

Spartan Ruin: A Reader

Young Joon Kwak

Edited by Jeanne Dreskin



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Foreword

Jeanne Dreskin

In August 2020, Young Joon Kwak was surrounded by an empty campus in East Lansing, Michigan. They had recently arrived to begin Michigan State University's Artist Residency in Critical Race Studies, a year-long position that would include teaching and preparing an exhibition. At the time, COVID-19 guidelines had required a massive restructuring of typical institutional life. With coursework and other collective activity dispersed across a network of remote experiences, the university as a singular, spatially embodied "commons"—once taken for granted—was no longer a given.

It was in this context that one body stood out: that of *The Spartan*, or "Sparty," an immense bronze statue installed on the northwest corner of campus. In 2005, it was cast from the terracotta original, which was sculpted by former MSU professor of art Leonard Jungwirth at the end of the Second World War. Originally conceived to reflect values of "strength, honor, and courageousness," the statue stands as a testament to predominant beliefs in MSU's institutional history and culture. Over its lifetime, Sparty has evolved well beyond a mascot into an icon: a mythical symbol of the university itself, commanding protection and exaltation from the campus community.

In its citation of Sparta, an ancient Greek military state, the statue's taut muscularity trafficks in classically Western paradigms of anatomical normativity, visibility, and power. Kwak saw the Spartan as exemplary of hegemonic whiteness and patriarchy, its idealized masculine body thrown into stark relief against the backdrop of a global pandemic, a national reckoning with white supremacy, and the continued toppling of racist historical monuments worldwide. Uninterested in negation, however, Kwak chose to mobilize the statue's imposing form as a catalyst for its own recontextualization and reimagining.

For "Spartan Skin," Kwak's exhibition on view April 9 – May 21, 2021 at MSU's Union Gallery, the artist recast the bronze Spartan, generating silicone molds from which they produced a group of cold-cast metal sculptural "skins" and a series of large-scale ink monoprints. Sparty's body was dismantled and rearranged in the gallery as an array of intimately scaled, visually accessible fragments, installed with museological precision. In this configuration, the sculpture's verticality was laid horizontal, its fixedness giving way to permeability and transience.

"Spartan Ruin" at Commonwealth & Council is both a re-presentation and an expansion of the prior exhibition. It brings the existing sculptures and works on paper into dialogue with two large-scale inked panels, a crystal-encrusted holographic breastplate, and a group of prints and sculptural skins that meld impressions of the statue with those of the artist's own body. With these new permutations, Sparty is duly transformed. Its surfaces, creases, and chasms increasingly resist alignment with legible signifiers, finding and claiming newer spaces of abstraction, fluidity, and queerness.

This reader, offered as a companion to Kwak's exhibition, excavates the narratives and thematics underlying the artist's exploration of the Spartan. Art historian Karin Zitzewitz's thoughtful reflections on Kwak's MSU residency, studio process, and installation provide a wealth of context on the institutional origins and outcomes of the artist's on-site experiments. The creative exchange that I was privileged to co-author with Kwak puts the artist in dialogue with a disembodied, imagined voice from MSU, aiming to crack open and unpack perspectives on Sparty held by the "Institution" at large. The reader concludes with a chorus of voices from MSU's Asian Pacific Islander Desi American (APIDA) community, offering candid and divergent perspectives on Kwak's work. Recorded in the midst of a national surge of assaults against Asian diasporic populations, the conversation highlights the urgency of critiquing institutional structures and symbols from within, where their hierarchies—and the tools for dismantling them—can be found most unvarnished.

These texts and their accompanying exhibition extend Kwak's ongoing praxis that insists on collectivity, kinship, and collaboration as preconditions for seizing the most potent means of resistance. They demonstrate that in the breaking down of the singular and authoritative, there is ruin. From ruin springs new growth. As that growth progresses, the monolith slips evermore into a multitude.



In-process casts of Sparty in the studio, 2021, photo by Young Joon Kwak



Kwak creating on-site mold of Sparty, 2020, photo by Ryan Frederick



Lauren Batdorff with booty sculpture in process, 2021, photo by Young Joon Kwak

Spartan Skin: What is a university, when we cannot be together?

Karin Zitzewitz
May 2021

The Critical Race Studies residency at Michigan State is designed to attract artists and designers who have formulated exciting and critical ways to engage students and communities in rich, complicated conversations around race. Young Joon Kwak applied, interviewed, and was chosen for this opportunity just before the campus was forced to shut down in response to the coronavirus pandemic. Last Spring, Young Joon and I spent a fair amount of time on the phone—me walking around East Lansing and they speaking from their studio in Los Angeles—trying to figure out whether and how they could adapt the residency to these swiftly changing circumstances. We agreed that improvisation was definitely going to be part of the work, and hopefully part of the fun, of the residency.

Young Joon reacted very imaginatively to the challenge, pivoting their teaching to incorporate virtual instruction, and building a virtual version of their ongoing Mutant Salon, inviting eight exciting artists to engage with our students and the wider community. But the biggest change, by far, came in their approach to their exhibition project, through which they had hoped to stage public conversations about the intersections of race and trans identity.

As the summer went on, it became clear that public art was becoming newly relevant to broader discussions of racial injustice, violence, and policing in the United States. It is important to remember that the focus that movements for racial justice put on public statuary was not inevitable. But once these arguments began—in Charlottesville, in Richmond, in Portland, and across the United States—it became clear that monuments offered protesters potent signs of the racist histories and hierarchies that are at the root of violence. Arguments about who—and whose histories—are valued within public space were natural extensions of the broader fight to be free to walk on the street, to play in the park, to change lanes, to go for a run, to stop at a corner store, or to do any of the other everyday activities that have served as pretext for attacks on Black people. Questions of which bodies are memorialized, and how, are important in themselves, and also serve as proxies for broader debates about representation and power.

Young Joon found in the Spartan an opening to a different kind of conversation, one in which the attachment to the icon could be gently unpacked. Their project gestures toward the kinds of thinking, discussion, and coming together facilitated by public art. And it does so by attending to the way that our dependence upon digital technologies through the pandemic enlarged the role that images were playing in our everyday lives. Unlike other artist residents, for whom interaction with campus began with lots of in-person conversation that, together, formed their impression of MSU, Young Joon began with a symbol of the institution as a whole, and used that interface to engage with students, faculty, and the wider community.

Young Joon's work highlights the history of the sculpture, which longtime professor Leonard Jungwirth made in terracotta as the Second World War came to a close. Informed by art deco stylization of form as well as more complicated political and cultural investments in ideas of physical fitness, Jungwirth's sculpture is first and foremost an exemplary body, an icon of Whiteness and masculinity. He carries the helmet and cape that mark him as a Spartan, and that associate him with the university's ideal virtues of tenacity and will. Though a work of art, the Spartan has always been primarily an icon of the university. Beloved from the beginning, it also attracted high-spirited vandals, often from chief rival University of Michigan, as early as the 1950s. And so, soon after, the MSU Marching Band program and friends began to guard the statue in the weeks leading up to major games.

The relatively delicate clay material eventually broke down in the face of all this interaction, and after an incomplete restoration in the late 1980s, the sculpture was recast in bronze and placed on a new pedestal in 2005. The Spartan remains a part of MSU's everyday life, and both official and unofficial acts—from the tradition of gluing pennies to Sparty for good luck to the application of a mask to Sparty's face during the pandemic—mark its continuing relevance as a campus symbol. No graduation is complete without a picture with the Spartan.

Young Joon's approach to the sculpture allowed for attention to these histories, through its reliance upon molds that preserved the Spartan's surface. Working with graduate student Nicolei Gupit and Studio Art major Lauren Batdorff, they spread non-toxic, silicone mold-making material on the statue's exterior, making large pieces that cover nearly the entirety of the statue. The molds reveal evidence of Jungwirth's hand and draw attention to the subtle fan interactions with its surface.

Kwak's sculptures, cast in a mixture of resin and metal, remake and invert the Spartan's skin. The sculpture's burnished, copper-colored interiors present Jungwirth's sculptural exterior surfaces, cradled inside shells of gunmetal gray. The sculptures are dignified, beautiful, and quietly demanding. Displayed with strong light casting deep shadows, Young Joon's work encourages the slow, contemplative engagement that is not typically afforded to Jungwirth's public monument. Kwak's close attention to the material form of the Spartan offers its own kind of visual pleasure. But it also reveals the separation between that form and its outsized symbolic meaning. That allows viewers to question where the meaning of the icon lies, and, as the university changes its character, how open those meanings are to transformation.

