

# Beautiful Protest

By Alma Rosa Alavarez

## *Uprising*

In *Uprising*, moving stratocumulus clouds are the opening image. Their fluffiness suggests serenity, but only for some seconds. A storm is coming. Two statues intrude onto the center of the scene, and seconds later, at intervals of a beat, the images are overlapped by statues of similar physical and representational composition. The intrusions are symbolic of the way the real-life individuals memorialized in “white bronze” intruded into history, creating legacies of racial disparity, colonialism, and inequity.

Seconds later in the video, Deborah Oropallo, formally trained as a painter, and Andy Rappaport, a sound and visual artist, break up the predominance of gray through color, beautiful and enticing: blue and yellow harnesses, splotches of pinks balanced by rainbow-colored flags in corners. The landscape becomes an interplay between attraction and repulsion. The scene is cleared so that only the clouds remain.

As we contemplate the peacefulness, men astride horses materialize, speaking to a worldwide mythology of masculine power that imposes itself over others and overtakes. But only momentarily. Oropallo and Rappaport subvert this narrative by overlaying the initial images with subsequent images to the beat of something vaguely familiar: carousel music. However, this version is rendered unfamiliar through a slowing down of the melody and the addition of minor keys, “carousel music on acid” that, despite its strangeness, becomes the song we can’t shake out of our heads.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, the color harnesses raise the statues, similar to the way horses rise up in a carousel ride. Like the images of statues in the earlier sequence of the video, the harnesses aim to lift these statues out of public memory.

## **George Floyd’s Murder as Social Frame**

On May 25, 2020, seventeen-year-old Darnella Frazier caught on film the callous murder of George Floyd. One police officer knelt on Floyd’s neck for over nine minutes. Another engaged in crowd control, as people begged for the officer to stop kneeling. Simultaneously, that officer mocked Floyd as he begged, with his last breaths, for air and for his mother who had died two years earlier. The other two police officers on the scene did not intervene.<sup>2</sup> Floyd’s murder served as a watershed moment for racial reckoning in the United States and worldwide. Protests ensued. Some sources cite up to 26 million people protesting in the United States. According to conservative estimates, 15 million people protested<sup>3</sup>, this despite the real threat of Coronavirus-19.

Oropallo’s and Rappaport’s collaborative works, *Uprising*, *Reckoning*, and *Rebellion*, situate the viewer in protest, specifically the Black Lives Matter protests in response to George Floyd’s murder. While 93% of Black Lives Matter protests were peaceful<sup>4</sup>, it wasn’t long before people worldwide began to see images of violence unfold. Three years after the Black Lives Matter protests, one protester remembers: She was fifteen. At the time, despite being underage, she thought of herself as an adult. She, and other youth stood at the front of the protest, toe-to-toe with law enforcement. The bandanas and medical masks, used as protection from COVID, were

poor cover for what came next. She recalls the burning of her eyes, the tightness in her chest, the sensation of choking... and running, or at least trying to run. From her vantage point now as an adult, she is angry at being tear-gassed. “We were just kids,” she says, bitterly.<sup>5</sup>

Oropallo’s and Rappaport’s work in *Rebellion* balances the violence of the Floyd protests with the resilience of protestors. Against a black backdrop are five frames with ever-changing figures that stand in defiance to the clouds of gray smoke curling around them, smoke from exploded cans of tear gas used to control, disperse, dismantle. However, these protestors are not running. They are not crumpled on the floor, reacting to the irritation of the mucous membranes in their noses, eyes, and lungs.<sup>6</sup> The protestors stand solidly, committed. In the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests lasted two years, ten months, and four weeks.<sup>7</sup> Across the country, in Portland, Oregon, BLM protests lasted two hundred days.<sup>8</sup> Resilience. At the same time, Oropallo and Rappaport do not want us to think of the protestors as people unharmed. The violence experienced was real. Sound—erratic breathing, the type done when wearing a gas mask, or when struggling for air, permeates the installation, to the point that the viewer takes on the belabored protestors’ breaths. For a moment, the viewer, unconsciously, is in solidarity.

