

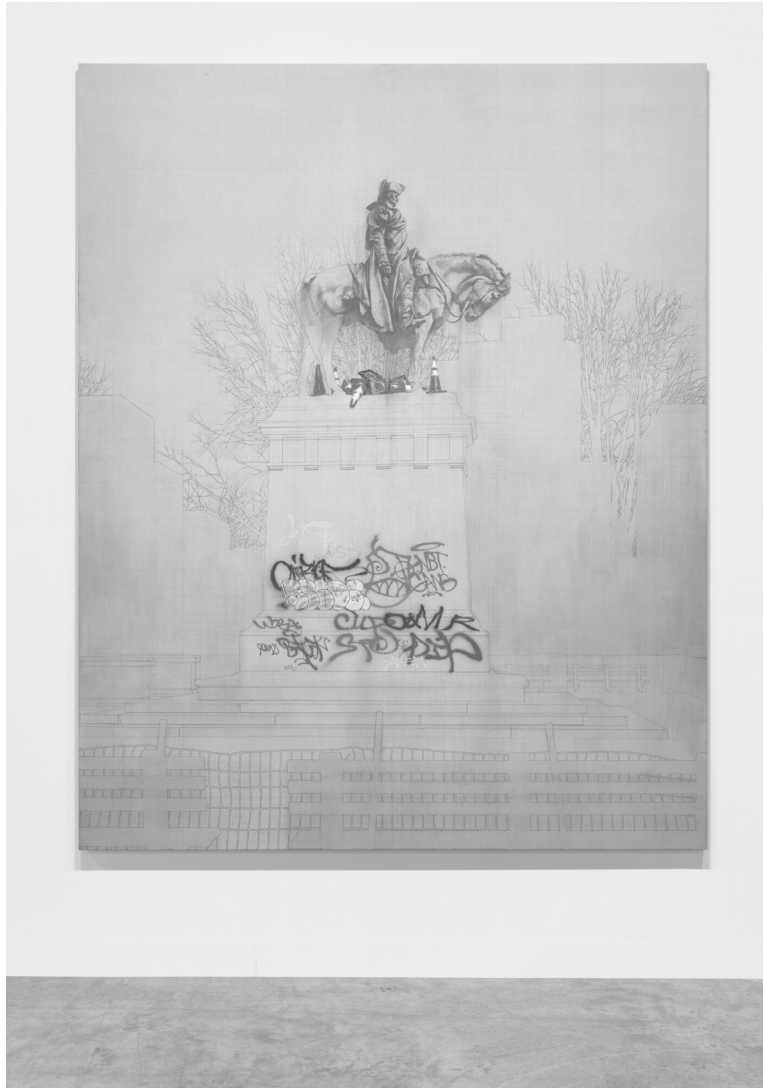
Tanya Leighton

ART
Monthly

Esteban Jefferson: May 25, 2020

Goldsmiths CCA, London, 7 October to 14 January

Tom Denman



Esteban Jefferson, *November 11, 2020, 2022*

This exhibition takes its name from the date of the murder of George Floyd in 2020, and the works – mostly large-scale canvases which pertain, directly or indirectly, to the turbulent wake of the African-American man's death – are similarly titled after dates. *May 29, 2020 (Union Square, Manhattan), 2023*, for example, depicts a vandalised police van via two collaged photographs taken by the artist on the titular

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date. The chronologised titling and photorealistic elements of Esteban Jefferson's paintings, all based on photographs taken near his studio in New York, resonate with the moments of visual (and temporal) capture that rallied international antiracist movements from Black Lives Matter to Rhodes Must Fall. These graphic interventions, rendered on a gridded wash background that resemble architectural blueprint paper, do more than slow down our engagement with these images: they posit civic unrest and its ghosts as constituting a liminal zone of rethinking and rebuilding.

The most immediately noticeable feature of Jefferson's paintings is their selective apportioning of detail. At his 2019 breakout solo show in New York, he explored racial erasure within the museum, detailing overlooked and mislabelled images of black people while only faintly outlining the rest of the interior. Here, he applies a similar technique to interrogate racial hierarchies in public urban space, and their important relation to time. In *January 19, 2022* (American Museum of Natural History, Manhattan), 2022, the head of the black man at Theodore Roosevelt's stirrup is sensitively modelled, whereas the president is invisible apart from his hip, and the only other part to receive as much detail is the horse's head – equivalences that call out white supremacy and the evident straddling of black bodies. In many of the other works, graphite-detailed renderings of statues are played off against oil-detailed, temporal spray paint, as in two paintings depicting the same vandalised statue of the slave-owning George Washington on different dates, and so with different graffiti. Like the hull of the *Argo* – or the words 'I love you' – social justice is a struggle of constant repainting against the illusion of permanence.

Mirroring this constancy of work, Jefferson's paintings are pointedly works-in-progress, in which *work*, including the work that is to be done, is a prominent theme. The canvases attend to the rehabilitative potential of righteous demolition; the unrubbed-out perspective grid, the blind spots, and the artist's slow and intricate execution together serve as a meditative proposal for action. In this light, we might consider his video work *June 4, 2023* (Continental Army Plaza, Brooklyn), 2023, playing on two small monitors rele-

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gated to the floor, which strikes as a two-channel miniaturisation of Steve McQueen's *Static*, 2009, except, instead of circling the Statue of Liberty, the focus is on a statue of (the 'liberating') Washington. As with his paintings, the key function is a shift in perspective. If McQueen questions what a monument is, Jefferson offers an answer: they may loom high, but we can be bigger than them.

Grief haunts these mostly unpopulated spaces, which memorialise and thereby extend actions commemorating myriad, often unspoken-about deaths. The black man beside the invisible Roosevelt is undoubtedly aware of the monument's true historic pathos. The strap on his shoulder - part of the rigging for the statue's dismantlement - is a clever metonym for his fateful burden and necessary agency. The composition's grandeur, assimilating that of the public artwork depicted, speaks to the tradition of history painting. And yet the main 'action' is the statue being taken down, in which the slave is as instrumental as the outlined labourers. The monument's decommissioning is itself 'monumentalised': as a commemorative instant of mourning for those afflicted, directly and indirectly, by Roosevelt's racist statue (in fact, the president himself instructed against memorial likenesses of himself, recognising the changeability of legacies). Jefferson doesn't simply reverse hierarchies, he democratises commemoration.

The exhibition lends historical gravitas to the recent and the continuing issues of the present, and to the necessary renewal of protest against these grievances, and the continuing, but no less significant ways in which these histories are tidied away. One pairing focuses on a scaffolded street corner in Brooklyn, based on photographs taken in 2021 and 2023 respectively. In the 'earlier' one, posterred to an already graffitied wall is the iconic 1968 image of civil rights activist Gloria Richardson defiantly palming aside a guardsman's bayonet; in the 'later' one, the poster has gone, yet the graffiti is fresh. Principled vandalism's material fugitivity - speed of execution enabled by the spray can, speed of removal ensured by the state - makes it an aptly ghost-ridden art form. If Jefferson doesn't exactly give visibility to these ghosts, he manages a harder and truer feat: he draws attention to our felt awareness of them.