

Spartan Skin: What is a university, when we cannot be together?

by Karin Zitzewitz

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The Critical Race Studies residency at Michigan State is designed to attract artists and designers who have formulated exciting and critical ways to engage students and communities in rich, complicated conversations around race. Young Joon Kwak applied, interviewed, and was chosen for this opportunity just before the campus was forced to shut down in response to the coronavirus pandemic. Last Spring, Young Joon and I spent a fair amount of time on the phone—me walking around East Lansing and they speaking from their studio in Los Angeles—trying to figure out whether and how they could adapt the residency to these swiftly changing circumstances. We agreed that improvisation was definitely going to be part of the work, and hopefully part of the fun, of the residency.

Young Joon reacted very imaginatively to the challenge, pivoting their teaching to incorporate virtual instruction, and building a virtual version of their ongoing Mutant Salon, inviting eight exciting artists to engage with our students and the wider community. But the biggest change, by far, came in their approach to their exhibition project, through which they had hoped to stage public conversations about the intersections of race and trans identity.

As the summer went on, it became clear that public art was becoming newly relevant to broader discussions of racial injustice, violence, and policing in the United States. It is important to remember that the focus that movements for racial justice put on public statuary was not inevitable. But once these arguments began—in Charlottesville, in Richmond, in Portland, and across the United States—it became clear that monuments offered protesters potent signs of the racist histories and hierarchies that are at the root of violence. Arguments about who—and whose histories—are valued within public space were natural extensions of the broader fight to be free to walk on the street, to play in the park, to change lanes, to go for a run, to stop at a corner store, or to do any of the other everyday activities that served as pretext for attacks on Black people. The question of which bodies are memorialized, and how, are important in themselves, and also serve as proxies for broader debates about representation and power.

Young Joon found in the Spartan an opening to a different kind of conversation, one in which the attachment to the icon could be gently unpacked. Their project gestures toward the kinds of thinking, discussion, and coming together facilitated by public art. And it does so by attending to the way that our dependence upon digital technologies through the pandemic enlarged the role that images were playing in our everyday lives. Unlike other artist residents, for whom interaction with campus began with lots of in-person conversation that, together, formed their impression of MSU, Young Joon began with a symbol of the institution as a whole, and used that interface to engage with students, faculty, and the wider community.

Young Joon's work highlights the history of the sculpture, which longtime professor Leonard Jungwirth made in terracotta as the Second World War came to a close. Informed by art deco stylization of form as well as more complicated political and cultural investments in ideas of physical fitness, Jungwirth's sculpture is first and foremost an exemplary body, an icon of Whiteness and masculinity. He carries the helmet and cape that mark him as a Spartan, and that associate him with the university's ideal virtues of tenacity and will. Though a work of art, the Spartan has always been primarily an icon of the university. Beloved from the beginning, it also attracted high-spirited vandals, often from chief rival University of Michigan, as early as the 1950s. And so, soon after, the MSU Marching Band program and friends began to guard the statue in the weeks leading up to major games.

The relatively delicate clay material eventually broke down in the face of all this interaction, and after an incomplete restoration in the late-1980s, the sculpture was recast in bronze and placed on a new pedestal in 2005. The Spartan remains a part of MSU's everyday life, and both official and unofficial acts—from the tradition of gluing pennies to Sparty for good luck to the application of a mask to Sparty's face during the pandemic—mark its continuing relevance as a campus symbol. No graduation is complete without a picture with the Spartan.

Young Joon's approach to the sculpture allowed for attention to these histories, through its reliance upon molds that preserved the Spartan's surface. Working with graduate student Nicolei Gupit and Studio Art major Lauren Batdorff, they spread non-toxic, silicone mold-making material on the statue's exterior, making large pieces that cover nearly the entirety of the statue. The molds reveal evidence of Jungwirth's hand and draw attention to the subtle fan interactions with its surface.

Kwak's sculptures, cast in a mixture of resin and metal, remake and invert the Spartan's skin. The sculpture's burnished, copper-colored interiors present Jungwirth's sculptural exterior surfaces, cradled inside shells of gunmetal gray. The sculptures are dignified, beautiful, and quietly demanding. Displayed with strong light casting deep shadows, Young Joon's work encourages the slow, contemplative engagement that is not typically afforded to Jungwirth's public monument. Kwak's close attention to the material form of the Spartan offers its own kind of visual pleasure. But it also reveals the separation between that form and its outsized symbolic meaning. That allows viewers to question where the meaning of the icon lies, and, as the university changes its character, how open those meanings are to transformation.

The monumental prints that surround the sculptures—monoprints made from the molds dipped in ink—continue that subtle exploration of meaning. The images of the Spartan's body deviate much further from his original form. They are recognizably human, but distorted and disambiguated. Some of the images, like the Spartan helmet, are engaged with symbols, others, like the long and graceful leg or the complete, broad torso, are subtly erotic.

Kwak's prints recall the work of African-American artist David Hammons, who from the 1970s onward has coated his own body with oil, applied it to paper, and then dusted pigment on the saturated surface, leaving ghostly images that allow for an uneasy range of interpretations.¹ The proximity of Kwak's images to Hammons' body prints opens up associations with critical histories of race by artists of color. I was reminded of Hammons work most by Kwak's nearly identical, paired images of the Spartan's face, one in black and one in gold. A literal reading of those colors leads viewers to ask how the Spartan icon can accommodate Asian bodies, even as Jungwirth's sculpture so clearly sets up an unmistakably White norm. The exhibition opened in the midst of the most serious wave of anti-Asian violence in recent history, a series of assaults that have profoundly destabilized any sense of belonging and security that Asian and Asian-American people had felt they had achieved in communities across the country, including in our campus communities.

Kwak's work poses questions and demands careful thought and contemplation, rather than offering strong positions with which to contend. As we contemplate what it will be to return to share the spaces of the university—to come together again—the exhibition offers us a site from which to imagine a new, richer, more inclusive, more critical form of the Spartan.

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¹Thanks to Nicolei Gupit for allowing me to read her fine paper on David Hammons' work in preparation for this essay.