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Pop-A-Washington

Sam Posso

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Pop-A-Washington

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Abstract

This paper discusses the idea generation that lead to the MFA exhibition: Pop-A-Washington. The visual aspects and multi-sensory interactive installations mimic the coin operated automatons, video and sound displays, and wearable costume components of an obsolete roadside attraction. While new directions for the myths of George Washington are created based on believable lies, the concept of manmade time and the repetitive action associated with what we understand as mechanized time works against an age where the audience expects to experience all aspects of the exhibition as briefly as possible.
Introduction

In 1835, entrepreneur and master entertainer P.T. Barnum purchased Joice Heth, a slave who would become the original, star attraction in his traveling blockbuster show of curiosities. For Barnum and the show’s white audiences, part of Joice Heth’s near undying appeal was her extreme age: recorded as one hundred and sixty-one years at the time of her death.¹ In step with Heth’s accruing age, the fledgling show of curiosities would eventually make Barnum millions, bringing both slave and owner fame and a leading role in this chapter of nineteenth-century American social and economic history.

Before her sale to Barnum, Heth was the property of Augustine Washington of Virginia. She served Washington’s family as a nurse, caring for his eight children first on the family’s farm near Fredericksburg. From this servitude, Heth could rightfully claim to have been the first person to tuck the unconscious baby into his crib, the very baby who would be responsible for the birth of America. At her death, Heth was the last living link to the little-known childhood of our founding father, George Washington².

Washington’s own legend grew exponentially upon his death in 1799 at his northern Virginia plantation, Mt. Vernon. The legend matured and was embellished over and over again by the media and by aspiring historians. This was all thanks to first


biography of the president, the popular, so-called biographical accounts written by author and book dealer, Mason Locke Weems, a local preacher.

When Heth died in the middle of Barnum’s curiosities tour, the ruthless entrepreneur and master-entertainer charged fifty cents per head to view the slave’s public autopsy. Over a thousand customers attended the show. Everyone wanted to know if Heth’s connection to Washington was authentic. The medical examiner responsible for Heth’s autopsy concluded, before gaggles of eager onlookers, that Heth’s true age was to be estimated from scientific findings at around eighty years—eighty-one shy of the slave’s age advertised by Barnum. Satisfied that the myth of the one hundred and sixty-one year-old nurse-maid to the president had been debunked, the spectacle-hungry herd departed. But not before each paid fifty cents to cast their eyes on the eighty year-old carcass, ripped to shreds in the interest of the truth and a greater understanding of the mythology of George Washington.

Had Joice Heth been an otherwise unremarkable woman, absent a tantalizing connection to such remarkable historical figure, the American public’s interest in her as a curiosity, a spectacle, no doubt would have been slight. But the young nation was holding out hope that the woman who narrated Weems-based tales of watching the stoic, moral compass develop in a young Washington, would serve as a form of validation for the growing legend. Although Barnum’s attempt at providing the public with a link to Washington ended as nothing more than a capitalistic farce, unfounded accounts of Washington’s early life continued to find their way into our collective knowledge and the annals of US history.

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3 Lengel 41-44
4 Reiss 136-141
The adaptation and continued evolution of Washington’s legend built up an irreversible head of steam. For me and for generations of the students in our American public education system, these fascinating tales and perplexing myths created a ready access point to the founding fathers. My creative work in this exhibition focuses on critiquing such accepted, collective knowledge and deconstructing myths of history, time, and place to create new series of stories and spectacles. Throughout this body of work, I reference roadside attractions and Americana through repetitive action, through the depiction of the many versions/visions of our founding father, and the inclusion of take-aways—souvenirs from this temporary space. In this way, you, the viewer are able to reconstruct imagery through reminiscences, long after the work ceases to exist. The decades-long traveling show of curiosities that made Barnum wealthy beyond his wildest dreams, flourished at the expense of its exploited gullible, entertainment-seeking audiences. Their meager pocket change was surrendered in exchange for a front row seat to human oddities, embellished tall-tales, and historical farce. This is the jumping off point for my own work -- for my own composition of a story born in a believable lie. As the multiple layers of each piece build, my version of the story cannibalizes other parts of the legend and the mythology related to our shared historical knowledge. This is all spurred on by the visual cues of time and the familiar physical image of George Washington.

