

Siting Jefferson:  
Contemporary Artists Interpret Thomas Jefferson's Legacy  
by Jill Hartz

Reviewed by Herbert Barger

This book preserves a site-specific exhibition sponsored by the University of Virginia Art Museum in 2000 called "Hindsight/Fore-site: Art for the New Millennium." All of the artwork is original and is set at sites such as Montpelier, Ash Lawn-Highland, the Monticello Visitors Center, the University of Virginia, and area parks and schools in Charlottesville.

In my opinion, it is a shame that well intentioned sponsors, (National Endowment for the Arts, the Virginia Commission for the Arts, Philip Morris, U.S.A., The Wachovia Foundation, the University of Virginia Arts Board and Arts Enhancement Funds and individuals and businesses), have funded this sorry excuse for art and comment on Thomas Jefferson.

Look at the cover of the book, which sets the tone. This is really a monument to Sally Hemings. Peter Onuf, History Professor at the University of Virginia, sitting in the Monticello sponsored chair, tells us, among other things, that Thomas Jefferson "freed only a handful of the many hundreds of enslaved African Americans he owned, and that those few, including HIS CHILDREN WITH SALLY HEMINGS (my caps),--had strong personal claims on his solicitude, we begin to suspect that Jefferson himself is the problem." He goes on to inform the reader, "...before consigning him to History's Dustbin." This Professor Onuf, earning his very living from the past labors of Mr. Jefferson, founder of the University of Virginia, is now ready to, "KNOCK HIM OFF HIS LOFTY PEDESTAL (my caps)." Further he would like to "BANISH HIS TARNISHED MEMORY (my caps), from the great house that he helped build and we now inhabit."

Now if some of these "talented" artists and writers had concentrated on their art instead of making statements about a non-existent Jefferson/Hemings relationship, the book would be a much better book. Unfortunately, none of the writers, John Casteen, III, UVA President, Cinder Stanton, Monticello Historian, Peter Onuf, UVA Historian or the Editor, UVA Arts Director, Jill Hartz, informed the reader that thirteen top scholars released their year long research in the Scholars Commission Report of April 2001, and found the basis of Thomas Jefferson-Sally Hemings relationship unlikely.