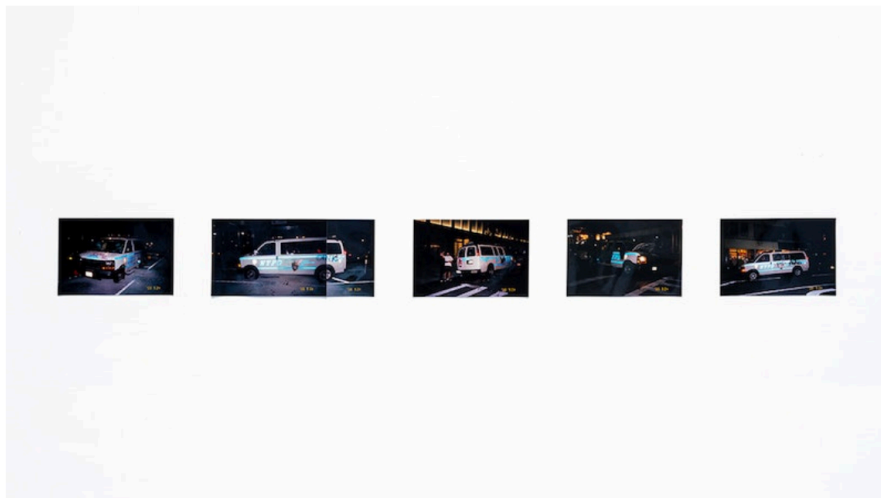


BROOKLYN RAIL

ArtSeen

Esteban Jefferson: *May 25, 2020*

By [Rebecca Schiffman](#)



Esteban Jefferson, *May 29, 2020*, 2023. Six photographic prints, 4 x 40 inches, 4 x 6 inches each. © Esteban Jefferson. Courtesy 303 Gallery, New York. Photo: Justin Craun.

After the murder of George Floyd in 2020 prompted a nationwide reexamination of the racism embedded in our lives, some memorials of America's founding fathers were taken down. Historians, protestors, and city governments clashed, attempting to reassess the old records of white, male American heroism, which protestors argue also stand as emblems of racism, nativism, and colonialism. At Esteban Jefferson's first exhibition with 303 Gallery, he has created a space that can serve as a site of education and contemplation for how these monuments function, through the extent of the 2020 protests.

ON VIEW
303 Gallery
*Esteban
Jefferson: May
25, 2020*
January 14–
February 25,
2023
New York

The Brooklyn Rail, January 2023

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In a small act of defiance, Jefferson titled the exhibition *May 25, 2020*, referencing the date George Floyd was murdered by the Minneapolis police. Jefferson marks his own experiences of land, body, identity, and protest through three scenes in his hometown of New York City: the Theodore Roosevelt monument, the George Washington monument, and flags in housing developments. Each work is titled with a date that corresponds to the artist's own visits to these monuments and places, and in each of the three pairings, Jefferson shows what has changed, and what has stayed the same. At the entrance, Jefferson makes his point of view clear: the installation *May 29, 2020* (2023) is comprised of six film photographs of Jefferson and his friends at twilight posing beside an NYPD van graffitied to match their feelings of disdain for the police.



Installation View: Esteban Jefferson, *May 25, 2020*, 303 Gallery, New York, 2023.
© Esteban Jefferson, Courtesy 303 Gallery, New York. Photo: Justin Craun.

The main gallery is occupied by six large-scale paintings, though these paintings mainly consist of graphite drawings. The works are all awash in shades of gray, and most of the linen canvas is exposed,

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giving them a sense of rawness. The focal point of four of these compositions is markedly emphasized by small details of bright, colorful oil paint. Throughout the canvases, Jefferson creates graphite grids of all sizes, employing the Renaissance sight-size technique to achieve accurate proportions. Like Charles Gaines's gridwork, Jefferson's grid acts as an entry point into his investigation of order and meaning in American society.

On the east wall are two "time-lapse" pictures that chronicle protests at *George Washington at Valley Forge* (1906), a statue located in Brooklyn's Continental Army Plaza. In both works, the monument is sketched out: Washington sits atop his horse, the pedestal drawn in perfect architectural detail, hints of trees and foliage sprinkled in the background. Though Washington is the main figure, pops of color supersede his stature, drawing the eye to the rebellion that seemingly just ensued. In the work on the left, *November 11, 2020* (2022), Washington fades to the background as neon orange traffic cones spill over the statue's plinth, colorful graffiti scribbled over its granite base. In the adjacent work, *September 17, 2021* (2022), Jefferson revisits the site a year later and finds new additions: there is a small scaffolding structure in the foreground and the graffiti is blurred away. As drips of faded color stream down, Jefferson documents the city's attempt to erase the outcry. Today, despite the protests, this statue still stands at the base of the Williamsburg Bridge in Brooklyn. And perhaps in spite of this, Jefferson adds small memorials of the protestor's modifications to the statue in this work: a single hand rises up from the metal bars in the foreground, and a pair of sneakers dangles from the horse's neck as if to signal that the protests won't stop here.

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On the facing wall, Jefferson examines the decisions concerning the Theodore Roosevelt memorial that stood at the entrance of the American Museum of Natural History for more than eighty years. This sculpture's composition includes a problematic hierarchy of figures: it depicts Roosevelt atop a horse, with standing Black and Indigenous figures on either side. In perhaps a satirical nod to this pyramid of power, Jefferson places a CRT monitor playing a recorded Zoom meeting of the Landmarks Preservation Committee of New York debating the monument in the center, flanked by two paintings of the resulting decision. These works focus on the removal of the equestrian statue of Roosevelt, who though an admired environmentalist and president, was also a devotee of eugenics, a racist, and endorsed the sterilization of the disabled. In *December 2, 2021* (2022) on the left, Roosevelt and the half-nude Indigenous figure are rendered in dark graphite, with construction workers and scaffolding surrounding them. In *January 19, 2022* (2022), Roosevelt is gone, and in his place, men work to dismantle

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the rest of the structure. The interaction of video and paintings prompts meaningful questions for the viewer: Does this historic monument serve positive or negative ends to its community? And how can we thoughtfully populate our public spaces with meaningful historic figures for future generations? One can't help but think of the scores of children, on their way into the museum on a class trip or with family, who would see the image and think that the hierarchy of figures was a historical and natural order, and the way things ought to be.

At the north and south ends of the gallery, two works highlight the Pan-African flag, the Puerto Rican flag, and the African American flag, displayed in what looks like a housing development. In a final call to the importance of protest, these flags were presumably placed by residents as assertions of self-expression and identity. Just as Jefferson leaves the grids visible on the gray linen canvas, his interest remains in the act of erasure, and who gets to be seen, preserved, and named.