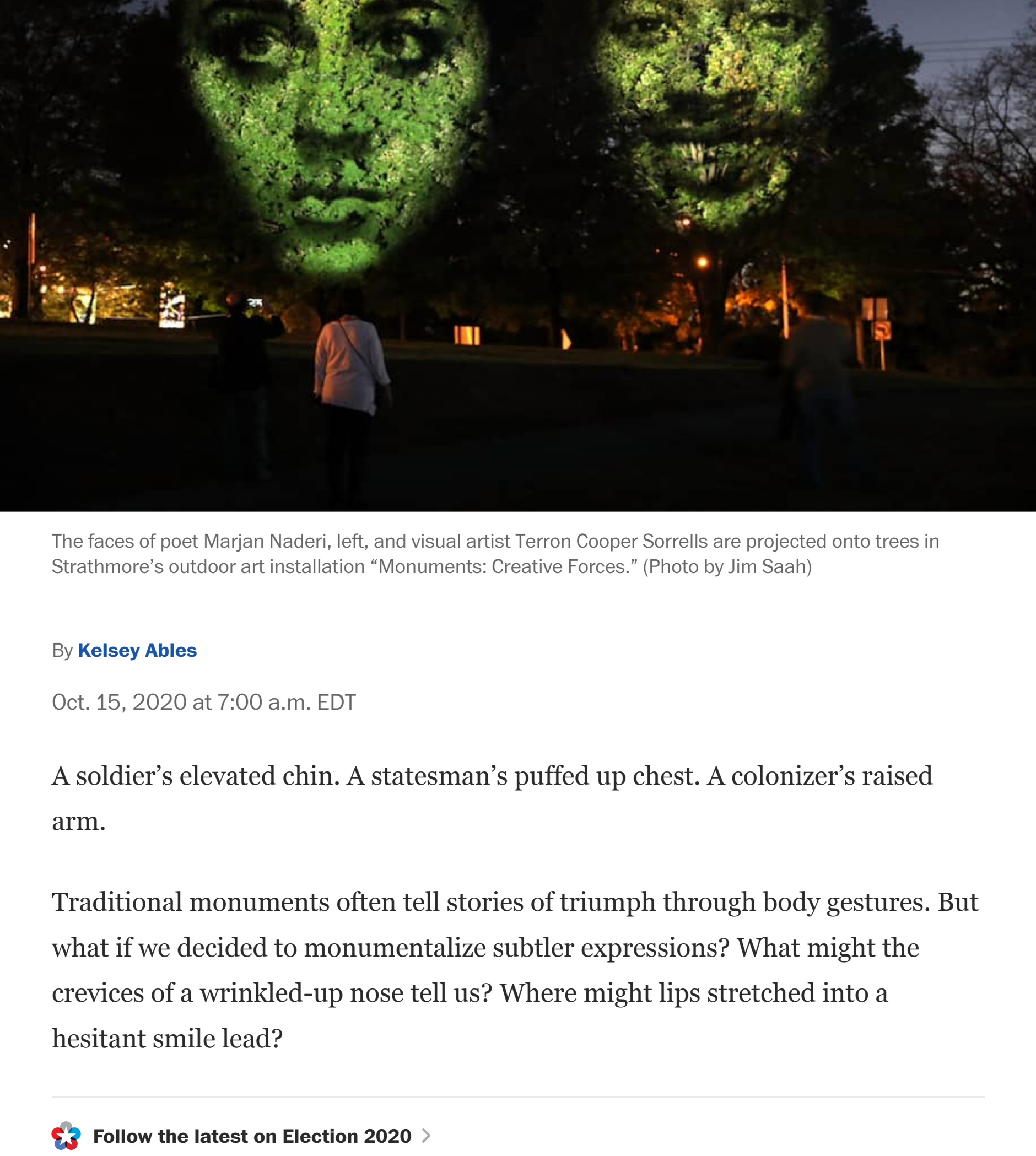


Museums

# The trees have eyes in Strathmore’s mesmerizing art installation ‘Monuments’



The faces of poet Marjan Naderi, left, and visual artist Terron Cooper Sorrells are projected onto trees in Strathmore’s outdoor art installation “Monuments: Creative Forces.” (Photo by Jim Saah)

By [Kelsey Ables](#)

Oct. 15, 2020 at 7:00 a.m. EDT

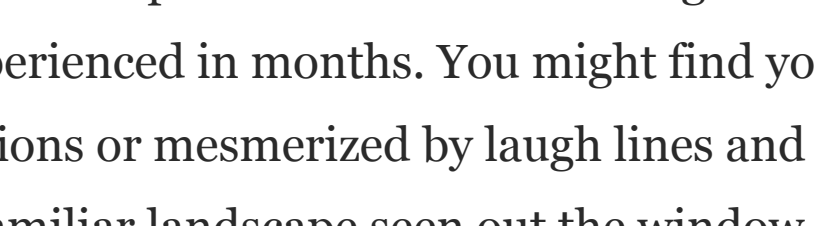
A soldier’s elevated chin. A statesman’s puffed up chest. A colonizer’s raised arm.