Oropallo’s and Rappaport’s images of Black Lives Matter protestors are given a place in the recent history of global protests, as protestors from around the globe emerge in the installation’s frames. Both artists are well-versed in global protests. Their work has featured Chinese, Iranian, and Israeli protests, just to name a few. Black Lives Matter is given a global solidarity.

Another aspect of protest was the removal of statues, especially those that celebrated Confederate, racist, and/or colonizing figures. Prior to Floyd’s murder, people in the U.S. had engaged in statue removal, primarily through legal channels, notably after the Charleston Church shooting (2015) and the Unite the Right Rally (2017). However, formal statue removal petitions often involved arduous processes that yielded inaction. From Floyd’s murder to October 2020, over a hundred statues memorializing the Confederacy and colonizers were removed or relocated.<sup>9</sup> “White bronze,” a cheap alternative to marble, was used to mass produce statues in foundries in the North in the early twentieth century. Often, statues reinforcing Jim Crow ideologies were shipped to the South. The inferior materials and poor pedestal placement made the toppling of statues by protestors with harnesses a challenging, but not impossible task.<sup>10</sup> The removal of statues, of course, was not without controversy, particularly for individuals wanting to uphold the status quo. Oropallo’s and Rappaport’s work in both *Reckoning* and *Uprising* speaks to this historical moment of protest.

## **An Imperative Against Image Overload**

I touch you tenderly 2,617 times a day. My sleek black screen, my lover. In times of anxiety, my caress turns into furtive fumbling—I will touch you over 5000 times a day. Are you there? In my bag, my backpack, my pocket? Sometimes, when I touch you, I go all the way, unlocking you at least 96 times a day. On bored days, sad days, 160. When you open to me, I am seduced by a smorgasbord of images, images I linger on for a few seconds. By the end of one of our times together, I am thoughtlessly scrolling, my brain experiencing image overload. I close my apps down, until we connect again... ten minutes later.<sup>11</sup>

Our brains can process an image in 13 milliseconds,<sup>12</sup> 60,000 times faster than words.<sup>13</sup> The medial temporal lobe, in concert with other areas of the brain, is the site where visual images are bound, encoded, and made into memory traces.<sup>14</sup> As humans, we can retain images within our brains better than words. But what happens when we have a proliferation of images? In 2021-2022, more photos were taken than in the entire world history of photography.<sup>15</sup> In 2023, approximately 2.1 billion images were uploaded daily on Facebook.<sup>16</sup> In a world that constantly produces images, images are easily supplanted by the next series of images. They are forgotten, and thus rendered almost invisible.

While Oropallo engages video and sound production technologies, she is troubled by how the images we consume on our phone screens can easily be dismissed.<sup>17</sup> The average phone screen is anywhere from 5.8 to 6.2 inches. Human life, regardless of its state or stage, is physically minimized. One of Oropallo's and Rappaport's responses is to use 8.5 feet tall by 15 feet wide screens—sometimes multiple screens that total as much as 45 feet in length. As a viewer becomes immersed in the installation, the images, because of the scale, are difficult to ignore. Moreover, the images themselves, their sequencing, the timing intervals, and the addition of sounds make viewing Oropallo's and Rappaport's collaborations a multi-sensory and unforgettable experience.

Oropallo's and Rappaport's work is a concerted effort to break the obsolescence of particular images that ought to matter to us as members of humanity. Their process includes combing daily through the internet, almost obsessively. This has led them to sometimes find images that eventually get censored by governments, as was the case with images of the Umbrella Revolution in Hong Kong, images of the White Paper Protest in China, and images of the 2023 Israeli Judicial Reform Protests. Often, particularly in relation to images of events in the United States, they are countering the ways these are framed in neutral language that detracts from the decidedly non-neutral event unfolding.<sup>18</sup> In an installation, anywhere from five hundred to a thousand discrete images are carefully placed in "sequences of painting."<sup>19</sup> In this sense, Oropallo's and Rappaport's work becomes a type of recuperation, not only of images, but of the emotional and the moral spaces occupied by images.

## End Notes

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