

**Kelly Kristin Jones. NWL. The Luminary, St. Louis, Missouri,
United States of America. October 8 – December 10, 2022**

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Review of

Kelly Kristin Jones. NWL. The Luminary, St. Louis, Missouri, United States of America. October 8 – December 10, 2022.

The critical assessment and removal of Confederate and colonialist monuments in America is a long-term effort. The movement gained traction in 2015 after the murder of nine Black members of South Carolina's Mother Emanuel Church by a Confederate-flag-toting white supremacist. To combat the racist ideology that the killer espoused, activists called for the removal of Confederate flags and monuments. Then came the 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, VA and the 2020 murder of George Floyd, incidents that galvanized the movement and resulted in a significant change. Many states removed their Confederate monuments (BeenVerified 2020). Despite this progress, there is more work to do. According to a Southern Poverty Law Center analysis, more than 2,000 memorials to the Confederacy still exist (Southern Poverty Law Center 2022).

The labor of organizing protests and offering alternative strategies for monuments has predominantly been taken up by BIPOC individuals and groups, the same groups directly impacted by the unspoken logic behind racist images, to uphold white male power and privilege. For example, St. Louis-based artist Damon

Davis has been commissioned to create Mill Creek Valley Monument for the city's Brickline Greenway. The public artwork will commemorate the once-thriving Black neighborhood that, in 1959, was bulldozed in the name of urban renewal. There are white artists, too, who contribute to the critique of public images. Krzysztof Wodiczko, a U.S.-based Polish artist, projects images and videos of immigrants onto public statuary to diversify the monument landscape and raise the profile of the immigrant experience. Even so, the imbalance of labor in the effort to dismantle white supremacy – whether it be in the landscape of monuments or within our institutions and communities – is a significant problem.

The examination of whiteness by white people has long been identified as crucial to completing the understanding of how systemic and institutionalized racism works. Voices as disparate as James Baldwin, Wendell Berry, bell hooks, and Tema Okun point to the imperative for white people to be critical of the damaging effects of white supremacy on people of color and to recognize the wounds white people inflict on themselves by upholding racist structures, narratives, and

implicit biases (Baldwin 1964; Berry 1998; hooks 2009; Okun 2022).

The imbalance of black and white participation in working toward solutions to racism led Stephanie Koch, Interim Executive Director of The Luminary, and Simon Wu, Co-Curator and Program Manager of TRII, The Racial Imaginary Institute, to ask the question: “How can white people dismantle white supremacy within themselves and their communities, and what would that look like in an exhibition format?” (The Luminary exhibition guide 2022). Koch and Wu invited emerging artist Kelly Kristin Jones, a white woman, to bring this question to life in an exhibition at The Luminary in St. Louis.

The exhibition’s title, *NWL*, is short for nice white ladies, and its premise is that white women have been complicit in, and benefitted from, white male power and privilege. The exhibition features work from Jones’s oeuvre and newly commissioned artworks that fall into two broad categories. The first category uses photography to address the theme of monuments. The second category includes Jones’s recent foray into installation art using commercial advertising and mass production to make its point. Taken together, the artworks explore the public and commercial representations of white supremacy to critique them through strategies that play with their visibility.

Kelly Kristin Jones’s strongest artworks are the conceptually clever and critical photographs that comment on American monuments. The photographs confront public monuments by erasing them using technical photographic techniques. One set of images depicts existing monuments

that the artist wrapped with printed images of the surrounding landscape, camouflaging the monument so that it blends in and is difficult to detect. Another group of photographs features Jones’s use of the Photoshop “healing tool,” a digital technique that can erase unwanted elements from an image. Jones uses the tool to remove an offending monument while leaving traces of her process for the viewer to see, turning straightforward documentary images into critical artworks. In her *Dodging Tool* series, Jones constructed an oversized large white geometric shape in the form of a photographer’s dodging tool, which is used during an image’s development process to block exposure to, and thereby lighten, one portion of a photograph. Jones inserts her homemade dodging tools into the camera frame to block a monument, resulting in an image that lampoons the tool’s purpose, to lighten or “white” something out. By obscuring the monument, Jones also sets free the surrounding landscape from the monument’s message and presence. There is a drawback in Jones’s use of industry insider techniques like the Photoshop healing tool and the dodging tool. Viewers without knowledge of photographic production might not grasp their nuanced implications.