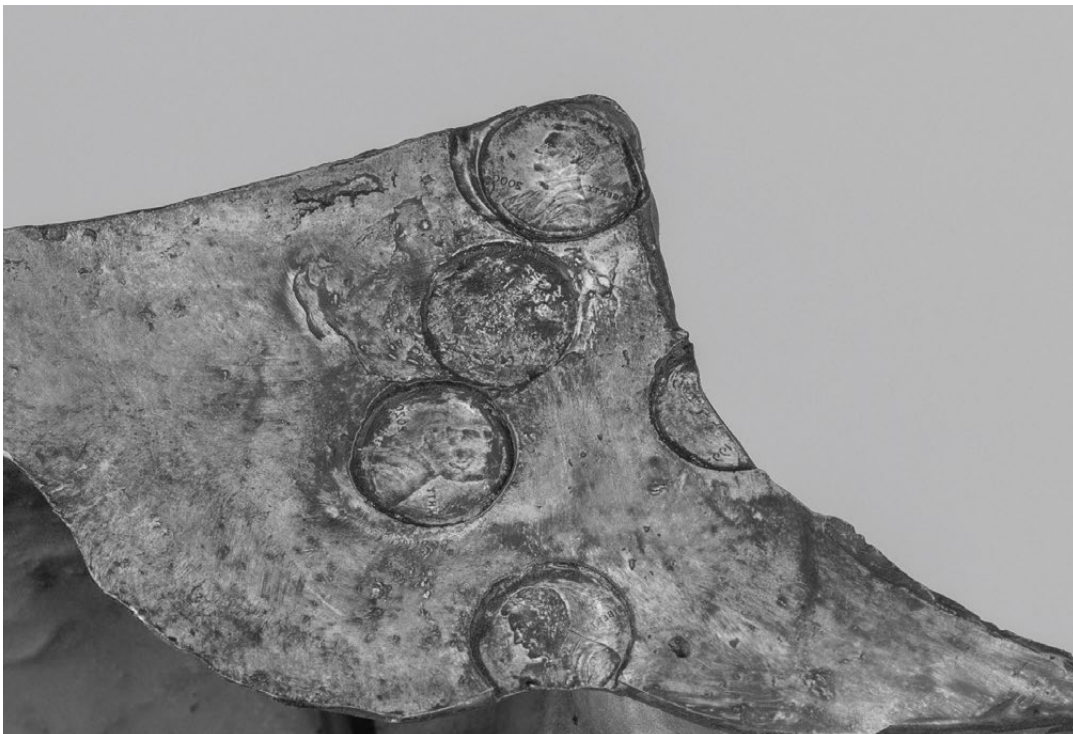
The monumental prints that surround the sculptures—monoprints made from the molds dipped in ink—continue that subtle exploration of meaning. The images of the Spartan's body deviate much further from his original form. They are recognizably human, but distorted and disambiguated. Some of the images, like the Spartan helmet, are engaged with symbols, others, like the long and graceful leg or the complete, broad torso, are subtly erotic.

Kwak's prints recall the work of African American artist David Hammons, who from the 1970s onward has coated his own body with oil, applied it to paper, and then dusted

pigment on the saturated surface, leaving ghostly images that allow for an uneasy range of interpretations. The proximity of Kwak's images to Hammons' body prints opens up associations with critical histories of race by artists of color. I was reminded of Hammons work most by Kwak's nearly identical, paired images of the Spartan's face, one in black and one in gold. A literal reading of those colors leads viewers to ask how the Spartan icon can accommodate Asian bodies, even as Jungwirth's sculpture so clearly sets up an unmistakably White norm. The exhibition opened in the midst of the most serious wave of anti-Asian violence in recent history, a series of assaults that have profoundly destabilized any sense of belonging and security that Asian and Asian-American people had felt they had achieved in communities across the country, including in our campus communities.

Kwak's work poses questions and demands careful thought and contemplation, rather than offering strong positions with which to contend. As we contemplate what it will be to return to share the spaces of the university—to come together again—the exhibition offers us a site from which to imagine a new, richer, more inclusive, more critical form of the Spartan.

Thanks to Nicolei Gupit for allowing me to read her fine paper on David Hammons' work in preparation for this essay.



Detail of *Spartan Skin (Prayer to Leonard Jungwirth)*, 2021, photo by Biddle City Project

Marvin Astorga with Sparty in the studio, 2021, photo by Young Joon Kwak



Still from process video of Kwak inking Sparty's booty, 2021, video by Nicolei Gupit
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BGjAL2Yipm0>

Kwak holding silicone mold with body makeup sponges, 2021, photo by Marvin Astorga



What Do Spartans Want?

Jeanne Dreskin and Young Joon Kwak

In July 2021, Kwak and Jeanne Dreskin, Monument Lab's Writer-in-Residence, collaboratively assembled an exchange between Kwak, who speaks from their own perspective, and an imagined voice that speaks from a subject position embedded within the MSU community. The voice's rhetoric reveals a series of institutionally codified beliefs, traditions, and myths that Kwak found to be heavily concentrated in and around the Sparty statue. Kwak's statements contest these predominant understandings of Sparty, reflecting the personal impressions, encounters, and confrontations that fundamentally shaped their residency experience and the exhibition that came from it.

MSU's Sparty statue is iconic. It exudes a majestic aura that's both unmissable and unforgettable. It's the main attraction on campus and the requisite backdrop for photos celebrating every student milestone. Guided tours, family weekends, rivalry weeks, [graduations](#), and alumni reunions are all incomplete if not commemorated by a visit to Sparty. Proximity to, reverence for, and exaltation of the statue all authenticate the MSU experience. To be pictured with the statue is to confirm that in this place, one is undeniably a "true Spartan."

Standing approximately fifteen feet high, Sparty serves as the capstone of Demonstration Field. It can be spotted from hundreds of yards away, perched on a massive five-foot pedestal that mimics a tri-level winner's podium. It presides over a nexus of converging footpaths, staged centrally on a circular, raised brick platform and framed by a low retaining wall. Step onto the platform and you're in the presence of a giant. The closer you get, the more you have to crane your neck to take it in. Sparty looms so large—both literally and figuratively—over campus life that its claims to space are exceeded only by its symbolic claims to time. It is indelibly intertwined in MSU's history, present, and its future legacies.

When I began researching MSU after applying for the Artist-in-Residence in Critical Race Studies position, I found that the Spartan statue and symbol was inseparable from the identity of the university. I got the job early on in the pandemic, at which point I saw a [news item](#) about how the university placed a large face mask on the statue to promote mask-wearing on and around campus. To me, this demonstrated how the symbol of the Spartan has been cultivated by the institution in ways that carry so much weight, influence, and power over the community.

At the time, I was inspired by burgeoning public debates around monuments in public spaces and institutions, which were developing alongside the country's growing political movements and social unrest. I wanted an alternative and more complex form of engagement. Rather than simply politicizing the symbol of the Spartan in a polarizing way or seeking to demolish it, as has been done with so many other statues and monuments around the world, how could I connect with Sparty as a means of connecting with the community?

When I first saw the statue in person, it felt so high up, so untouchable, impenetrable. It's up there, I am down here. It's so huge, I am so small. It's so hard compared to my soft, squishy body. It's so proud, so white. I saw how much people identify with it, adopt it as a form of representation of the community—or it adopts the community. But not me, and not many others, it turns out. I wanted to look at it closer, to see it on its level. The pedestal was pushing me away from it, enforcing distance. At the time, the pandemic was compounding heightened social and ideological rifts across the country. Being in isolation in this swing state during a presidential election year, all I wanted was touch, intimacy, to understand.

To know Sparty is to understand its crucial role as the MSU community's great connector. For those lucky enough to have made memories at MSU, the mere sight or mention of Sparty no doubt recalls their happiest times on campus. Standing next to the statue, perceiving its magnitude, feeling parts of its bronze skin...these experiences can be transportative. They offer a portal to MSU's institutional past.

Sparty represents the social bonds that community members share with each other, as well as the characteristics that every Spartan can take pride in sharing with the world. It pronounces to every student, faculty, and staff member, “you are welcome here, and you belong.” As long as Sparty stands, it will stand firm for Spartan ideals, inspiring everyone in the community to do the same. In each of these ways, Sparty is alive. The statue’s body exudes a palpable, vibrant energy that permeates the space around it. To be amidst the statue, especially with fellow Spartans, is to feel and participate in that energy, like rising to cheer in a crowd of fans at a championship football game.

