

Jennifer Colten - Artist Statement

The history of Washington Park Cemetery reveals within its microcosm of events, a complicated tangle of social injustice, racial politics and imbalance of power.

I was introduced to Washington Park Cemetery in the early 1990s soon after moving to St. Louis. The cemetery land was beautiful; it also happened to be very valuable. The adjacent Lambert Airport wanted part of the land for its runway expansion, and the Bi-State Development's MetroLink wanted the land for its rail route connecting to the airport.

When I began my work at Washington Park Cemetery I knew very little of its history as one of the largest African-American cemeteries in the region. What I saw as I wandered the site: the beautiful decade's old trees, the once careful landscaping, sat parallel to the upheaval caused by controversial politics. I found a story I could not ignore, and began documenting—making work that was guided by the need to honor the families who had little or inadequate representation. The story is complex—a sordid pattern of neglect, dishonesty and outright erasure of an entire community.

The history of racial injustice reflected within these cemetery grounds mirrors the struggles of the larger community. However, as I have learned in the process of making this work, the injustices at this particular African-American cemetery, are not singular. Sadly, but not surprisingly, there are parallel stories throughout the country—uncanny in their similarity, and certainly perpetuated by like-minded motives.

The photographs made in the 1990s reveal a complex overlapping set of conditions—the sustaining beauty of the landscape, nature taking over the order of the cemetery, and the disruptive process of excavating the graves. The addition of current day photographs shows a slow but steady effort by dedicated volunteers and family members who work to maintain cultural and familial ties. With these photographs, I extend an effort and a promise toward acknowledging the cultural and historical significance of Washington Park Cemetery, and toward honoring the people touched by decades of oversight, neglect and disruption.

This work is in part protest, in part tribute, and in part historical documentation.

—Jennifer Colten



Jennifer Colten is an artist and educator living in St. Louis, Missouri. After receiving her M.F.A. from Massachusetts College of Art in Boston, she relocated to St. Louis to teach photography at Washington University Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts.

Central concerns within Colten's artistic practice reflect upon the representation of landscape, and examine interlacing issues surrounding social and environmental injustice. A common thread of resiliency considers how issues link the "social space" to the "environmental space."

Colten has received numerous awards including a M-AAA NEA Fellowship in Photography, an International Arts Program Network Award encouraging cultural learning and arts exchange. In 2014 Colten was awarded a Regional Arts Commission Artist Support Grant to further photographic scholarship and community work in St. Louis, and a Creative Activity Research Grant from the Sam Fox School to support the initial production of the Washington Park Cemetery project. Receiving a Ferguson Academic Seed Fund Grant from Washington University in 2016 has allowed this exhibition to come to fruition.

Colten's photographs have been collected in international and national institutions, including the Museum für Fotografie, Braunschweig, Germany; Museo de Arte, Moderno, Bogota; Museo de Antioquia, Medellin, Colombia; Bellas Artes Institute, Medellin, Colombia; and Museo de Arte Pereira, Pereira, Colombia.