

An unrealized project, submitted to the Agency of Unrealized Projects (AUP), May 18, 20011:

**PHOTOGRAPHIC DOCUMENTATION OF THE STONE CIRCLES
OF SENEGAL AND THE GAMBIA**

The Richard B. Solomon Faculty Research Awards (Proposal 2006) / Brown University

1. Cover Sheet

A.

Name: Kerry Stuart Coppin

Title: Associate Professor of Visual Art and Associate Professor of Africana Studies
(Untenured)

B. Title of the proposal:

Panoramic Photography Documentation of The Stone Circles of Senegal and The Gambia

C. Abstract of the proposed research:

My visual research documents and interprets contemporary Africa, and the African Diaspora through photographic imagery. Through photography I undertake the deconstruction of negative visual imagery which has so much defined the Western view and interpretation of the African continent: “an image of hungry and dying children and mothers withering away in desolate lands because of hunger and poverty: child soldiers roaming about revenging for the death of their parents . . . brutalities of all sorts, disease, hunger . . .” In particular, my visual research has focused on Urban Africa: cities rather than rural communities. With the Solomon Faculty Research Award, I propose to extend visual research to a region of the continent not well known - a little documented rural region. One of five sites in Africa recently (2006) declared Unesco World Heritage Sites, the Stone Circles of Senegal and The Gambia occupy 15,000 square miles between the Saloum and Gambia Rivers. Located on the north bank of the river Gambia around Wassu and Kerr Batch in the Central River Division are 93 stone circles arranged into four groups that “represent a larger, more complex sacred landscape dwarfing the enormity of Stonehenge . . .” They are “believed to be burial mounds of Kings and chiefs in ancient times . . .” Stone circles are found “throughout Europe and the Near East,” but nowhere are there as many as are found on the north bank of the Gambia river. I plan visual interpretation and documentation of this site through panoramic photography.

2. Summary of relevant background literature:

A. Another Africa, Photographs by Robert Lyons, Essay by Chinua Achebe

- Robert Lyons
1998, Doubleday
ISBN: 0-385-49038-0
- B. Lynn Davis: Monument
Lynn Davis
1999, Arena editions
ISBN: 1-892941-07-3
- C. Anthology of African & Indian Ocean Photography
1998, Revue Noir
ISBN: 2-909571-30-0
- D. Markings: Aerial Views of Sacred Landscape
Marylyn Bridges
1986, Aperture
ISBN: 0-89381-228-5
- E. The Last of the Nuba
Leni Riefenstahl
1973, St. Martin's Press
ISBN: 0-312-13642-0
- F. Hometowns: An American Pilgrimage
George Tice
1981, New York Graphic Society
ISBN: 0-8212-1713-5
- G. Africa
Herb Ritts
1994, Bulfinch Press
ISBN: 0-8212-2153-1

There is no “background literature” in print that I can find relative to a visual interpretation of The Stone Circles of Senegal and The Gambia. While books such as *Another Africa, Photographs by Robert Lyons*, with Essay by Chinua Achebe, provide a complex treatment of contemporary African life, it does not significantly address African architectural structures or monuments. *Lynn Davis: Monument* provides visual a treatment of many African monuments, but her examination is isolated primarily to North Africa. My interest is to extend dialogue to Sub Sahara Africa in an attempt to demonstrate and illustrate the existence and efficacy of stone architectural structures in Black Africa. *Markings: Aerial Views of Sacred Landscape*, by Marylyn Bridges, provides the most “relevant” interpretation of the kind of sites, which I plan to examine, but provides no interpretation of sacred sites in Black Africa.

Other texts primarily examine the social structure and document the vanishing primitive landscape of the continent, without homage to any significant architectural achievements: *The Last of the Nuba*, by Leni Riefenstahl is a good example of this form. While there is significant examination and documentation of the most vernacular architectural forms in North America (*Hometowns: An American Pilgrimage* by George Tice), and elsewhere, no such examination exists to value the Stone Circles sites, or to privilege the existence of stone

architectural form in Sub Sahara Africa. Much of the “literature” provides a rather romantic view, such as *Africa*, by Herb Ritts, but few provide objective interpretation of the significance of Africa’s architectural forms, as expressed through visual interpretive photography.

This visual research project will significantly contribute to my scholarly field(s) by bridging research in the Visual Art Department with my research interest in Africana Studies. It will demonstrate the impact and significance of the visual arts in cultural and economic development of the African world, and bring visual research fully into the discourse of the Africana Studies Department.