Sparta was one of ancient Greece’s most successful military states and its citizens prized physical fitness, strength training, and readiness for battle. Sparty’s taut, angular form is a testament to this legendary might and fortitude. From its square jaw and broad shoulders to its strikingly defined abdominals, sinewy legs, and confident pose, the statue evokes a consummate warrior. It holds its head aloft, unafraid, while drawing its helmet down to its side. The softness of its flowing drapery complements the firmness of its stance and the steadiness of its gaze. It embodies the tenacity, conviction, and humility of great Spartan athletes and their supporters—poised, sportsmanlike, and primed for greatness. Sparty’s is a body that aspires to invincibility.

In my research, I came across a [Reddit thread](#) that discussed a petition to replace the Spartan statue with another version of the Spartan, Fernando Botero’s *Il Guerriero* (1992). This indicated that there was a contingent of people who felt that the current representation of Sparty on campus was outdated in its essentialized ideals of raced, gendered physical fitness, and how this can bolster real harmful effects of objectification, shaming, and violence enacted on differently abled/non-normative bodies.

Icons and exemplary bodies like Sparty’s are mechanisms for the workings of power through discourse. They invoke an identification that can objectify or subjugate the viewer. What if the exemplary body of ideal physical fitness was one of fluidity, formlessness, and fragmentation? I can’t help but imagine possibilities for an icon that represents a newly radical form of consumption and identification. What, then, would become of identifications of beauty, gender, race?

To me, Sparty symbolizes whiteness. It’s a symbol that is so entangled with white supremacy as to be inseparable from it. It’s similar to how western civilization has become a euphemism for white civilization, which forgets that ancient Greeks and Romans didn’t even consider themselves white. The institutions that use Spartan imagery and other classical symbols blindly and without any critical reflection play a role in constructing and upholding whiteness. They continue to exclude those who have felt voiceless or invisible, those who’ve never seen themselves duly represented or are often misrepresented. It excludes the experiences of many trans, disabled, and non-normative bodies, those of us who recognize our bodies as sites of contradiction within the western/patriarchal/white male gaze. It excludes the complexity, the nuances of all our bodies, our selves, and our identities that can’t be captured by that gaze. I’m less interested in “equitable” representations of different human bodies that are already known and recognizable than I am in forms that are bodily yet beyond what we think of as human bodies—beyond the skin.

Sparty exists to be both seen and touched. The statue tends to receive a kind of collective veneration reminiscent of religious idols: it’s a necessary stop on the [Spartan Walk](#), the football team’s traditional fifteen-minute procession from the Kellogg Center to the stadium locker room prior to every home game. When players and coaches reach the statue, most place or toss pennies at its feet, which is believed to bring the team auspiciousness and, hopefully, a Spartan victory. Some pause briefly to graze their hand across a part of Sparty’s bronzed surface, letting their touch linger. Some have even left pennies on Sparty permanently, adhering them to its toes or in recesses of its body. In these moments, Spartans’ personal connections to the statue and the communal spirit it inspires become tangible. When MSU shows the statue its Spartan pride, the statue is known to return the favor.

I imagine each touch of the statue, each penny placed on its body by the players, coaches, and fans, as being loaded with individual and collective hopes, dreams, and prayers. I also think of Jungwirth’s touch in modeling the original statue—the varying pressures and sheer multitude of his hands, the care and tenderness with which he modeled this exemplary body, his years of training and artmaking culminating in the creation of this monument. All this reveals the human construction of this symbol, and with it, the potential for its reconstruction. Perhaps Sparty can be a site for imagining a sort of material transformation, creative agency, and unfixed potentiality.

In 1925, Michigan Agricultural College, the first agricultural college in the United States, became Michigan State College (MSC). This name change officially recognized the college's newly expanded curriculum, which had designated a degree-granting division for liberal arts alongside that for agriculture and engineering. It was also at this time that the college's athletic teams, previously known as the "Aggies," briefly became the "Michigan Staters," then finally the "Spartans." This is the name which we have come to know and love, which inspires pride in our community members, and which has brought such immense renown to MSU athletics. Seven years later, MSC Athletic Director Ralph Young encountered the University of Southern California's bronze "[Tommy Trojan](#)" statue, which had been unveiled in 1930 as a gesture honoring USC's own athletic prowess and university culture. Young was inspired to suggest that a similar statue be built of the Spartan at MSC.

The Spartan not only represents the history and enduring spirit of MSU, it honors the university's connections to ideals of the classical past. These ideals, born in civilizations of antiquity, gave rise to the foundational American concepts of sovereignty, democracy, liberty, and humanistic education that have shaped our academic and political institutions.

As an artist and teacher, I want to expose these hegemonic associations and untruths from within by working with the institution's platform and resources as they currently exist. I want to not just rethink past narratives, but also reflect on who we are today and where we are going. I'm not interested in replacing or demolishing a symbol for demolition's sake. I want to build something. My work is not about the negation of the Spartan symbol, but a twisting of it, setting it into motion, allowing it to resignify in ways that carry multiple meanings and allow for new interpretations and forms of interaction.

As one of the university's most present and significant symbols, the Sparty statue is accorded the utmost respect. As a bestower of luck to Spartan athletes (especially football players), the statue achieves a level of sacredness. This quality extends well beyond offerings of pennies and hopeful, lingering touches on its skin. Community efforts to protect and maintain the statue are simultaneously efforts to protect the virtue and integrity for which the statue stands. Therefore, caring for Sparty—keeping it clean and free from harm—is paramount.

[Sparty Watch](#), a group of students, alums, and fans who volunteer to stand guard at the statue to protect it from vandalism (especially during Michigan-Michigan State rivalry

week), arose out of the agreed upon need to maintain Sparty's protection. All Spartans take Sparty's welfare seriously, but members of Sparty Watch take it *just* a little more seriously. It's an honor, after all, to show up for Sparty and to defend what the statue means to each of us.

During the on-site mold-making process at the statue, my assistants Lauren Batdorff and Nicolei Gupit and I gently brushed silicone all over Sparty's body, tracing the motions of Jungwirth's hand. I tried to imagine a bit more about his subjectivity, and how it informed his decisions to make Sparty's ass (and other body parts) in just this way. The silicone is fluid, amorphous, and goopy. It reflected for me how identifications can be inscribed into gestures, as well as how gestures can be inscribed into materials. Drenched in silicone, Sparty reveals itself as a set of not-yet-formed definitions. It connotes a sense of breaking free, a continual realization of becoming, or of never having arrived.

There was a physical barrier and sign explaining the project along the perimeter of the statue site while we were working. Some people just hopped over it, disrupting our process that involved time-sensitive materials (curing of plaster and silicone). I was surprised by how wild some people's reactions were and how many of them jumped to the conclusion that we were vandalizing or harming the statue, to which they took great offense. People would read the sign explaining the project and yell out things like, "what the fuck is critical race studies," showing aggressive disdain for the concept. Or maybe they were just aggressively confused. Some people implicitly politicized the work and demanded that we tell them who we were voting for (it didn't help that this process took place during election week).

We tried our best to meet this hypermasculine aggressive energy with patience and politeness, though some people were unrelenting and refused to believe the project's intentions. I questioned whether the project was worth putting my assistants at risk of violence or abuse, terrified that some unmasked screamer would give one of us Covid or that some confrontation would escalate. Was it because my assistants and I, as femme/genderqueer artists of color, looked different?

Multiple people called the city police (who had been notified about my project), or threatened to call them. A guy named Johnny Spirit showed up unmasked on the first day that we were working and immediately started getting in our faces and breaking social distancing rules. He harassed us with questions while recording us with a camera. Supposedly a

member of Sparty Watch, he set up wireless cameras to surveil us and continually walked around the site, at one point even climbing the scaffolding to record us working. Every so often, one of his fellow Sparty defenders would show up and join him in interrogating us. Johnny Spirit stayed with us throughout the entire first day of working on site. When he showed up the second day, the campus police had to ask him to leave and gave him a warning, which provided us with some relief.

