



MAKING THE GROUND TALK AND OTHER STORIES

BRIAN PALMER

PEABODY AWARD-WINNING JOURNALIST & PHOTOGRAPHER

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ROBERT AND SALLIE BROWN GALLERY AND MUSEUM

SONJA HAYNES STONE CENTER

Artist Statement

I resisted the label "artist" for a long time. I tried it on while earning a masters in fine arts. The label didn't fit, at least as I understood it. I was a journalist, a documentarian. I was committed to facts and to social justice. Most "art," to me, was frivolous, esoteric, elitist, even pointless. My ignorance, however, was soon buffeted by provocative work such as *And Babies?* by the Art Workers' Coalition and *What is the Proper Way to Display a U.S. Flag?* by Dread Scott. I was both moved and confounded by such art, but it opened my mind to different aesthetics, including anti-aesthetics. I realized I needed to determine what I wanted my photography to be before worrying about labeling myself.

I realized I needed to determine what I wanted my photography to be before worrying about labeling myself. I knew I wanted to confront and reflect the nation and world I lived in. I was stamped from the beginning, to borrow from Ibram X. Kendi, by my parents. Dad came from York County, VA, Mom from Queens, NY. They came of age when this nation did not recognize them and theirs as full citizens—or as fully human. They were both teachers. They had a deep faith in facts and education. Not surprisingly, the photos I took that gave me the most satisfaction back then were ones that depicted what passed in front of my lens, with fidelity to that scene and the people in it.

I have always strived to capture real life, real chaos, real order, real people, with technical skill and creativity. And integrity. When I succeeded at this, I saw that viewers were drawn into my photos. I began to trust myself and my vision. Later, seeing work by artists such as Alfredo Jaar, Wendel White, Dawoud Bey, Carrie Mae Weems, and Faith Ringgold gave me permission to think and act more conceptually while still using my camera to depict what I see, as I see it.



When I started photographing historic Black cemeteries more than a decade ago, the majority of them long abused and neglected, most of that creativity stuff flew right out the window. I became a collector of evidence, a chronicler of the damage that Jim Crow policies did to these places—once-manicured African American sites overgrown, vandalized, reduced to illegal garbage dumps. Most of my pictures were reactive and reflexive, and therefore dull.

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I was moving too fast at places like East End and Evergreen at first, and I was too angry to hear the ancestors who may have been calling to me, trying to steer me toward the things that matter at these sites, the signs of care and connection carved into gravestones and planted in family plots. I needed time, and I needed more knowledge. I also needed patience to find my way to a vision and purpose: making photos that show the damage yet honor the love that was so clearly embedded in these spaces by relatives, fellow church members, friends, colleagues.

I also find (put) myself in situations that are adversarial, where my very presence as an African American can be a provocation to some (white) people. At such events, which include Confederate celebrations and memorials (and one KKK rally), I respect the humanity of the people in my frame while depicting the falsity and toxicity of their ideology. My photos from these events tend to be less lyrical or interpretive, and this is by design. I want viewers of my photos to see with clarity the flags, symbols, and signs. The ideology they represent, their Lost Cause, has powerfully, painfully afflicted our nation. It still does. We must know this and them.

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Forty or so years ago, I was naive about what my pictures could do—change the world, I thought. I am less so now. They won't change the world, but one might touch a heart, trigger a thought, move someone to action. I'm good with that.



A Civil War reenactor and member of the Sons of Confederate Veterans displays a facsimile of a Confederate flag to visiting public school children. Beauvoir— the Jefferson Davis Home and "Presidential" Library, Biloxi, MS, 19 October 2018.

About the Artist



Brian Palmer is a Richmond, Virginia–based visual journalist, writer, teacher, and artist. His work has appeared in outlets including *The New York Times*, *Smithsonian*, *Richmond Free Press*, *PBS*, *BBC*, and *Reveal*. A former *Village Voice* fact-checker, he has held staff roles at *U.S. News & World Report* (Beijing bureau chief), *Fortune*, and *CNN*, and has taught journalism and documentary at Columbia University, SVA, and the University of Richmond, among others.

Palmer has exhibited his photographs at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts and other venues. In 2024, he co-presented *Home/Grown* at the VMFA, featuring over a decade of his Virginia-based work. Palmer has received numerous honors, including a Peabody Award for a *Reveal* investigation (2018), a George Gund Foundation photography commission (2020), and a Ford Foundation grant for his documentary *Full Disclosure* (2008). Since 2014, Palmer and his wife, Erin Hollaway Palmer, have volunteered to help reclaim East End Cemetery, a historic African American burial ground in Henrico County, using research, reporting, and creative work to uncover the stories of those laid to rest there during Jim Crow.



The Works



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1. Snowden, a property once owned by Alexander Maben Hobson, the man identified in records as the enslaver of my great-grandfather, Mat Palmer. Goochland, VA, 23 November 2012.
2. Mr. Artie Jefferson removes old flowers from the grave of Ms. Patricia Ann Hardy (b. 8 Nov. 1954; d. 7 Feb. 2016), his partner of 26 years. Evergreen Cemetery, Richmond, VA, 2 October 2016.
3. Ms. Kimberly Pleasants (left) and a relative tidy the Knight-Branic-Bullock-Pleasants plot for Memorial Day. East End Cemetery, Henrico County, VA, 28 May 2018.
4. Rinsing the recently unearthed gravestone for Mr. James Collier (b. 1891; d. 1924). Evergreen Cemetery, Richmond, VA, 26 October 2024.
5. The bronze statue formerly atop the Confederate Soldiers and Sailors Monument is hauled away. Richmond, VA, 8 July 2020.
6. A Reclamation Drum Circle for the Richmond community organized by the Elegba Folklore Society. Marcus-David Peters Circle, Richmond, VA, 24 July 2020.

The Works



Headstone for Ms. Lizzie Walker (b. 4 Sep. 1886; d. 9 Mar. 1910) during reclamation effort by the Friends of Geer Cemetery and partners. Durham, NC, 5 May 2020.

The Works



**Soldiers from Ft. Gregg-Adams plant US flags on veterans' graves on Veterans Day.
Evergreen Cemetery, Richmond, VA, 11 November 2023.**



About the Robert and Sallie Brown Gallery and Museum

The Robert and Sallie Brown Gallery and Museum at the Sonja Haynes Stone Center is dedicated to the enrichment of visual culture on campus and in the community. The Brown Gallery supports the Stone Center's commitment to the critical examination of all dimensions of African-American and African diaspora cultures through formal exhibition of works of art, artifacts and material culture.

History and Overview of the Stone Center

The Sonja Haynes Stone Center is part of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. As an academic and community engagement unit with the Provost's Office, we play a central role in supporting the academic mission of the University. We have a commitment to broaden the range of intellectual discourse about African Americans and to encourage a better understanding of the peoples of Africa and the African diaspora and their perspectives on important social and cultural issues.

The Sonja Haynes Stone Center For Research In Black Culture And History



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