3. Description:

My visual research examines the role, and function; the visual arts can and should play in the cultural and economic redevelopment of the African world (the continent of Africa and the many countries and communities of African descent in the New World). I am interested in, and the potential of, how the visual arts may play a powerful role, and may prove to be a vital tool, in the revisualization, revitalization, and reconstruction of the nations of Africa, and her peoples and communities in the New World (and across the Diaspora). I produce visual interpretations that examine the lives and experience of Black people, and the experience of people of color throughout the Diaspora, in an attempt to examine, document, and preserve, an expression of our identity. My hope is that this visual research may ultimately serve to counter the many negative visual stereotypes and degrading imagery too “often portrayed by Western media . . .” This is an ambitious visual agenda, which breaks with traditional interpretation and portrayal of Black Africa, her people and culture, and elaborates a political function for art in the post modern world. I am advocating that the visual arts may have an important place, and may play a significant role, among the many systems used in elevating Black communities in Africa and the Diaspora.

It is my ambition to produce provocative photographic interpretations that elaborate and celebrate positive aspects of Black community experience. I am convinced (in the words of bell hooks) that “the lives of black people are complex, and are therefore worthy of sophisticated critical analysis and reflection . . .” Picasso stated that “painting is not done to decorate apartments; it is an instrument of war against the enemy . . .” I am trying to use photography as a tool, “an instrument,” to “change the way we as Black people look at ourselves and the world . . .” I hope through my work to contribute to our sense of world community; to help “create a world where Blackness, and Black people, can be looked upon with open eyes . . .” I recognize that “there is no naked, honest, simple way for it to be done (for a white man to look at a Black man),” but perhaps, as Black people, we can look at each other.

My ongoing research represents a visual journey, bridging international borders, to construct a portrait of “Africans Born in the Western World.” My visual research attempts to connect the experience and legacy of North American Black communities to Black community experience in the rest of the world (Old World and New). Visual artifacts (photographs) of my travel, exhibited alongside images of North American Black communities, attempt to reconstruct a portrait of Black cultural life as we enter a new millennium (A hoped-for period of joy, serenity, prosperity, and justice . . .) Photographs can be powerful instruments of cultural and economic change. Through photography, I not only attempt to interpret and record my experience, but also to participate in an ongoing debate on the fate and shape of

the Black cultural experience. I am interested in making moving, poetic, portrayals of Black community life, but also in examining how photographs function, and "how it (photography) may be used to resist dominant structures . . ."

The Solomon Faculty Research Award would be used to fund research travel to Dakar, Senegal, and passage onward to the north bank of the river Gambia, to the Central River Division, where I intend visual examination and documentation, through panoramic photography, of the Stone Circles of Senegal and The Gambia. Previous visual research in Africa has focused on Urban Africa: cities rather than rural communities. With the Solomon Faculty Research Award, I propose to extend visual research travel to a region of the continent not well known, and a little documented. One of five sites in Africa recently (July 2006) declared Unesco World Heritage Sites, the Stone Circles of Senegal and The Gambia occupy 15,000 square miles between the Saloum and Gambia Rivers. Located along the north bank of the river Gambia around Wassu and Kerr Batch in the Central River Division are 93 stone circles arranged into four groups that "represent a larger, more complex sacred landscape dwarfing the enormity of Stonehenge . . ." They are "believed to be burial mounds of Kings and chiefs in ancient times . . ." Stone circles are found "throughout Europe and the Near East," but nowhere are there as many as are found on the north bank of the Gambia river. I propose visual examination, interpretation and documentation of this site through panoramic photography, utilizing specialized panoramic cameras, and medium format film. Large-scale exhibition prints will be produced which interpret the sites.

My visual research in Urban Africa has resulted in more than 45 solo exhibitions and 90 group exhibitions, since 2000. Continued fieldwork in West Africa will provide necessary content for future exhibitions, and publication proposals, which will extend visual interpretation of the African continent. Whereas I have concentrated past efforts on urban African (Dakar and St. Louis, Senegal; and Cairo and Giza, Egypt), I would use this opportunity to concentrate research efforts on the little known and less understood stone monuments of the Senegambia region: "massive seven-ton pillars . . . erected between the third century BCE and the sixteenth century." On July 21st 2006 the World Heritage Committee added the Stone Circles of Senegal and The Gambia "along with 17 other sites to their list of 830 cultural and natural properties deemed most valuable to present and future generations." The Senegambian complex comprises 1053 stone circles with up to 52 circles on a single site - not the few isolated circles found in other parts of the world. "In recognizing the universal significance of the Stone Circles, the World Heritage Committee cited the fulfillment of two World Heritage Convention's conditions for inscription in the World Heritage List, noting that the finely worked individual stones display precise and skilful stone working practices and contribute to the imposing order and grandeur of the overall stone circles complex, and that the stone circles represent the wider megalithic zone, in which the survival of so many circles is a unique manifestation of construction and funerary practices which persisted for over a millennia across a sweep of landscape, and reflects a sophisticated and productive society. . ."