**Dissecting Myth to Create the Story**

Parson Weems had perfect timing. He composed the very first biography of Washington, completing volume one in 1800, a year after the president’s death. Weems thus became the puppet master; in large part, Weems fashioned the image of Washington
we know today. At the time of the biography’s publication, the American people—still mourning the loss of this unique, first leader character—begged for insights into the unknown parts of his life. What was Washington like as a child? Was he a religious man? Were there candid stories about Washington during the war? In combination with stories Weems had heard about Washington, the author invented a world where Washington has existed ever since.

Weems wrote that the teenage George Washington displayed great strength by throwing a rock across the Rappahannock River at Ferry Farm, in eastern Virginia near Fredericksburg, the site of the family’s home. The width of the river was said to be three hundred feet where he threw the rock. That would mean that the young Washington would have thrown a rock the length of a football field.\(^5\) This is clearly a hyperbolic tale—that is, if anything like this even happened. Over time, the legend changed and it became the tale of George Washington throwing a silver dollar across the Potomac River. The place in the Potomac where this supposedly took place was even wider than the Rappahannock locale.

Wearing a George Washington mask, I went to the Potomac River to showcase George Washington in a plausible light (fig 1). As I stood on the bank of the mighty river beginning my throw, I knew the only way the dollar was going over the river was if an eagle snatched it in midair and carried it across. That did not happen. Each time I threw a dollar coin towards the opposite bank, the small projectile soared about fifty feet and plopped into the slow river current. I like to imagine that if George Washington were to time travel to the present day, and hear all of these stories, he would set out on a tour. His

\(^5\) WEEMS, Mason Locke. *The Life of George Washington; with Curious Anecdotes.*

goal would be to prove to historians, who still claim the veracity of certain of these blatant myths, that he might have been a good leader for a new country, but he did not possess at such a young age superhuman strength, or the inability to chop down a tree, or to display ethical morals beyond his tender years.

In the 1939 work by American painter, Grant Wood, Parson Weems can be seen pulling back the curtain to show a very theatrical version of George Washington chopping down his father’s cherry tree. It was a way of constructing American identity through the use of this imagery, drawn from this important source of collective, national memory. Through my work, I identify with the artist Grant Wood, and the regionalist painters of the 1930’s who aimed at: “Revamping American values through the close attention to the culture of the hinterlands.” My pieces work towards generating interest in this American folklore, placing the character of George Washington in many settings relatable to today’s viewer. I focus on American myth, turned on its head: as in the placement of Washington in the landscape to interact. This forces the viewer to experience a transaction in Washington-adorned currency. This is a means to pay for a simple experience, and a Midwest road trip inspired souvenir—all of these gestures act as simple nods to the regionalists. But they carry a much more critical attitude towards our current value system placed upon the founding fathers in relation to the current state of the presidency.

Focusing on the stories of Weems, I began constructing my own stories to accompany the audio exhibit for the sculpture “George Washington Had a Wooden Penis” (fig. 2). Mixing and matching these stories, already debunked as hyperbole if not flat out lies, creates a somewhat plausible, but wildly absurd narrative. As a result, my

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story of George Washington revolves around an infection at circumcision in his infant life. A common infection at that time would often lead to further medical problems, so it is believable that an infection could lead to the amputation of a gangrenous appendage. In this new narrative, my Washington never knew any different, and so it did not affect his ambitions to lead an army and become the leader of a new country. Washington’s lack of interest in having a real penis was furthered by the many useful tools that the various wooden penises could have. He used it to splint his friend Gus Hamper’s arm when he broke it playing near the creek on land near his home. It had been fashioned so sturdily and true, that the doctors asked permission to keep it in place while the bone healed.