While there were these moments when I wanted to hide, we also had conversations with passersby who were intrigued, or at least open, to the project and its intentions. They shared their own personal stories and myths and anecdotes about the statue. All of the attention, curiosity, and concern around Sparty heightened my own awareness of the community's intense attachment, sensitivity, and identification with it and with the symbol of the Spartan in general. This confirmed for me that I'd chosen the appropriate subject matter for a project meant to engage the campus community. It also confirmed for me that I'd made the right decision to not wear my already-purchased Spartan cheerleader drags for the occasion.

By the late 1980s, Jungwirth's original terracotta statue was over four decades old and in dire need of repair. Weather and sandblasting for graffiti removal had caused the sculpture to warp and crack. A "Save our Sparty" committee was formed to raise funds for a renovation. Despite the renovation's successful completion, by the early 2000s it became clear that Jungwirth's terracotta work would simply not outlast the elements. The new cast was produced, the original was relocated to MSU's Spartan Stadium, and the now-famous bronze Sparty was installed in its current location. With this casting, Sparty was given a new lease on life. It became whole again, projecting an enduring, indestructible quality befitting of the Spartan image.

The statue's 1,500-pound bronzed physique, like the MSU spirit, is sturdy and resilient. This sense of durability rightfully looks to the future, promoting an everlasting legacy for not just the statue itself, but for the values it has come to represent.

For the presentation of my project at MSU, I created sculptural "skins" and print-based "impressions" of the statue. Rather than creating a replica of the statue by using the mold as a [negative] vessel to create the [positive] art object, we cast the molds themselves, using the negative as the positive. The resulting artworks were deconstructed reverse casts of Sparty's body. Like trace fossils, these acts of "skinning" Sparty reveal new details through its body's absence, newly

animating the physical and social life of the Spartan. These skins and impressions suggest a multiplicity of possible truths about the life, evolution, and history of a bygone being or thing. They inspire critical inquiry and imagination in those who observe them. They can be sites of indeterminacy and of queerness.

I want to invite people to question what lies beyond the symbolic skin of the Spartan. The sculptures' concave surfaces are burnished with wax and pigments, which highlight the marks originally made by Jungwirth, the little details on the surface of the statue that otherwise go unnoticed, and the scars that have accumulated over countless interactions with humans in the statue's environment. Traces of Sparty remain in these skins, but they reveal new marks, forms, shadows and gestures that could lead to newly reimagined bodies and futures.

The skins are presented in fragments. As sculptures, they create opportunities for new and multiple viewer projections and reflections. Their scale and viewing height bring them downward, closer to our own bodies. Sparty is now on our level and we may look closer, longer, and from different angles. The larger floor sculptures (torso and groin) are installed to be viewed horizontally. They reveal a quasi-corporeal or carnal topography that maps bodily potential beyond the limits of the skin. Sparty becomes a site of emergence and immanence. A new body being found.

The works on the wall (the "impressions") are monoprints made from silicone casts of Sparty that I inked using a cosmetic application technique, with body makeup sponges. The scale of the prints is more monumental than that of the sculptures, but they immerse viewers in something that appears short of a clear image, where distinctions between figure and ground are porous. Their open chasms and critical gaps make space for viewers to project, imagine, and connect Sparty with other forms, concepts, or narratives, which can all become new growths. One can imagine the affective flows moving in and out of these chasms, creating potential for unforeseen interactions in between fragments. These impressions don't occupy a singular space of figuration or abstraction, symbol or gesture. They can be thought of as spaces of indeterminacy or unfixed potentiality, inviting viewers to expand their preconceived notions of Sparty's exemplary body. Normative identifications of race, class, gender, and their attendant divisive politics blur and transformation and movement unfold in their place. In these spaces, the touch of Jungwirth's hand, my hand, and the viewers can all join to build something new.





Spartan Skin (Groin) and *Spartan Skin (Torso)*,
both 2021, photo by Biddle City Project

Opposite page: *Spartan Impression (Face)*,
2021, photo by Young Joon Kwak

APIDA Roundtable on “Spartan Skin”

On April 22, 2020, faculty, staff, students, and alumni from MSU’s Asian Pacific Islander Desi American (APIDA) community participated in a virtual roundtable to discuss Young Joon Kwak’s presentation of “Spartan Skin.” At the time, APIDA communities across the United States were facing the sharpest rise of anti-Asian violence in recent history, a phenomenon fueled by political rhetorics that exacerbated preexisting racism and xenophobia in the wake of COVID-19’s global spread. The following dialogue is excerpted from this roundtable, in which APIDA participants and their allies reflected on how Kwak’s exhibition challenges and shifts views of the Spartan as an institutional symbol informed by histories and hegemonics of white supremacy.

Maggie Chen-Hernandez, Associate Director of Office of Cultural and Academic Transitions (OCAT)

Shreena Gandhi, Fixed Term Assistant Professor of Religious Studies

Nicolei Gupit, MFA Candidate in Studio Art

Joy Hannibal, Assistant Director of Detroit M.A.D.E. Scholars Program

Young Joon Kwak, Artist-in-Residence in Critical Race Studies

Ellen Moll, Assistant Director of Center of Integrative Studies in the Arts and Humanities (CISAH/IAH)

Vivian Nguyen, BS ‘23, member of Asian Pacific American Student Organization (APASO)

Anna Pegler-Gordon, Professor in James Madison College

Iris Shen-Van Buren, BA ‘90, BFA ‘91, APASO alumna ‘85-’91, Asian Pacific American Minority Aide ‘88-’90, Admissions Counselor/Recruitment Manager for OH, IN, KY for Office of Admissions

Christine Ye Jin So, BA ‘22, member of APASO

Brady Velasquez, BA ‘10

Naoko Wake, Associate Professor of History, Director of Asian Pacific American Studies Program



Still from Zoom recording of APIDA roundtable, 2021

Naoko Wake: I think we all got a clear message [from “Spartan Skin”] as a disembodied or disassembled version of the body that is supposed to [represent] MSU in a singular, heavy-duty way. And I wonder if it’s a good idea for us to say a few words about how you or each one of us would describe our relation to Sparty or the Spartan, then say a few words about how the relation that you previously had with the Spartan might have been challenged, changed, or totally transformed after seeing Young Joon’s work. We can start with personal reflections.

Christine Ye Jin So: When I think of Sparty or the Spartan statue in general, I think it’s a really powerful symbol on campus. It’s notoriously known. Everybody takes their graduation pictures in front of it. I’m a music major and we rehearse at Demonstration Hall, which is the building right behind Sparty, so I would always pass Sparty and look at it. Sparty’s usually never alone. It’s something that’s protected on our campus, especially during the football season rivalry with the University of Michigan. I’m also in the band fraternity [Kappa Kappa Psi], which helps a group called Sparty Watch contribute to watching [the statue] for twenty-four hours. It’s just a very powerful symbol. Regarding the exhibition, I really liked how Young highlighted Sparty’s butt. Sparty has a nice butt and I don’t think that’s highlighted enough because we don’t get to see the backside of it. We just see the front. So that’s where I wanted to kick us off--with Sparty having a nice butt.

Iris Shen-Van Buren: I came to Michigan State and didn’t start off as an art major. I actually started off in biology and pre-med, but ended up in art and really enjoyed doing figurative work. Most of my paintings were very figurative and very sculptural, and I actually ended up doing more sculpture and making that part of my emphasis. I got a chance to see the exhibition at the Union Gallery and it’s a tiny gallery, but there’s so much to see. If I didn’t have to drive home immediately after, I probably would’ve stayed there and maybe even brought my sketchbook and looked at the sculptures longer. To me, Sparty, in general, embodies the university...when I talk to students coming in, I tell them [that] this is where students mark their first time on campus. I have them park right by the Sparty statue, take a selfie, and then maybe throughout the years they take pictures during events, like going to a game, or after graduation, maybe after weddings or anniversaries. It’s kind of like that touchstone that is part of the university. But, looking at the sculpture and Young’s pieces, what I found really interesting is that when you look at each piece—such as the sculpture that Young did of Sparty’s face—it’s really interesting because even though it’s concave and you’re looking at the reverse image of the face, you see a ghost. You see what the face is supposed to look like. I don’t know how to describe it--it’s like a negative, but it’s also a positive at the same time. You see both aspects of it. Young Joon, did you use your molds to make those prints of Sparty, or did you use the actual sculpture?

Young Joon Kwak: Yes, I made silicone casts from molds of the actual statue that I then used to make the prints. Iris, I love that you had a sort of disorienting perception of Sparty’s face when you looked at my sculpture. I was definitely going for a delay and disorientation in recognizing Sparty’s body, so I really appreciate hearing about your experience.