Traditional monuments often tell stories of triumph through body gestures. But what if we decided to monumentalize subtler expressions? What might the crevices of a wrinkled-up nose tell us? Where might lips stretched into a hesitant smile lead?

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While many monuments capture famous figures in postures that convey heroism, the six people depicted by Australian artist Craig Walsh in “Monuments: Creative Forces” — on outdoor view, after dark, at Strathmore — strike a different tone. Made by projecting black-and-white portraits of local artists, writers, and musicians onto trees in eight-minute video loops, the close-cropped faces cycle through forgettable behaviors and quiet emotions: disinterest, sadness, delight. They smile. They yawn. They fall asleep.

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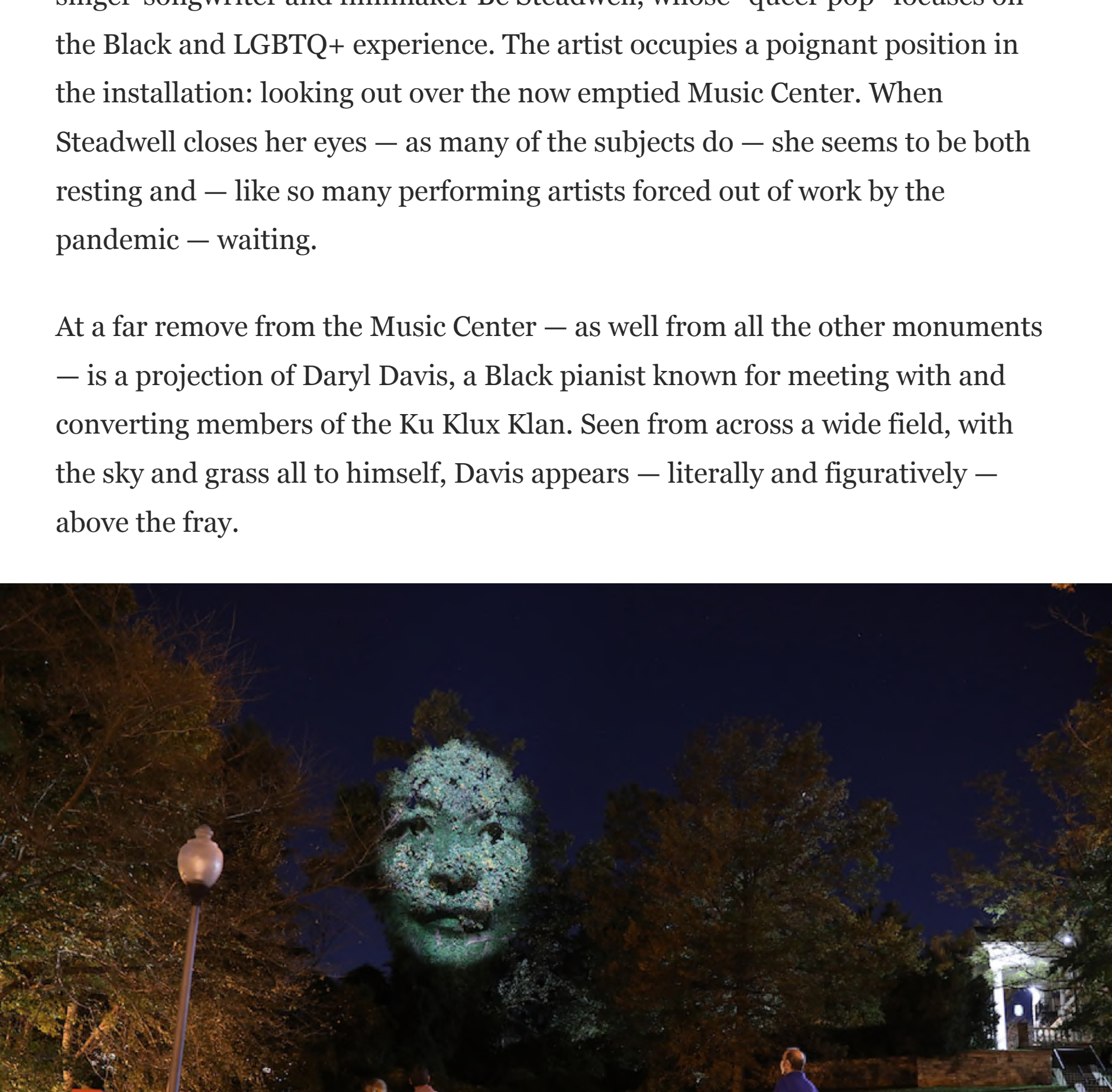


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The works are a part of an ongoing series, begun in 2014, in which Walsh partners with local communities around the world to memorialize living heroes — from bicycling enthusiasts to green-energy activists — in spectral forms.