Also as a child, George would often tie his penis to the middle of his fishing line, using it as a bobber during day-long fishing trips. The bobber was perfect for the type of slow-moving river fishing with which Washington was most familiar. The slightest teeter would alert him to the fish on the other end. One day, George was sitting on the edge of the Rappahannock. It had been a long day with few bites. He watched his penis floating about twenty feet away, the glare shining off the tip pointing to the westward sun. He had been staring at his penis for so long that it took him a while to notice that it had vanished below the water. He set the hook and fought the fish to the shore. He brought the 42-inch blue catfish home and cooked it as dinner for his mother.

As an adult, Washington and his men were positioned for major battle in the war. It was so cold on the December night that the ink in Washington's pen-well froze solid. Looking to draft for an alternative for the soldiers’ upcoming attack, Washington took the wooden penis from his pants and set the tip down in the coals of the fire. After igniting
briefly, Washington grabbed it and blew out the flame. The charcoal tip became the writing utensil to plot the Valley Forge attack that was the turning point of the war.

Ultimately, a historical account acts as a specific memory that cannot be recognized as contextual truth for the time. Author Elizabeth Clowie writes in her book *Recording Reality, Desiring the Real*, a discussion of memorized versions of history and their role in documentary filmmaking. Clowie states, “History is a form of memory, of remembering, that is a knowing of the past in the present. It is a cultural memory handed down to us and evoked in the exhortation to remember. What we are asked to remember is a knowledge that while deriving from historical accounts also functions as myth did for non-literate societies.”\(^7\) By creating the new memory in relation to history, the clear link to the familiar character begins to blur.

**Tracing Washington Figuratively and Ideologically**

My interest in Washington as a figure in history developed with a cross-country road trip through South Dakota, the summer after Kindergarten, July 1997. I remember learning about Washington and Lincoln in school that year. In the classroom, a model of Washington’s wooden teeth was displayed on a handmade George Washington puppet and was used by our teacher for Presidents’ Day presentations. This crude representation had wooden popsicle sticks as teeth. We could use the puppet theater during leisure time after our daily nap, and I would often visit our puppet theater to act out scenarios with George Washington. He was an entertaining puppet to use because of the clacking noise

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the wooden nubs made when his mouth flopped up and down. I was also fond of
Abraham Lincoln because I thought his name was pronounced Abersam, so I claimed him
as a fellow Sam. I also collected coins from under my father’s living room chair as my
sole source of income. The recognizable heads on the coins earned a place of importance
for me as small monuments. I remember transferring the profiles of the heads by way of
frottage, and creating miniature scenes with multiple presidents all facing the same way.

This was also at the time in my life when becoming president seemed like a
potential career path behind policeman and baseball player. My excitement grew as my
father told me about a mountain face, sculpted with the monumental heads of George
Washington and Abraham Lincoln, in South Dakota. He showed me a picture of it and
when I asked how it was made, he told me that it occurred naturally: perhaps this is
where I developed my own interest in bending the truth to create a more interesting
narrative.

My interest in using the character of Washington in my work developed when I
was practicing cutting silhouette shapes out of copper sheet with my jewelers saw. I was
looking for a silhouette that was challenging enough to further my technical skills, but
familiar enough to be a usable piece, even in the featureless, two-dimensional form. I also
knew that Washington profile would read as Washington even in the most poorly
executed formal version. We are all so familiar with the quarter’s image of Washington,
and everybody knows a few fun facts about Washington. We share the ability to create a
starting point in the narrative, with a backstory partially developed by the importance
placed on American history in the public education system. It really doesn’t matter how
bad the version of Washington looks; it will still be read as Washington.
“When I was in junior high school there was a contest sponsored by the Veterans of Foreign Wars to design a patriotic poster. Along with a guy in my chemistry class lab station, I decided to enter the contest. From the very beginning we meant it as a joke. First of all, we agreed to collaborate on the poster, so that neither of us would be responsible for the final outcome. Secondly, we were not close friends, so we didn’t care about making each other look talentless. We couldn’t have spent more than fifteen minutes on the poster. We each took turns painting it. And we picked the most insipid subject matter and caption we could think of: a portrait of George Washington in front of the American Flag with the motto, “Your Land and Mine.” We used the cheapest materials--poster board and elementary school poster paint--and painted as poorly as possible. The flag was depicted as a crude series of stripes with one sloppy star and a totally unrecognizable Washington was painted in a garish combination of chartreuse and green. We won.”