Shen-Van Buren: It was really cool to also be able to see that the pennies on the toes were embedded in the statue. When you look at it, most people just walk by. They see Sparty, [but] they don’t SEE Sparty. And Young, with this process, you are allowing us to see Sparty in a different way. As a former art student and an artist, it’s really interesting to take different views of different buildings, different icons that people normally see in one manner and bring them to life in a different way. I really, really enjoyed that.

Shreena Gandhi: First I just want to say they were so beautifully executed, the sculptures and the prints. So there’s that inherent beauty of [the exhibition] as art. The other thing that I thought when seeing what Young did to Sparty in terms of representing—him, or them, or just Sparty—I mean, does Sparty have a gender? That’s another question. But, the two ideas that came to mind when I was looking at the art were fragmentation and exposure. One thing I’m realizing—especially this year, as I’ve taken up a leadership role in APIDA¹—is realizing how fragmented we are as a community in terms of our values, what we imagine the institution to be, and how we try to hide how

¹ MSU’s Asian, Pacific Islander, Desi American/Asian Faculty and Staff Association (APIDA/AFSA) advocates for the needs of Asian Pacific Islander Desi American/Asian (APIDA/A) faculty, staff, and administrators.

exposed we really are. Not only just in light of the Larry Nassar² stuff, but also the immense kind of support for white supremacy and racism that goes unchecked [at MSU]. The other thing that I've been thinking a lot about is how some faculty really showed their compassion this year. And others exposed themselves as not so compassionate.

Nicolei Gupit: I love these comments and I kind of don't want to be a negative Nancy. I wanted to share that before having the unique experience of being Young Joon's studio assistant, originally I had an alienating experience with the Spartan statue. I was thinking about what a mascot means to me, or to us as a community. When I was an undergrad at Williams College, my mascot was the Purple Cow. Choosing between a purple cow or the Spartan, I would rather choose the Purple Cow. With my original experience of the Spartan statue, I was thinking of it as a male figure, masculine, kind of sickly thin with the ribs showing--this idealized body of the white male. And I recognized myself as other. But then, over the months that I've been working with Young Joon, I was thinking about the bravery that it took to open up the really problematic symbol as a carrier of meaning. With her work, Young Joon is unraveling the many layers of Sparty and creating a really nuanced relationship between the community. As mentioned before, with the pennies in the armpit and on the toes--that kind of feeling of promise of winning a game, or luck. Thinking also about both the fragmentation and the repetition of copies, like how many times you make a copy of Sparty, and how the meaning changes over time and with different materials. In the gallery I was thinking about touch and intimacy. There was such a tactility in both the prints and the sculptures that draws you in. I'd like to hear about what you think about that, Young Joon--the tactility and materiality of your work.

Kwak: You and I have touched every single inch of the statue, with the molds that we've made together and your assistance in the studio. We've gotten so intimate with the symbol, but also the actual material and the physical statue itself, climbing all over it. The insides of the sculptures are burnished with a wax mixed with pure pigment in a way that really reveals all these details that go unnoticed in the statue...like the original artist Leonard Jungwirth's hand, the varying pressures of his touch, and how he carefully used certain tools to model it...how the metal of the statue has worn over time and accumulated scratches, dents, and other marks. [These details] made me look at the body in a different way, revealing a sort of vulnerability of that body--that symbol that means so much to so many people. [They reveal] the human construction of it, and thus the potential to deconstruct and reconstruct it, to manipulate it. It's this agency of creation that I was really interested in capturing. And then with the prints, they allow the body of the Spartan to deviate further from its initial form. It takes on another quality of life, of liveness...not just as a static symbol, but also gesture and ephemerality. Using the actual body of the Spartan to present something that is other to itself, short of a clear image, with all these openings in a process of transformation...it encourages the viewer to use their own imagination to fill in the gaps, connect to other forms, concepts, projected narratives, or parts of their own subjectivities.

Anna Pegler-Gordon: I think Nicolei and I share some of the same feelings about this symbol. It's interesting to hear the statue referred to as "Sparty" because I think of that statue as "The Spartan," and then Sparty as being the foam [mascot at sporting events].³ That foam version of Sparty is so different, and I had never thought about it before this conversation. [It's different] not only in terms of the visual representation, the way the foam mascot moves around, and the kind of cartoon/comic affect of it, but also the texture, which I had never thought about before. To me, the Spartan and the whole centrality of the Spartan at MSU is funny to consider because it wasn't there at the beginning of the university. I was surprised when I read about the statue to realize that it was created in 1945, because—to be honest—I always thought it was like a 1930's style, a sort of fascist statue. It does seem in the whole Greek, Roman, white supremacist, militarist, masculine history. And the word "Spartan" appears everywhere [on campus]. My kids went to the Spartan Child Development Center. I never thought about it until my mom came with me one time. She's from England and she said, "what

² Convicted sex offender Larry Nassar is a former professor at MSU's College of Human Medicine. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Larry_Nassar.

³ The foam Sparty mascot costume is worn by an anonymous student and appears at most university sporting, alumni, and fundraising events. It is often portrayed in MSU promotional notices and materials.

do they do with these kids? Do they send them out into the woods for seven years so that they can toughen them up and then give them weapons so they can fight one another? And if they die, it doesn't matter?" That's what Spartans did. She knew history that I didn't know. For her, looking at Spartan Child Development Center, that was how she saw it. I know your work isn't about Sparty [the sports mascot], but I just think that's also fascinating, thinking about the armor. Sparty wears the armor, but it's made of foam, and the Spartan statue has the helmet down, and it's actually really hard, but it's also a naked body. There are so many odd kinds of permutations of the different ways this figure exists inside of our campus. And I was really fascinated to hear how. [This has] really changed it for me, hearing Iris and others speak about how this is a meaningful statue, because I literally just drive past it. I've never stopped. And now I'm going to slow down as a result of Young's art, but also the conversation we're having here.

Ellen Moll: I have a side interest in being nerdy about ancient cultures and so for me, the pseudo-ancientness of Sparty was always interesting, the way perceptions of Sparty as a mascot really fly in the face of everything we know about ancient history. I'm interested in the way that modern cultures use ancient symbols and turn them into something totally new. The original Sparty was already doing that. What I loved about [Young's] very evocative sculpture was how if you just took a glance, you would think, "oh, that's an exhibit of ancient artifacts." I love the "ancientness" [of that] and how evocative that was. With the fragmentation, that was like "I'm taking my tour through the ruins of this traditional masculinist subjectivity." And as someone who's also interested in cyborg feminist theories and things like that, being in the ruins of subjectivity is a really powerful place to be. That's where the hope is. That's where the potential for transformation is. With anything that I was looking at, I felt like I could just look at it and think about it for a really, really long time and come up with something new every time. So thank you for that as well.

Kwak: Thank you, Ellen. I love that you said "ruins of masculinist subjectivity" because I wanted to display the sculptures in museological style, with metal display stands and bases--similar to how relics, ruins, or artifacts from a bygone era or culture might be displayed in a history museum.

Moll: ...like how colonists steal artifacts--except the opposite of that.

Kwak: ...in order to contemplate the archaic ways in which these symbols function[ed] in the past/present. It's also so interesting to hear Anna talk about the foam Sparty versus the bronze Spartan statue. That's something that I've been thinking about, in terms of how taking this thing and transfiguring it through different materials creates different contexts in which these symbols function differently. I think a lot of my work is about that. I think it's also worth mentioning not only the white supremacist roots of symbols of the Spartan historically, but also how it's presently used by so many right-wing extremist sectarian groups with ties to fascism and racism and xenophobia and particularly pro-gun politics around the world.

Joy Hannibal: As somebody who went to other institutions, I was trying to think about mascots and my relationship [to them] in general. I think I don't really pay them that much attention. Sparty in particular reminds me of my rival school from undergrad, the USC Trojans. [Both] these statues are high up. Where I went to school, the bear at UCLA is lower, not on a high pedestal. So Sparty just seemed to me so untouchable. I wouldn't be able to tell you what all the parts of Sparty look like, because of the pedestal he's on, whereas Young has now brought it to eye level or below so that we can become more intimate, more in community. I think that is representative of how APIDA and other historically excluded communities have been to the university. We're looking at this place on a hill or this place that's untouchable, that isn't for us. I see that where Sparty is placed, as opposed to where Young has placed Sparty, giving us eye level contact with all the different parts of Sparty.

