

The Defining Exhibitions of 2023

Counterpublic, St. Louis



Torkwase Dyson, *Bird and Lava* (Scott Joplin), 2023.

Photo : Photo Chris Bauer

Art, at its best, encourages us to imagine better worlds. But when that art is public art — meaning it probably involves cumbersome committees and municipal permission — you tend to get less envelope-pushing, more consensus-approved likeability bordering on nothingburger. With a team of truly visionary curators, Counterpublic director James McAnally offered a bold new alternative for the second edition of this biennial devoted to public art. The civic exhibition engaged both temporary and permanent modes of memorial, most of which made visible the city's Black and Indigenous histories. The organization did the important work of helping artists navigate logistical loopholes. They helped New Red Order point a billboard that reads "Got land? Give it back!" at two settlers' homes sited right on Sugarloaf Mound — the last remaining Indigenous mound in an area once known for them. Steffani Jemison installed an audio installation in gondolas on the city's ferris wheel: floating above the city, passengers heard names and locations of Black theaters that you can no longer see, since they've been lost to gentrification and demolition. As we continue to imagine what might replace the triumphantly toppled statues of Confederate soldiers, Counterpublic's model and artists are good guiding lights. —Emily Watlington