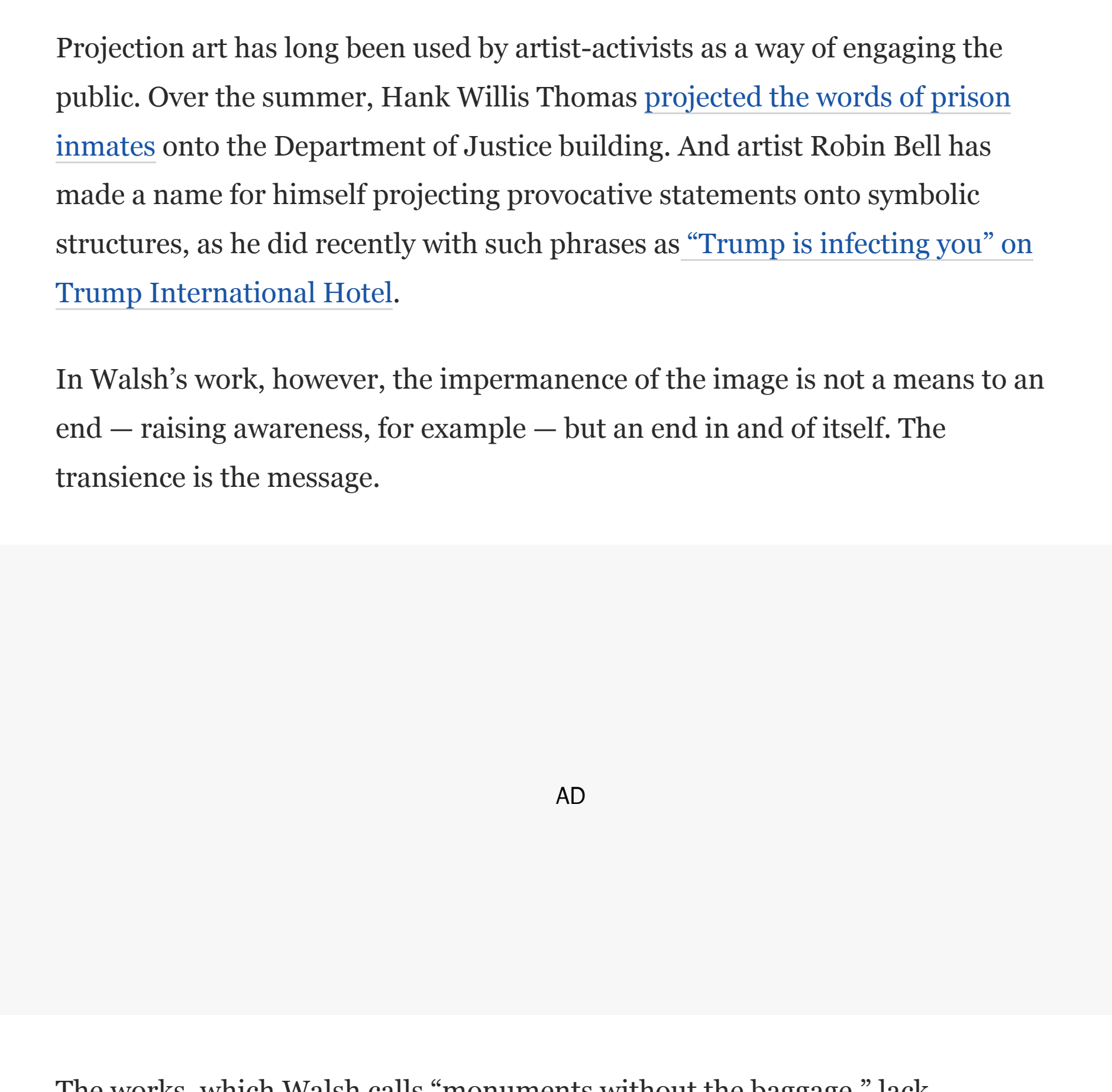
At first, it sounds creepy, like some arboreal horror movie: “The Trees Have Eyes.” (The off-putting [promotional photos](#) don’t help). But in person, it is surprisingly easy to connect with the video portraits. At tree-size, the faces simulate the kind of close-up interaction with a stranger that many of us probably haven’t experienced in months. You might find yourself absorbed in the subjects’ expressions or mesmerized by laugh lines and smiles, as if they were features of unfamiliar landscape seen out the window of a train.