Wake: What Joy just mentioned made me think of how, to become part of our community, the Spartan has to represent himself as the ruins of masculine subjectivity. He has to be ruined first to come into the community, which is an interesting way of thinking about how we relate to the Spartan statue. Going back to my relationship to that statue, I have to say that just like Anna, I have never been to the statue because I never liked the idea of symbolism. It has something to do with the reason why I came from Japan all the way to America. That's the society that I chose to live in. Japan places so much value in symbolism that comes with social status. To give

you an example, if you go to an excellent university, elite university, no matter how much you didn't study, no matter how uneducated you may in fact be, you get a great job just because of that sort of elitism that is always associated with symbolism. I think of myself as running away from [Japan] because I didn't want to have that. So, to attach myself or have anything to do with something like symbolism and the embodiment of it—something like the Spartan—was the last thing I wanted to do. That's when what Christine said about the Spartan statue's butt comes into play, to talk about the ruins of masculine subjectivity. Young Joon's work made me think of the Spartan as if he were a Barbie doll. You see this tiny little head, which is completely unnatural. Then you see this huge butt that is completely wrong. Just like if a Barbie doll were a real person with the same proportions, she wouldn't be able to stand...he can't stand. So it's not real at all. To add to what Joy said, his butt makes me think of how [Young's work] took that process up...sort of comparing him to Barbie...for me, anyway. He is now on ground level, at least on even ground [with] me, for me to be able to see him in that light.

Vivian Nguyen: Similarly to what Iris and Joy said about how the statue is on a pedestal, when I look at the Sparty statue, I've always viewed it as a piece of art. And because it's a statue and because it's a piece of art, I'm not allowed to touch it. I'm not allowed to go near that kind of thing, it's just something to be viewed from a distance. That's why I don't really identify with the symbolism or the whole school spirit thing. Being able to see Young Joon's work with the intimacy [of] touching the statue and creating those molds...it's kind of like breaking the tradition of what normal art is: just seeing from a distance and appreciating. One thing I noticed and wanted to ask Young Joon about is: did you purposely place the chest cast of Sparty laying down on the floor instead of vertically? I think that's a really good way to show vulnerability with the statue.

Kwak: I did. What some people brought up with the fragmentation of the statue...I wanted [the sculptures] to be approachable, so that we can get close to it, move around it easily to really SEE it. It's a different kind of positionality in relation to our own bodies, to be able to look down on it and see it as not so monumental anymore. There was something I liked about the disembodied hand on the groin next to that torso. Those two sculptures were larger and flatter than the others. Looking from the top down, they have a kind of topographic, map-like quality, and they're placed on a low platform that's like an examination table.

Maggie Chen-Hernandez: I don't know if I really had a deep relationship with Sparty, but this exhibition made me think about that more after doing a walkthrough with Young Joon. If anything, it just made me reflect upon how I don't identify with Sparty, and yet so many others do. In thinking about this, I questioned...is it my own identity that doesn't fit with the identity of Sparty? It's recognizable to a lot of folks and I've always found it to be so weird...all these rituals around it, especially when [people] sleep outside to protect [it] for the big U of M vs. MSU rival games. I've always found that to be very odd.

Kwak: Maggie, I think that's a really great point. It seems like a lot of us in the APIDA community don't pay Sparty any mind, although everybody else around us does so hard. It makes me sad, in a way...I wonder if it's because these symbols were never meant for the APIDA community and other non-white communities. I wonder if this is just an extension of the same invisibility or silencing or non-recognition of our larger community, where we become so attuned to not being represented by the symbols around us. But maybe that also affords us the ability to stand back and have an extra layer of criticality toward the ways in which identification and subjugation work with these symbols. I'm curious if other people feel like that.

Brady Velasquez: I might be an outlier in the conversation because for me, when I think of Sparty—either the statue or the mascot—my thought doesn't go towards the symbolism of what it is, but what emotions it causes...the relationships that I've made on campus. Some of my best friends were the ones that I met at school and I met my husband at MSU, and so for me [the statue is] not necessarily [about] the symbol of the Spartan or what it means to be a Spartan. For me, it's about the relationships I built, the experiences that I got to have. As a Korean adoptee, [being at MSU was] the first time I really felt like an Asian. It was the first experience that I had being around a multitude of other Asians. For me, when I look at the statue, when I see Sparty and football games, it's those memories that take precedence for me, rather than the fact that the statue was praised. It's more just the memories that it brings. I remember the first picture I took with Sparty and the last picture I took

with Sparty, and [I] was surrounded by the other people that I met in college. So for me, it's more nostalgic, I guess.

So: I want to bounce off Brady really quickly. I think it's interesting, the points Brady brought up, because being an undergraduate student here, many view Sparty in a similar light to how Brady does. But I also want to highlight that I appreciate how Young Joon deconstructed Sparty, and to add on to what Joy and Dr. Wake said, I agree that the deconstruction takes away the power that it has. By putting it at eye level, the exposure puts Sparty in its place. He seems so high and mighty on the pedestal in a way that emphasizes the weird toxic masculinity behind Sparty. I wanted to throw that in there, too, as resonating with me.

Velasquez: I agree, I understand that the symbol of a Spartan, the way it presents itself, is crappy, and especially that it was John A. Hannah [who] did it.⁴ I get that, especially during times that we feel othered by the university as people of color and communities of color. I so appreciate the fact that we're having conversations like this and looking at it from a different perspective, because I do think the university has been horrible as it relates to communities of color for years. I was in college when the MCRI passed.⁵ I remember meeting with the administration and being so frustrated because they just didn't care. So it's interesting, all the perspectives people bring up relating to how the mascot and the statute can be representative of all that violence towards communities of color. You have given me a lot to think about.

Kwak: I really appreciate your voice amongst all these different perspectives. I think it's totally real that we have these transitional objects and their symbolism is arbitrary or secondary to how they are placeholders for a time or feeling in our lives. Where I'm coming from, the impetus for this project is critical. I want to reach people who wholeheartedly scream "MOLON LABE"⁶ at games, just like pro-gun groups do, and those who wholeheartedly love the Spartan symbol and the statue and don't have to deal with these questions of representation that we do. I want people to encounter their beloved Spartan statue in this other context, this other form, to see that the Spartan can be manipulated into something else. To experience that it could be viewed anew, something other than what they had seen beforehand, or to see it as a different kind of object of beauty. Any sort of expansion of the idea of the Spartan symbol is great, but it's also importantly a means of connecting beyond boundaries of difference for me. I love the idea of connecting with someone who has different political views through my artwork. I love the idea of art as a way of interfacing with someone who may even hate me or someone else because of race/gender/class stereotypes or other preconceived notions of difference based on one's appearance...being able to see this artwork that's based on this symbol that they love, and for them to just spend some time with the work and be with it and not feel alienated by it. Maybe the experience is slightly disorienting, but tolerable and engaging and interesting. I think that'd be great, that's really THE GOAL. I'm happy with multiple ways of interpreting the work—multiple meanings—as long as there's some form of communication.

Wake: Just quickly, I'd like to say a few words. In response to your question, Young Joon, what does it mean as a person that belongs to a community in a broader sense? First, I am not asking the statue to look like an Asian. It's not going to make anything better. So we are not asking for something that would look more like us and [be] more obviously relatable to us. That's not going to resolve the question anyway, because that's going to exclude other people who don't look like Asians, right? I was glad that you didn't include a picture of the real Spartan statue, which is sometimes the way in which deconstructive artwork is presented: there's a before, this is a real thing, and then here is a deconstructed version of it. I was thinking of how there was nothing

⁴ John A. Hannah was president of Michigan State College (later Michigan State University) for twenty-eight years, between 1941 and 1969. During the 1945 dedication ceremony for Leonard Jungwirth's original terracotta Spartan statue, Hannah celebrated it as a symbol of the school's "strength, honor, and courageousness."

⁵ The Michigan Civil Rights Initiative (MCRI), or Proposal 2 (Michigan 06-2), passed into law on November 7, 2006. It was a citizen ballot initiative aimed at stopping discrimination based on race, color, sex, or religion in admission to colleges, jobs, and other publicly funded institutions, effectively prohibiting some affirmative action by public institutions based on those factors. The Proposal's constitutionality was challenged, but it was ultimately upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court.