"We wish to plead our cause," wrote John B. Russwurm and Samuel Cornish in their inaugural edition of *The Freedom's Journal* (the first black newspaper, published in 1827). "Too long have others spoken for us . . ." My visual research is my attempt to "plead our cause . . ." I am concerned with how systems of art function . . . I am interested in the way in which, and possibility that, visual art can function as an instrument of social, cultural, and economic, development and change. My ambition is to use visual art as a means to counter negative Western perceptions, interpretations, and interactions, with the African world (Africans and peoples of African descent); as a means of providing an alternative

interpretation of the many communities of African descent; and, as a means of cultural and economic development. I see an economic as well as political function for art . . . And, I seek to use visual art in a much broader context than the merely decorative or simply documentary. I believe that by changing the visual image of Africa, and her people - as perceived by the Western World - that it can and will have a tangible effect on the economic development of the continent.

I am eager to participate visually in an open dialogue which furthers our understanding of the processes of 'reconciliation,' particularly with regard to visual art practice; and the image of Blacks in the post modern world. It is my belief that much of our interpretation and understanding of Africa, and Black people, is based significantly upon the visual image, as it is projected in the media and through cultural institutions. In museums, the notion of Africa as primitive culture is continually reinforced by exhibitions of wood carvings and African masks . . . This leads to a significant misinterpretation of African culture, particularly among and between blacks in the Diaspora and African Blacks. My interest in reconciliation is as much an interest in the reconciliation of the experience and expression of Blacks in the New World with our histories and ancestries in the old world.

In applying for the Solomon Faculty Research Award, I believe it will prove to be an opportunity to further examine ongoing visual research interests, in an environment of enlightened critical observation. Visual interpretation of The Stone Circles of Senegal and The Gambia will broaden contextualization of Africa and her cultural history: "the stones were quarried with iron tools and skillfully shaped into almost identical cylindrical or polygonal seven-ton pillars, on average about two meters high . . . the whole of the stone circles testify to a highly sophisticated and organized society with an early knowledge of iron-working, and a belief in life after death . . ."

4. Endorsement from proposer's department chair:

To the Solomon Grant Selection Committee,

I whole-heartedly endorse Associate Professor Kerry Coppin's "Stone Circles" project. Professor Coppin has an extensive record of powerful documentary photography in Africa and the Caribbean. In addition he is well versed in the technical challenges of panoramic photography, a method that involves the meticulous construction of a series of images taken in a 360-degree circle. Thus his technical method echoes his subject matter.

In his art Professor Coppin has brought to a Western audience a positive view of Africa that emphasizes the vitality and culture of African cities. His pictures depict both the familiar and the obscure; haunting landscapes of the Pyramids, or a merchant in Senegal. Photographed in black and white, digitally enhanced with a warm, sepia tone, and printed very large, Professor Coppin's photographs are elegantly composed and lit. I would be eager to see the images from a project at the "Stone Circles."

Sincerely Yours,

Leslie Bostrom,
Associate Professor and Chair
Department of Visual Art

5. Names of two scholars qualified to review and comment on the proposal:

A. Richard Fishman, Professor
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B. Peter Mark, Professor
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PhD Yale University
MA Syracuse University
BA Harvard University

Peter Mark is author of *“Portuguese” Style and Luso-African Identity: Precolonial Senegambia, Sixteenth – Nineteenth Centuries*. “Peter Mark shows how building styles are closely associated with social status and ethnic identity. Mark documents the ways in which local architecture was transformed by long-distance trade and complex social and cultural interactions between local Africans, African traders from the interior, and the Portuguese explorers and traders who settled in the Senegambia region . . .” He has also authored *The Wild Bull and the Sacred Forest* and *A Cultural, Economic, and Religious History of the Basse Casamance since 1500*.