Here, Mike Kelly demonstrates perfectly the basic visual knowledge everybody applies to Washington as a symbol from their earliest education. Washington’s head represents freedom, the face of patriotism. There’s a blameless tendency for children to believe what they are taught. It is astonishing that the fictitious versions of George Washington’s history are still reinvented by grade school teachers as credible, so as I sat in my elementary classroom gluing cotton balls to a paper cylinder to make a crude Washington wig to wear while others built stove top hats out of black construction paper,

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there was nothing stopping me from obsessively remember the stories we were being told so I could act them out in my wig at home for my parents.

**Eyes on the Roadside Attraction**

In the small town I’m from, Spooner, in Northwestern Wisconsin, we could boast of our own roadside attraction. A mini golf course on the edge of town displays a cowboy hat-laden muffler man, known as Big Mel. This larger than life cowboy, constructed by the International Fiberglass company, helped develop my fascination with roadside attractions as a child: the monumental Leif Erikson, Norse explorer, first to discover parts of North America, atop a pedestal in Duluth, MN; the world’s largest Muskie, one of this relatively rare species, celebrated at the Freshwater Fishing Hall of Fame in Hayward, WI; and the various Paul Bunyan statues in Wisconsin and Minnesota, some of them lumberjack versions of the familiar muffler man, Big Mel, in my own town.

A more presidential themed attraction in my town was a urinal that John F. Kennedy was said to have used during a campaign stop at the Buckhorn Tavern in downtown Spooner. The importance of finding a link to greatness for a rural town shines brightest when locals instruct tourists to use the same toilet as this heroic president of the working class, cut down in his prime. These sites offer portals to the past, whether it be the figurative past, constructed by the historical legend touted on a plaque in front of the monument, or a simpler past, when a large fiberglass statue was enough to stop the family car in its tracks to snap a roadside picture next to the awkwardly proportioned character.

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9 See “Muffler Men,” https://www.roadsideamerica.com/story/37422 for a full list of the existing examples of muffler men and their locations within the United States.
In “George Washington Had a Wooden Penis,” the Washington figure elevated on the pedestal plays the same role as Leif Erikson in the park in Duluth, MN: a curiosity involving an unknown story attached to the familiar imagery of a historical figure. They are both founders and died as legends. We will never fully understand the time they occupied in their different versions of America. This piece also references the memory of long-gone attractions in my Midwestern childhood. The base is modeled after various heavily shellacked wooden pedestals carrying the legends and lore associated with each character, relevant to the towns each restaurant occupied. With the rising importance of mechanization and technology in entertainment, these simple attractions often grew dated and many have been removed, including Big Mel, or left to fall into disrepair.¹⁰

As more of these roadside attractions falter and their viewership wanes, we lose out on the rich series of stories that inspired them. This references the immediate loss of Washington’s true history with his death. Parts of the stories are forgotten, while new versions emerge with the developing and changing interests of American culture. I passionately try to make the most out of the viewer’s time with my pieces. Whether they have an interactive component that can act as an entertainment hook for the sake of keeping a viewer’s interest, or an elaborate painstaking process of completion built in as a means to show the viewers that I’m not just trying to mess with them: there are many versions of the spectacle that can be enjoyed by those who are not necessarily interested

in engaging in the concepts I’m exploring. That becomes another social commentary related to art viewing and art making in general.