Although an emerging artist, Jones’s work in critiquing monuments is well established. Her socio-political focus can be linked to the rich social practice tradition of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where Jones earned her MFA. An early interest in documenting abandoned Chicago landscapes pivoted to civil war markers after she moved to the south to serve as Faculty Photography Fellow at the University of Georgia. Jones noticed that the problem with

Atlanta's many commemorative signs is the acceptance of their narrative as the single important historical fact while other facts, such as the seemingly small stories of the generations who live near the historical marker, are left undocumented. Jones saw the hidden agenda behind the Confederate marker's existence, to valorize a war that was fought on the Confederate side to retain the institution of slavery.

The exhibition's second category of artworks use as their media commercial advertising and mass-produced objects. Broadly speaking, this group of works explores white Western culture's obsession with a whitewashed, anglicized version of "classical" Greek and Roman empires from 400 BCE to 800 CE. That obsession was largely constructed in the Eighteenth Century by Johann Winckelmann, often considered the father of art history, who defined Greek and Roman art as the pinnacle of human achievement.

Jones enlarged a catalog image of an Urban Outfitters candle in the shape of a Roman column. Another image shows a Roman bust next to a Pantone swatch of skin tones. In some cases, Jones overlays cutouts shaped like Grecian urns over her photographs of monuments. The largest and most prominent installation is a colonnade of sorts made from white plastic urns that Jones sourced from eBay and other second-hand sources. The flimsy white plastic urns had been used to decorate domestic spaces, spaces that are still the purview of the feminine. In the gallery, urns are stacked one atop another, from floor to ceiling, in multiple columns as a critique of the Greco-Roman props of (white) consumer culture. These cheaply made objects of a throw-away

culture are repurposed into modern-day Readymades that would make Duchamp proud. The logic of this installation works well if one understands the sources of Jones's materials, the historical references, and the connection to the traditionally feminine realm of domesticity. Some of these notions are mentioned in the exhibition guide. But to casual visitors who don't examine the guide, the urns may read as too general a symbol to attach to white feminine complicity with white male power.

Often, the indirect strategies of Jones's artworks on display verge on being so subtle as to be elusive, a problem if the point of the exhibition is to contribute to the discourse on dismantling white supremacy. There are curiously few nice white ladies to be seen in this exhibition despite its title, *NWL*. This discrepancy leaves one with a sense that the exhibition evolved during the installation process. One artwork, "Impulses of the Mob," is a photography installation described in the exhibition guide as "cutout images of white women's hands as they hold on to various contested monuments" (The Luminary exhibition guide 2022). However, this work does not match that description. Instead, we see an arrangement of five pairs of photographs juxtaposing one photograph of a Black person's arm with a photograph of a white person's arm. Curiously, the above description more closely resembles a key work in Jones's oeuvre called "white women and monuments" which, disappointingly, is not included in the show. For this work, Jones built an archive of over 500 images of white women (including her grandmother) posing with monuments around the U.S. The images document the strategy of white women to commemorate

their connection to white patriarchal power by posing with monuments to white men. The collection, which reflects the exhibition's purpose more explicitly than the artworks on view, can be seen on her website and has been displayed elsewhere.

Despite the challenge that some viewers may have in grasping the point of the artworks on display, the exhibition's premise and motive stand as an inspiring example of curators and artists striving to advance racial equity. The programming that accompanied the exhibition is especially notable for contributing to the resonance of the curators' vision. The gallery offered a twelve-week workshop featuring readings of literature by BIPOC writers, writing prompts, and group exercises. Organized by *Undo Bias*, the workshop helped attendees consider, recognize, and begin to undo their own racial biases.

Together, the exhibition, programming, and gallery guide advance the effort to dismantle America's racial hierarchy by addressing the history of complicity, the idea that whites benefit from the racist imbalance of power even if they endeavor to not contribute to its perpetuation. A self-aware vigilance is required for whites committed to racial justice (Applebaum 2008). Although Kelly Kristin Jones's art is not overt, in combination with the exhibition's curatorial premise and programming, the show is able to help visitors examine the ubiquity and normalization of white privilege through symbols in the public and commercial realms and recognize how that normalcy and ubiquity is part of the problem.

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