“Monuments: Creative Forces” is an outdoor art installation by Craig Walsh that features the faces of six artists, including singer-songwriter Be Steadwell, projected onto trees near Strathmore’s Music Center. (Photo by Jim Saah)

The six artists and creators recognized in the Strathmore iteration of “Monuments” were selected by a panel, based on their impact in the local community. The installation has been in the works for years, but present circumstances have made the endeavor particularly meaningful as ongoing crises have left many artists struggling. The first monument in the show depicts singer-songwriter and filmmaker Be Steadwell, whose “queer pop” focuses on the Black and LGBTQ+ experience. The artist occupies a poignant position in the installation: looking out over the now emptied Music Center. When Steadwell closes her eyes — as many of the subjects do — she seems to be both resting and — like so many performing artists forced out of work by the pandemic — waiting.

At a far remove from the Music Center — as well from all the other monuments — is a projection of Daryl Davis, a Black pianist known for meeting with and converting members of the Ku Klux Klan. Seen from across a wide field, with the sky and grass all to himself, Davis appears — literally and figuratively — above the fray.



The face of musician Yoko K. Sen is projected onto a tree on the grounds of Strathmore, part of Craig Walsh’s art installation “Monuments: Creative Forces.” (Photo by Jim Saah)

Closer to the footpath that winds its way through the grounds of the arts complex, the two youngest artists selected — poet Marjan Naderi and visual artist Terron Cooper Sorrells — swap glances from neighboring trees that were chosen to match the shape of their faces. Beside a gazebo, [Step Afrika!](#) founder C. Brian Williams blinks, while Yoko K. Sen, a sound alchemist and electronic musician, gazes meditatively from atop a hill.

AD

By calling these works monuments, Walsh positions the luminescent faces in the fraught, timely debate over whom we should honor in public space — and how. Physically, the works resist what we think of when we think of monuments. Made of light, the diaphanous compositions are practically immaterial and as fleeting as the autumn foliage that holds them. Captured on video, the subjects are in constant motion. Even the smallest shifts in expression, rippling over hundreds of leaves, feel weighty.

Projection art has long been used by artist-activists as a way of engaging the public. Over the summer, Hank Willis Thomas [projected the words of prison inmates](#) onto the Department of Justice building. And artist Robin Bell has made a name for himself projecting provocative statements onto symbolic structures, as he did recently with such phrases as “[Trump is infecting you](#)” on [Trump International Hotel](#).

In Walsh’s work, however, the impermanence of the image is not a means to an end — raising awareness, for example — but an end in and of itself. The transience is the message.

AD

The works, which Walsh calls “monuments without the baggage,” lack permanence, even as you experience them. If you don’t stand in the precise right viewing spot — midway between the projector and the tree — the face becomes indiscernible. As you walk away, the form is lost as quickly as it appeared.

But the monuments also lack the baggage of expectation that comes with glorious figures cast in stone. Strathmore’s monuments often gaze up at the sky. In so doing, they appear curious, deferential, maybe even a little bit confused. It’s as if they are wondering, “How did I get here? Why me?”

At one point in the show, two monuments seem in sync: Davis yawns, and then so does Naderi. Yawning, which typically conveys boredom or fatigue, is a strange, unflattering thing to include in a memorial. But [one evolutionary theory](#) suggest that yawns, which increase blood flow to the brain, spread from one person to another to create a collective, heightened state of awareness. In that regard, a yawn is a call to action, and perhaps not so different from the raised hoofs of the District’s many equestrian statues.

AD

And yet, the yawning monuments might be better at pulling you under their influence. While no one passing through Logan Circle would feel compelled to start trotting alongside [General John Logan](#), looking at these monuments, you might just catch yourself yawning too, and not out of boredom.

## Monuments: Creative Forces

On the grounds of Strathmore, 5301 Tuckerman Lane, North Bethesda.

[strathmore.org](#). Face coverings are required for ages 6 and older, and recommended for ages 2-5.

**Dates:** Daily, beginning at sunset, through Oct. 31 (subject to weather). Allow 30 to 60 minutes to experience the installation.

**Admission:** Timed, pay-what-you-can tickets are available online. Free tickets are available Sundays-Thursdays. Parking in the Grosvenor-Strathmore Metro garage is \$5.20 during the week, and free on weekends.

**Public program:** On Monday at 7 p.m., there will be a Zoom panel discussion with artists Craig Walsh, Daryl Davis and C. Brian Williams, moderated by artist and educator Ada Pinkston. Marjan Naderi will perform original poems to open and close the session. Register for pay-what-you-can tickets at [strathmore.org/events-and-tickets/monuments-panel-discussion](#).

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