The performance of “The Words of George Washington” relies on various performers taking on the cloned resemblance of Washington that I have created—multiples versions are made out of this singular unique character. Each individual is disguised by the mask as they recite the words of a letter or speech written by Washington. Individual qualities are reflected through body language and the muffled voices projecting through the small nose holes in each mask. We don’t know enough about Washington to relate and build upon him as impression. Mocking his speech with deconstructed and decontextualized language makes the access point easier for the factual portals of Washington that we can attain. As individuals put on the masks, the collective act provides a critique of this essential character in American history. In *Rabelais and His Word*, Mikhail Bakhtin writes on the role of carnival as comedic relief, which for a limited time becomes an access point into the dealings of masking in medieval times. While the use here is very similar, it is not using masks and performance to skewer and belittle the acting figureheads under the protection of carnival. It is making fun of the ignorant, egotistical characters in daily life that contorts George Washington to represent them in their irrational worlds.\(^\text{11}\)

\(^{11}\) Bachtin, Michail M., and Izvol Skaja Elena Aleksandrovna. *Rabelais and His World (Tvorčestvo Fransua Rable, Engl.)*. 1968. 39-45
I draw comparisons to the work of Greta Pratt and her photography projects depicting scenes celebrating America in rural areas across the country. To understand the subjects in her photographs, we rely on the shared information we can chime off about Lincoln, Washington, and the outlaws of the old west. Nineteen Lincolns offered a dramatic comparison to the men who obsessively find themselves portraying honest Abe at civil war reenactments and various corporate events. In collecting the images of nineteen different men portraying their versions of Lincoln at a Lincoln Presenters Association convention, she shows the interpretative values that we all know of Lincoln. Fifteen presidents later, our historical record of Lincoln draws a much clearer picture than the folk tales of Washington.

Further Deconstruction of the Image

Clearly handmade attempts at creating Washington imagery provide a link to objects at a fair. Small means of entertainment are used to draw in the crowd. My piece “Pop-A-Washington” is an automaton balloon inflating display that features a handmade George Washington-shaped balloon in the window of a tall skinny booth. Upon inserting five quarters, a light turns on and the balloon begins to inflate out of the mouth of Washington until it bursts. The window of the box to the balloon filling Washington remains open as a way to retrieve the souvenir after the balloon pops. This nonfunctional scrap of latex roughly continues to hold the shape of Washington, a metaphor for the reshaping, inflation, distortion, and tearing down of Washington’s legend throughout

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history. After all of these attempts, we are still simply left with the silhouette. The intricacies of Washington are lost in relation to the masks.

Using the same materials to create other objects, shaped like Washington, continues in “Pop-A-Washington.” This condom machine with altered imagery dispenses handmade condoms made to look like the president. Symbolic of the male utility and dominance that Washington and the other founding fathers represent in the viewer’s dissection of America, it is important to make reference to the penis in general outside of the sculpture, telling the story of George Washington’s penis. While the masks create a disguise suitable for anyone, the condoms can act as a disguise for the penis. George Washington as a sexual tool offers the idea of false protection. It also creates another source of souvenir and entertainment for $1.25 in quarters. Through the use absurd objects, “Pop-A-Washington” seeks to build multiple connections to the imagery’s existence in our greater culture.

**Constructing Time and Place**

The concepts of time and place remain important throughout my entire body of work, as in those pieces focusing on the imagery of Washington. Martin Creed in 2001 won the Turner Prize for with his piece Work No. 227: The lights going on and off. It centered on lights in a room turning off and on, in five-second increments. The uproar generated by what the art world saw as a travesty, pulled off by a classic trickster artist, didn’t stop the piece from being sold to the Tate Museum for over a hundred thousand dollars. While I find Creed’s Work No. 227 humorous, it lacks the commitment to the

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joke that I like to see in such repetitive work. Creed’s piece is fully automated, and is not
duly being controlled by the artist in any way, aside from setting the light on a timer.

In my own work, I convey a clear representation of time, and the investment on
the part of the artist. In “An Hour of Artificial Light and Artificial Darkness in
Harmony,” I have created a place where the activation of a simple light switch is done in
repetition using stop motion animation. The process provides a link to the artist and an
appreciation for the pain in duration; it earns the viewers’ time and interest.

The hand in this film provides a textural connection reminiscent of the latex
characters in the George Washington piece. The relation to repetition and absurdity
through a repetitive action starts to blend together similarly to the act of living each day
from beginning to end. We focus so much of our days on the incessant passing of time in
digestible chunks, so I have chosen an hour as a digestible chunk that most would see as
too long of a commitment in the context of art viewing, but not in an entertainment
seeking venture such as a movie or television show.

