# *Standard of Care*

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Care, porosity, translucency, and sensitivities of haptic vision are at the heart of Nate Lewis' artistic practice. A level of intention and compassion permeate Lewis' works; each composition a meditation on resilience and healing. Porosity for the artist points to a kind of cognitive absorption — a willingness to recognize and be changed by relationships with others. Through his method of sculptural cuts into paper — a repetitive and almost surgical method of intervention rooted in what the artist has called a visual "language of examination" — he lifts a veil illuminating that which is unseen. A look by itself can often equate to a violence; each cut Lewis makes is in exploration and recognition of the fact that the mere act of looking alone is not tantamount to care or understanding. Lewis' engagement with paper is the beginning of his lightwork. He knows it intimately: how it will behave under the pressure of his hands, the images he burnishes and pierces into its fleshy layers. Each component of the work is deftly measured; even the paper itself often carefully handmade or embossed by the artist's own hands.

What is a diagnostic tool? In medicine? In the world? What does it serve to produce? We deal primarily with that which we can see. With evidence, devised by tools of our own making, designed to show us the full spectrum of what is present. In some cases, the tools allow us to see what is broken in the hope that we might fix it. These diagnostic tools are the lifeblood of Lewis' work. Ultrasound, MRI, X-ray, the vital rhythms of the body — the pulse, the heartbeat — become akin to line and cut made in effort to let a little bit of light in. Lewis comes to his process-based works on paper through a lifelong fascination with biological materials, the kinetics of the body, and a career as an Intensive and Critical Care unit nurse. As a child, he was enamored with human anatomy. The minutiae of cell tissues and membranes, their functions and chemical processes, and the nuances of seeing the slight, practically imperceptible, differences that order existence on this plane for living things and inanimate objects alike, inspired him. As Lewis developed a professional medical career, the desire to bridge the clinical detachment he was trained to keep between himself and those whose care he was charged with began to light a path that deepened his engagement with art-making. He began to collect electrocardiogram (EKG) readings and create art works with them. The lines and patterns of the electrocardiogram were a revelation, an extension of the healing mediations and interventions of care he offered patients. Lewis' initial engagement with the EKG paved the way to his now easily recognizable sculptural photographic works. The cascade of cut-line patterns that can still be seen in the work are an outgrowth of his employment and study of diagnostic tools. What can be read at first glance as

***this is your heart on a prelude***, 2013
Nate Lewis
Electrocardiogram rhythm, mixed media
14 x 9 in

wounds on the Black bodies in motion often seen in his ongoing *Signaling* series, are in fact adornments of "intentionality, persistence in caring, understanding and interacting with someone chemically, physically, and emotionally." Lewis' lines stretch across the sinews of the corporeal form, notating the infinitesimal atoms dancing in chorus and chaos in each cell of the skin, in celebration of both form and function of the Black body. Motility, a biological term defined as the ability for an organism to move independently, freely using metabolic energy, is among the paramount concerns of the work.

These concerns and elements of assessment drawing from electrocardiograms, ultrasounds and other medical diagnostic lenses extend into Lewis' other bodies of work. In the aftermath of the 2016 Presidential Election, he looked out at what was happening in the world and sought to find an entry point to begin a conversation. He turned his lens to scenes at the 2017 Inauguration Day in Washington, D.C., and newscasts about incidences of contention and violence at gatherings in communities all over the country. He cut into the photographs he made at the inauguration, and stills from the newscasts, laying bare the class, racial, and political tensions that have long threatened to unravel the fabric of American social life. The works point to a recognition that the feelings that animate these tensions (paired with a collective unwillingness to address them) have long been poison for this country's self-professed legacy of freedom and justice.

With his latest series, *Probing the Land*, the artist has turned his attention to capturing and evaluating famous monuments implanted in the landscape of the United States — both the controversial and the mundane. For Lewis, it is critical to show not only the obvious but **everything** that is present. For the purposes of this essay, the artist's active engagement with Confederate monuments is my concern. After the June 2015 shooting at the historic Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina perpetrated by a person adorned in rebel flag paraphernalia, the matter of the flag and the throngs of monuments venerating secessionist white supremacists has become a point of serious discussion. Among the effigies Lewis has tended to are the bronze sculptures lining the storied Monument Avenue in Richmond, Virginia. The swath of land, officially designated as a National Historic Landmark, features commemorations of rebel leaders like Jefferson Davis, Stonewall Jackson, Robert E. Lee, and J.E.B. Stuart. The Robert E. Lee statue was the first of the sculptures. It is said that some 100,000 people attended its unveiling in May 1890, 25 years after the Civil War. Measuring a towering 61 feet, the statue and its base are a colossal imposition. The elephant in the room, as the current Mayor of Richmond Levar M. Stoney put it, is that its presence is based on what "is, at best, an incomplete story — equal parts myth and

deception." To be clear, these are relics of a defeated movement that promoted the idea that Black people in perpetual slavery "to the superior race" was "a natural and normal condition."[1]

After the Civil War, an era of reconciliation, known as Reconstruction, began, wherein formerly enslaved Black people were allowed to vote and hold office. By the late 1870s, the movement toward full citizenship for Black people in the South had all but run aground. It was followed by a period of outright racial terrorism designed to relegate Black people to a position of permanent second-class citizenship. Data[2] from the Southern Poverty Law Center shows a massive surge in the creation of monuments to the Lost Cause (as the defeated secessionists are called in some circles) all over the country between the 1890s and 1920s (and later, in the 1950s and 1960s). It is no coincidence that almost all of the Monument Avenue statues were erected in this timeframe. They are devices of narrative — even if steeped in an uneven mythos. Our monuments tell a story about who we are and the values that govern us; from whence we siphon our power.

To look upon these statues as a Black person was to be reminded of a white supremacist's vision of your place in the world. What do objects so emblematic of violent, racist history enact — literally looming and writ large — on the landscape itself, on the built environment, and on our reality in the present day?

These questions are at the heart of Lewis' engagement with the subject. He takes the cue for his cut lines from those who say that such questions seek to "gut history." At their most potent, Lewis' cuts serve as a debridement of sorts, removing the detritus from a wound that has long festered on the corpus of this country. It is not the wound itself but rather the continued denial of the presence of the wound that is the problem. The wound is living. Each cut seeks to animate and alchemize the stone into flesh, creating a vulnerability within the materiality and narrative integrity of these objects that are typically read as impenetrable fixtures on the land. It is a destabilization of power, a figurative shifting of the narrative firmament upon which we stand, upon which we will build our future. He is not making any proclamations, but instead opening up the paper and the bronze depicted on it for conversation, rendering them translucent and susceptible to change.

The connection between American monuments — really, American memory — and Black music is an important one. Black music is at once the vanguard of innovation and potentiality and the adjudicator of history in this country and in the West in general. It serves as a constant reminder, a keeper of time in a place whose bedrock is made from forgetting and selective memory. It is the heartbeat in a place that often moves without regard to heart. For Lewis, Jazz in particular taps into a frequency and acts as a sort of amplifier. It is an emission of raw emotion and energy answering the call of the land to defenestrate that which does not extend life. It is an ultrasonic force capable of healing, pathbreaking and visioning, much like what Lewis' incisions seek to create. As we reckon with the turbulence of breaking from the stifling reductive movements of the past, it is this music that is the signal boost as we set a new precedent of truth and vision.•

1. Alexander H. Stephens, "Cornerstone" Speech, Savannah, Georgia, March 21, 1861.
2. Southern Poverty Law Center. *Whose Heritage: Public Symbols of the Confederacy*. Updated 2019.