

***Unsung Founders* (2004)**
Do Ho Suh

Unsung Founders strives to resist the language of the Western monument, to test new models of memorialisation in the wake of trauma.

I was so moved to have been invited by the UNC students to create this memorial, which commemorates the slaves and other minorities who built the university hundreds of years ago. The horrors of slavery cannot and should not be forgotten. My aim with the sculpture was to create something that challenged Western, colonial power structures, the structures that enforced slavery in the US until so recently.

Unsung Founders is not a traditional monument. It functions as a table so that it can be a site for coming together, for touch and conversation. The words on the sculpture are the students' own, which is important because it suggests the spirit of collaboration over the trope of the artist as individual 'genius'. It suggests the significance of the chorus over the singular. The figures are touching the ground because they represent the power of grassroots movements and collective action. The slaves may have been unsung, but I wanted to harness the strength of communal singing in each of the individually cast bronze figures. We remember and honour each person, even if we cannot know their names.

In Korea, where there is a long history of oppression, we have a term, *mincho*, for the general public or the oppressed classes that translates as 'public grass' because it never dies, it continually renews itself. It may be easily trod upon, but it always springs back. People are resilient. They grow and regenerate and uplift one another. The actual figures in *Unsung Founders* are burdened by the colossal weight of oppression (historic and contemporary), but they are not discouraged. I really wanted to retain a hopeful element to the work.

When I first visited the site, I was profoundly struck by the rocks that denoted the unmarked graves of the slaves in the University cemetery. The experience of seeing them shook me to my core. I will never forget it. It was dusk and the rocks formed tall shadows that stretched across the ground, their shapes contrasting with the structured grandiosity of the neighbouring individual tombstones. Removing or refusing a person their name is such an aggressively dehumanising act. I knew that I couldn't list the individual names of the slaves on the memorial because their identities had been erased, or those that might exist would likely be linked to slave owners. I also wanted to express collectivity rather than cite individuals, so I emulated the roughly hewn surfaces of the rocks in the cemetery in the stools that surround the table.

I have always been absorbed with the problematics of systems. The history of the pedestal stretches back millennia, but today, it acts as a signifier of specific power structures. My ambition is to decolonise those structures, to decentre grand narratives and offer a model of memorialisation beyond the pedestal. In fact, I want to undermine the pedestal entirely.

Unsung Founders is located in McCorkle Place, one of the oldest parts of the campus, named after one of UNC's founder ([fig. 1](#)). It sits on an axis with the statue of a Confederate Soldier – 'Silent Sam' – which was toppled in 2018. The pedestal was then removed in 2019. When encountering a pedestal, one inevitably slips into patterns of thinking and looking that uphold the Eurocentric convention of glorifying individuals, many of whom are deeply problematic. Human history is a history of gaps, erasure and selectivity. Every record says as much, if not more, about the person who recorded it as it does about what they're recording. For that reason, the archive can be an extremely violent thing. The past breathes with us and we now need new ways of remembering that acknowledges the gaps. Our current methods often serve to tidy history up. In doing so, they miss the subjectivity and complexity of lived experience and memory, reducing it – in literal terms – to a vertical human form on top of a perfectly carved rectangular pedestal. I refuse to perpetuate that model. I want to break with those frameworks, as well as with simplistic notions of temporal progress that ascribe to their logics. I do not think we should attempt to erase history within our urban architecture. Instead, we should explore new, porous ways of holding, expressing and communicating it so as to learn and unlearn.

Unsung Founders is positioned low to the ground as a challenge to how we perceive things. If I had been logistically able, I would also have made it a very large surface area. The language of looking encompasses movement, learning and context, as well as the object itself. When approaching a pedestal, our heads tilt and we instinctively look upwards. The vertical figure on top of the base is often larger than life and some distance away. Who or what the sculpture presents is barely apprehended, but it is granted an authority by dominant power structures..The pedestal signals those structures, it behaves as a warning or a conjunction within a particular etymology. The object of the pedestal would have no meaning without the structures it upholds. It is almost invisible, in the same way that systemic racism is invisible to many.

My intention with *Unsung Founders* is to counter the up and down movement of looking and introduce a different, more expansive gesture. This requires active participation from the viewer: it takes work. The viewer has to make the decision between looking upwards at the Confederate soldier, or down in a sweeping movement to take in *Unsung Founders*.

I always try to interrogate the idea of site-specificity, to consider what the ontological condition of the sculpture is. I am not interested in something that sits outside of, and above, its context on a rarefied plinth, sanitised in a way that is more suited to a 'white cube' gallery. I have to fully respond to the site, which, in this case, meant responding to terrible specter of 'Silent Sam'. The figures that support the tabletop are not required to square up to the soldier at the same height as that would perpetuate the same Eurocentric models in a reactive way. By bringing the memorial down to beneath eye level I hope to re-articulate the relationship between the object and the public. When you look down, you see the actual site, the grass and the earth, and the mass of figures that symbolise the multiple, diverse, often unnamed, people who constructed the walls of the surrounding buildings. The sculpture functions horizontally, when we are accustomed to verticality.

My intention is to interrogate existing systems and structures. History is fluid – now the Confederate statue has thankfully been toppled and its pedestal removed, so that is a new articulation of the space. *Unsung Founders* tries to invert the weight of the pedestal. With it, I hope to activate space in a different way and encourage a new literacy of looking and remembering ([fig. 2](#)).

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