⁶ Ancient Greek phrase translating to "come and take them," attributed to King Leonidas I on the eve of the Battle of Thermopylae (480 BC), as a response to Xerxes I's demand that the Spartans surrender their weapons.

like that in your exhibit and I was really glad that you didn't want to include that, because it kind of makes a fragmented version more real. You have to rely on meanings that are more associated—in your personal way—to the statue as you look at the fragmented version of it. That actually led me to think, what if the statue doesn't exist, [what if] you have a symbol or symbols that are more institutionally connected, but don't have any real substance to it? There are universities who do have those symbols. And I'm not going to say it's better by any absolute sense, but Indiana University has Hoosiers and there's no real Hoosier. There are no statutes of Hoosiers. So it made me think of different ways in which a symbol can or can't or doesn't have to be a statue. It may not be anything unique to me being an APIDA person. But I think some of my subjectivity as an APIDA person made me think of that because it's not, again, like we minorities are demanding more statues of people who are like us in any simplistic sense of the word. We are asking for something more, like what you described, Young Joon, in terms of how there could be more meaning—various ways meanings can happen, maybe in a way that Brady mentioned earlier—that allow more diverse people to actually find meanings, rather than being alienated by this sort of singular image that statutes might carry.

Kwak: It's interesting that I've looked at the statue's face for hours and hours and based on its facial features, it's [still] somewhat racially ambiguous, but it definitely does adhere to other kinds of ideals of institutional white masculine fitness.

Shen-Van Buren: Taking a look at some photos of the Spartan online, "Spartan" has kind of a double meaning because he is Spartan in terms of not having a lot of clothing on. He's actually almost a little bit emasculated when you look at his crotch. When they talk about Spartans as being warriors, he's a naked and inactive warrior, like he doesn't have his sword up. He isn't stabbing somebody. He's more of a subdued warrior in that sense. And to tackle what Brady said, I've never actually until now really thought of it as something that is a real person or a statue. It's not...to me, it's more of just a symbol rather than a "masculine" statue. I'm not male and that's kind of not really the way I relate to the statue. I find that looking at your pieces, they are so soothing, actually, because they really do take that big strong physical thing and [make it] the very delicate skin of a statue. It's a vessel, rather than the form itself. The statue that you took the skin of is already a copy of the original, so it's no longer actually the original. And it's been modified a little bit over the years by people gluing stuff to it. And those elements are softening the lines. So when you do your mold, you're even making that a little bit softer. Let's have a different way to look at it and kind of reconsider that. Now I'm actually going to think about it a little differently because it had never really crossed my mind.

Moll: I just wanted to follow up on Iris's comments and ask if you had any thoughts about skin. I'm very interested in the idea of skin as the boundary between yourself and the world, skin as border. And the way skin is very racialized in the U.S. context. What made you focus on the skin element of the Spartan?

Kwak: In titling it "Spartan Skin," I know there's so much attention to the surface, but really it's also about wanting to encourage people to think about what lies beneath or beyond skin. I think so often for people of color the skin is the first point of objectification and policing of our bodies. And so often the skin is the start of how our representations can be misconstrued, can contradict and belie our own experience of our bodies, of who we are, and of other parts of ourselves. I was also thinking about the dual meaning of "skin." There's the noun and the verb "to skin." I was thinking about that in relation to the symbol of the Spartan, but not wanting it to be so obvious as to be another way by which I might completely alienate a public of people who would take offense to the work even before experiencing it. It's just another underlying meaning to it in terms of my approach to the symbolism of the Spartan. What I'm doing is kind of peeling back those layers of skin.

Gupit: I was just thinking about how you use "skin" as a verb, not just as a violent act, but rather the way that you really challenge the notion of the idealized proportions of the Barbie or the Ken doll with the work. By fragmenting and isolating each of the parts, they no longer embody that kind of masculinity. After so many months of working with you, the kind of delicacy [with which you approached] the statue and the care, the kind of feminine act of applying the "makeup" of the ink with the makeup sponge...it's so intimate and enriching to [have seen] the work through all the months of creating it, but also to see it in the gallery.

Contributors

Maggie Chen Hernandez is Associate Director of Office of Cultural and Academic Transitions (OCAT) and has served in various leadership roles at Michigan State University for over 30 years. As an undergraduate student she was an RA for Residence Life and was one of the founding members of APASO (Asian Pacific American Student Organization). She currently is the Senior Coordinator for the Intercultural Aide Program and the Coordinator for the MOSAIC Multicultural Unity Center.

Jeanne Dreskin is an art historian, curator, and writer based in Los Angeles. She is a Senior Researcher at the Berggruen Institute, the 2021 Writer-in-Residence at Monument Lab, and has recently served as Editor of the Joan Jonas Knowledge Base. She holds a PhD in the History of Art from the University of Pennsylvania, where her doctoral research focused on the evidentiary status of photography and its deployment by artists in the 1970s/80s to disclose and intervene into patterns of media and art world bias. She has previously held positions at The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (MOCA); The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA); and Dia Art Foundation, New York. She has independently organized exhibitions in New York and Los Angeles and her writing, reviews, and interviews have been published by Artforum, Aperture, and the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Shreena Niketa Gandhi is Fixed Term Assistant Professor of Religious Studies in the College of Arts and Letters at Michigan State University. Trained at Swarthmore, Harvard, and the University of Florida, she is a cultural historian of religion with expertise in religion, race, the Americas, and Hinduism. Her research and public scholarship are on the history of yoga in the U.S., and she is revising a manuscript on this topic using the framework of white supremacy and cultural appropriation. Professor Gandhi is also a member of the Feminist Critical Hindu Studies Collective, which encourages a reoriented approach to Hindu Studies which takes into consideration white supremacy and caste supremacy/brahmanical patriarchy.

Nicolei Gupit is a multidisciplinary artist and third-year MFA graduate student in the Department of Art, Art History, and Design at Michigan State University. After completing her BA in Studio Art from Williams College, she taught English at K-12 schools in Micronesia, South Korea, and Taiwan for 4 ½ years. Her body of work touches upon issues related to the American dream, US colonization in the Philippines, and her cultural identity as a US-born Filipina. Her recent projects have been shown at The Painting Center in New York City, NY Minneapolis Institute of Art in Minneapolis, MN, and at Elsewhere Studios in Paonia, CO. She currently lives and works in East Lansing, MI.

Joy R. Hannibal, PhD has worked with students at various steps in their educational journey (preschool, elementary, middle and high school, community college and university). She has her BA in Psychology from UCLA and her MS in School Counseling from California State University. Joy has a PhD in Higher Adult Lifelong Education from Michigan State University where her dissertation centered around the interaction of Western and Indigenous ways of knowing in the island nation of Palau. Her research interests also include first generation and students of color in higher education. Joy has spent many years working with populations who are traditionally underrepresented in higher education. She provides both students and parents with information about college preparation, transition, and success.

Young Joon Kwak is a LA-based multi-disciplinary artist, founder of Mutant Salon, a roving beauty salon/platform for collaborative performances and exhibitions with their community of artists and performers, and the lead performer in the electronic-dance-noise band Xina Xurner. Kwak presented solo and collaborative exhibitions and performances at galleries and institutions including Cerritos College Art Gallery; the Hammer Museum; The Broad; Cloaca Projects; Walter Phillips Gallery, Banff Centre; and the Art Museum of the National University of Colombia, Bogotá. Selected group exhibitions have been held at Hauser & Wirth, New York; Contemporary Jewish Museum, San Francisco; Antenna Space, Shanghai; and Le Pavillon Vendôme Centre d'Art Contemporain, Clichy, France. Kwak received the Korea Arts Foundation of America's Award for the Visual Arts, Rema Hort Mann Foundation's Emerging Artist Grant, Artist Community Engagement Grant, and the Art Matters Grant. Kwak received an MFA from the University of Southern California, an MA in Humanities from the University of Chicago, and a BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Ellen Moll, PhD is Assistant Director of Integrative Arts and Humanities at Michigan State University. Her administrative interests include general education; curriculum development; student success; innovative online pedagogy; faculty and organizational development; interdisciplinary curriculum and pedagogy; and, diversity, equity, and inclusion. Research and/or teaching interests include Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, Science and Technology Studies, and portrayals of gender and diaspora in contemporary drama.