In the piece, “An Hour of Time Starting at Eleven,” the reference to creating a
particular space for an hour of time relies on specifically creating time for the entire hour.
The creation of time is relayed through several connections, as each second of the video
is made up of 24 different images: 6 shots of movement, and 18 shots of the second hand
resting still after it reaches its destination. Creating the hour visually from scratch forced
me to take 86,400 images to complete the work.

In the sound for the piece, I create time further by making a clicking noise with
my tongue in front of the clock as each second passes. Three thousand, six hundred
tongue clicks in an hour becomes a very low level meaningless challenge reminiscent of a
Guinness Book of World Record. This piece relates very strongly to Bakhtin’s notion of chronotype which is, “where time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible, while space becomes charged and responsive to the movement of time, plot and history.”\textsuperscript{14} Using time as the narrative marker for time, in multiple physical and mental relationships to time. In the space, time is the performance that has an end in sight, but the time that continues after the piece is what the viewer will be focusing on.

A secondary relationship that this piece eludes to is the symbol of the clock as a way of predicting an end. I have given the viewer the ending time that they can expect for this piece. It doesn’t have the “When is this going to end?” feel that some other mysterious, durational pieces I have made. The clock is used as a representation for the end of everything, from something as simple as the end of the day, to the dramatic end of the world. The United States Government’s \textit{Commission of Prevention of Weapons of Mass Destruction, Proliferation, and Terrorism} releases a progress report yearly on America’s preparation for the possibility of being attacked with weapons of mass destruction titled “THE CLOCK IS TICKING”.\textsuperscript{15} As the doomsday clock gets pushed further towards midnight, my piece represents this anticipation to an end that might not necessarily mean the relief of not having to watch a dry-mouthed man click his tongue any longer.

\textsuperscript{14} Bakhtin, M. M. \textit{The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M..} Translated by Caryl Emerson & Michael Holquist, University of Texas Press. 1981, 84.

\textsuperscript{15} “THE CLOCK IS TICKING: A Progress report on America’s Preparedness to Prevent Weapons of Mass Destruction Proliferation and Terrorism.” October 21, 2009. For more on the detailed nonchalant language the government uses to discuss the potential of an immediate cease of existence as we know it.
I also draw comparisons to Christian Marclay’s *The Clock* (2010). Marclay’s work is very similar to my own in one specific way: real-time becomes the focus of the ongoing narrative. All other notions of story are dismissed, as the purpose becomes the continuation of real-time by viewing the clock as it dictates the actual time that we are living as we watch the dictation. I am criticizing the role of the clock as the keeper of time in a very similar way to Henri Bergson’s view of time in video format. Shot in real time, the mechanism would eventually be depicting versions of a reality that happened, stating, “such is the contrivance of cinematograph. And such is also that of our knowledge. Instead of attaching ourselves to the inner becoming of things, we place ourselves outside them in order to recompose their becoming artificially. We take snapshots, as it were, of the passing reality. We may therefore sum up that the mechanism of our ordinary knowledge is of a cinematographic kind.”

**Conclusion**

Each day in the gallery starts with this re-composition of the physical concept of time passing in its mechanical format. The work as a whole is not easy to take in in short bursts. This is by design, and a criticism towards a “quick look and move-on” type of viewer. This must take place before I’m able to take up post as the balloon-inflating automaton. All of the pieces come across as a criticism of the ease of access and dismissal of extremely complex representational images that we interact with on a daily basis. This focuses on the human controls of life displayed as time, monetary transaction,

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entertainment escapism, and the bowing to patriotic establishment who we hope are constantly negotiating for our lives to not end in a giant mushroom cloud. Through the deconstruction and reconstruction of myth and time, this work creates for a short duration an extremely humorous outlook on issues that leave most of the population hopeless and paralyzed by crippling fear.


Pratt, Greta, and Karal Ann Marling. "Fairs: A Fixed Point on the Turning Wheel of


“Work No. 227: the lights going on and off.”