Anna Pegler-Gordon teaches courses in Asian American history, immigration policy, citizenship, comparative race and ethnic relations, and U.S. racial and immigration history at Michigan State University. She has received fellowships for her teaching and research, including national and international awards from the Organization of American Historians, the Immigration and Ethnic History Society, and the Japanese Association for American Studies. She has been a visiting research fellow at the University of London School of Advanced Study. At MSU, she has received a Teacher-Scholar award, as well as an Intramural Research Grant Program (IRGP) grant and a Lilly Teaching Fellowship. She has served as Director of MSU's Asian Pacific American Studies Program and is currently Director of the Interdisciplinary Inquiry and Teaching Program, a fellowship program for graduate students based in James Madison College. Her first book, *In Sight of America: Photography and the Development of U.S. Immigration Policy* (2009) won the Immigration and Ethnic History Society's Theodore Saloutos Prize. She is currently working on two article-length projects about Chinese American citizenship and Japanese American resistance outside of confinement camps during World War II. She is also completing work on her second book, a study of Asian immigrants at Ellis Island.

Sandra Rosales is an LA-based multi-disciplinary artist and designer. Her art explores queer and ancestral themes. Recent design projects include *People I've Met From the Internet* by Stephen van Dyk. Rosales has exhibited her art at the One Archives and Phyllis Gill Gallery at UCR where she is finishing her BA.

Naoko Wake, PhD is Associate Professor of History at Michigan State University, and also the Director of the Asian Pacific American Studies Program. A historian of gender, sexuality, and illness in the Pacific region, she has authored *Private Practices: Harry Stack Sullivan, the Science of Homosexuality, and American Liberalism* (2011) and *American Survivors: Trans-Pacific Memories of Hiroshima and Nagasaki* (2021). Her next project is the history of disability in Asian Pacific Islander Desi American families and communities. She was born and raised in Japan.

Iris Shen-Van Buren has worked at Michigan State University's Detroit Outreach Admissions Office since 2002 and is currently the Admissions Counselor/Manager of Recruitment for OH, IN, KY. She engages with prospective students, sharing Spartan traditions and opportunities and working to increase the socioeconomic, cultural, and geographic diversity of the university. She is a graduate of Michigan State University's Department of Art, Art History and Design in Studio Art, BA, '90 (Painting/Drawing) and BFA '91 (Sculpture) with post-degree work in painting (Wayne State University), sculpture (College for Creative Studies) and digital photography (Michigan State University). She was an Asian Pacific American Minority Aide on campus and active in the Asian Pacific American Student Organization (APASO), where she created the Cultural Vogue show in 1990 to break stereotypes and highlight the duality between traditional/modern culture of APA students. She has been involved in the Association of Chinese Americans (ACA), Asian Young Professionals Group (AYPG), National Association of Asian American Professionals (NAAAP), and the Council of Asian Pacific Americans (CAPA). As of June, 30, 2020, Iris has an on-going drawing project, *Art in the Time of Covid*, consisting of 400+ works relating to daily life during the pandemic.

Karin Zitzewitz is Associate Professor of Art History and Visual Culture at Michigan State University, where she leads the artist/designer residency in Critical Race Studies. A specialist in the modern and contemporary art of South Asia, she is the author of *The Art of Secularism: The Cultural Politics of Modernist Art in Contemporary India* (2014) and *The Perfect Frame: Presenting Indian Art: Stories and Photographs from the Kekoo Gandhi Collection* (2003). She curated exhibitions by Pakistani artist Naiza Khan (2013) and Indian artist Mithu Sen (2014) for the Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum at Michigan State University. Her research has been supported by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, the American Institute for Indian Studies, and the Fulbright program. Her new book, *Infrastructure and Form: The Global Networks of Indian Contemporary Art, 1991–2008*, will be published by the University of California Press in 2022.

Artists's Acknowledgments

This project was strongly motivated by what felt like a pivotal moment in reckoning with our nation's racist history: the toppling of white supremacist monuments, the continuing urgency of fighting for Black lives, debates around critical race theory, and the need for creative ways of addressing the political divide across the nation all provided the impetus for me to move to the middle of a Midwestern swing state during a presidential election year. Self-quarantining in Michigan due to the global COVID-19 pandemic further fueled my desire to connect and commune with the outside world during this time of crisis. I was told that university leadership approved my proposal to create molds of the statue on-site in part because of how few people were on campus due to stay-at-home orders and remote learning. This also allowed me to spread out production across several empty classrooms, which provided the necessary large amount of space to dismantle the campus monument, make a mess, and increase the scale of my work.

The work in my exhibition and in this reader is the culmination of a lot of fruitful collaboration. I want to share my deep gratitude and respect for the great work of my studio assistants in MI, Lauren Batdorff and Nicolei Gupit (both former students and great artists in their own right). I am so thankful for their commitment and lending their skills, without which I wouldn't have been able to create the works in the show. I feel so blessed to have developed a close friendship with both Lauren and Nicolei, which helped me get through the long and harsh winter in MI. I was deeply moved by Nicolei's bravery in all her work in speaking truth to power and challenging institutional racism from within. She reminded me to not fall into the trap of complacency in the face of webs of institutional bureaucracies. Special thanks to Michael McCune for creating the beautiful metal stands for my sculptures and Walter Peebles for his advice and ensuring that I didn't hurt myself or anyone else in the facilities. Thanks to Luvia Lopez, Custodian of Kresge, for our late-night conversations about our dogs and families, and for letting me know when something I was making was working. Thank you to Steven L. Bridges, Senior Curator of the MSU Broad Art Museum, for your sustained attention and dialogue around this project from its beginning and throughout. I want to acknowledge Jacquelynn Sullivan Gould for managing the gallery and for her assistance coordinating aspects of this project. Thanks to Ryan Frederick for taking the time to document the whole process on campus. Thanks to Saper Galleries in East Lansing, MI, and Mendell Varela in LA for framing the prints. I am blessed to have had the assistance of two artists, Michael Earl and Charlie Roses, in my studio in LA this summer whose care and attention to detail perfectly complement my messiness and help smooth my rough edges. I couldn't have completed the new works for my show at Commonwealth & Council without their help.

Many thanks to the editor, designer, and all the contributors of this reader for their openness and generosity in taking the time to help build and share this rich dialogue that I am so proud to partake in. This reader wouldn't exist without Jeanne Dreskin, whose editorial mastery, incredible scholarship, and unique voice that combines empathy and criticality I greatly admire. It was such a joy to work with Jeanne on different occasions and on different levels—as a curator, writer, co-author, editor, and exemplar of someone that so many artists would be lucky to work with. Many thanks to Patricia Eunji Kim and Monument Lab for publishing our co-authored piece in Monument Lab's Bulletin. I am grateful to Karin Zitzewitz for her beautiful writing that expertly provides a depth of context for the project, and for being instrumental in getting the project approved by the president and provost of the university when there were many who doubted that the university would let an art project go near their beloved symbol and statue. Thank you to Naoko Wake, Ellen Moll, and all the participants of the APIDA roundtable about my project. I was so delighted to connect with you all and to build a sense of togetherness as a community at a time of isolation and deep sadness, not just due to the pandemic but also because of all the anti-Asian racist violence taking place locally and nationally. I'm deeply honored to have the opportunity to center APIDA voices and perspectives around my work during this time. And thank you Sandra Rosales for making us all look good together with your design eleganza!

So much love and thanks to my partner Marvin Astorga, and to Young Chung, Kibum Kim, Audrey Min, Benjamin Love, Gala Porrás-Kim and the extended Commonwealth & Council fam for all the ways y'all support me and my work.



Kwak and assistants Lauren Batdorff and Nicolei
Gupit with Sparty, 2020, photo by Young Joon Kwak

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"Spartan Ruin" includes and expands on works from Kwak's previous exhibition, "Spartan Skin," presented April 9 – May 21, 2021 at Michigan State University's Union Gallery as part of MSU's Artist/Designer Residency in Critical Race Studies. Established in 2017 by the Department of Art, Art History, and Design and the College of Arts and Letters, the residency is funded by the Michigan State University Federal Credit Union.

Credits

All artworks in this publication are by Young Joon Kwak. Unless otherwise noted, all images were provided by the artist.

Front cover: Sparty covered in silicone, 2020, photo by Ryan Frederick; inside cover: Kwak on-site with Sparty and university signage, 2020, photo by Ryan Frederick; back cover: *Spartan Skin (Face Mask)*, 2021, photo by Young Joon Kwak.

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