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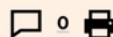
# The public sculpture debate – 47 potential ways forward

An exhibition at Goldsmiths CCA in London asks artists to find a fresh approach, but do monuments help us to remember or let us forget?



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In 1995, Horst Hoheisel responded to a competition to design a “Berlin Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe” with a provocation. Blow up the Brandenburg Gate, he said, and the scorched earth would become a new Holocaust monument. The artist surely thought it unlikely that the triumphal arch and emblem of Prussian power would actually be razed to the ground. But his unfulfilled plan draws attention to how public monuments so often follow the same script: unyielding obelisks and fluted columns, heroic figures on horseback. What if the act of remembering the past could be encapsulated not in the erecting of another monument, but in the absence of one?

## HOLLYBUSH GARDENS

Monuments haunt us and are themselves haunted. The sprawling, cerebral exhibition *Testament* at Goldsmiths Centre for Contemporary Art — a former Victorian bathhouse in south-east London — offers a testing ground for 47 artists to create proposals that respond to the feverish debate around public sculpture. It arrives in the same month that a man scaled BBC Broadcasting House to take a hammer to Eric Gill's "Prospero and Ariel" in protest over the artist's abuse of his daughters; the "Colston Four" activists were acquitted of criminal damage for their role in toppling the statue of the slave trader in Bristol in 2020; a New York statue was removed that showed President Theodore Roosevelt astride a horse, flanked by two bare-chested men of Native American and African descent.



© Rob Harris

## HOLLYBUSH GARDENS

Exploring the shamanistic energy of monuments, Zadie Xa and Benito Mayor Vallejo's trippy oil painting "Proposition for Earth Prosperity" (2021) envisions a tree growing from a conch and, perched on its branches, a fox, seagull, orca and cabbage. A reference to a Korean totem pole, it is meant to offer protection against evil — the artists suggest sticking it in the Thames. From a similarly maximalist imagination, Monster Chetwynd's "A Monument to the Unstuffy and Anti-Bureaucratic" (2019) sets a hulking green foam beast on a wooden stage — a cartoonish monstrosity that looks as if it's leapt out of the pages of a medieval manuscript but in whose toothy maw visitors can lounge. Laure Prouvost offers a study for an archway set in some country garden: teats sprout from the roof; bottles of hand sanitiser are set into the walls. "Go through this gate and be free from it all," she promises.

Elsewhere, sprawled over a short white plinth, a cat is snoozing, its grey and white fur mottled and matted; the animatronic creature's paws creeping over the edge. The accompanying text to Ryan Gander's sculpture recounts a submission to a public art competition at a university in Bergen, Norway, in which the artist suggested that the budget be reinvested in an annual scholarship; Gander also stipulated that a Norwegian Forest cat be introduced to the college, allowed to roam at will, with the new scholar responsible for its care. The (unrealised) proposal points to how public art often does a poor job of understanding who its "public" is in the first place. What if a monument *did* something for us? The artist Ghislaine Leung has answered this in her own way by filling one gallery with a giant inflatable pub.

## HOLLYBUSH GARDENS



'I'd rather stand' (2022) by Olu Ogunnaike © Rob Harris

Not everything is zany free-for-all. Several designs conjure feelings of melancholia and loss. In Olu Ogunnaike's "I'd rather stand" (2022), scraps taken from the factory floor of a luxury hardwood supplier are mashed together, the shards of oak, ash and elm pressed into the form of Trafalgar Square's empty Fourth Plinth, turning it into a monument that feels precariously constructed. A video by the artist Lawrence Lek imagines what a memorial to memory loss might look like, riffing on the Greek myth of Nepenthe, a potion of forgetfulness. His film recreates a gallery from the CCA as a woozy video game space that constantly folds in on itself.

Tanoa Sasraku's "Part and Proposal: Storr" (2021) takes the shape of an eroded map created through an inverted process of "constructive self-destruction": the artist has collected sheets of newsprint, rubbed them with a red ochre foraged on the Isle of Skye, plunged them in seawater, and then cut through to reveal rippling strata of the mineral pigment. Its fully realised form will trace the contours of the British Isles: a haunting anti-monument that evokes a sense of deep, geological time resonating beneath.



'Monument to Money Laundering' (2022) by Jeremy Deller © Rob Harris

The unpicking of the relationship between the shape of monuments and the body becomes a thread through the show. Stuart Middleton dramatically unfurls a banner of stitched-together clothing donated by friends, family and colleagues, a monument to everyday human contact that flows down the gallery's balconies. Meanwhile, Elizabeth Price uses cloth to imagine something darker: her curtain of purple, black and green satins is a veil to conceal an unspecified statue. The artist was inspired by her Catholic childhood and how, at Easter, statues in church were often draped in dark silks. Suddenly the sculptures became faceless — “alien, morbid, dreadful” — she recalls.

The exhibition's misfires come in its more didactic parts. Jeremy Deller's plaque, “Culture War Memorial” (2022), provides an obvious one-liner announcing “a memorial to family and friends who have been radicalised and lost to us through disinformation and conspiracy theories” that will “take the form of an apparently bottomless sink-hole”. The artist Yuri Pattison has acquired a decommissioned immigration control desk from Heathrow; it squats in the middle of a gallery, ugly and useless, a monument to an imagined borderless future.

## HOLLYBUSH GARDENS



Still from Adham Faramawy's 'A proposal for a parakeet's garden' (2021) © Rob Harris

Better are proposals that prompt a more ambivalent response to monument-making. Adham Faramawy's short film "A proposal for a parakeet's garden" (2021) calls for "a monument for the displaced" in apparent reference to the growing population in the UK of the vivid green birds that have been labelled by some a "feral" threat. The artist's avian paradise works as an atmospheric cipher for anxieties over immigration. "Share the abundance your fathers stole. Let them come," he implores.

A sculptor once observed to me that public monuments, though purportedly designed to suggest feelings of remembrance and reverence, are all too often a way of forgetting, of chiselling memories into cold stone and moving on. (A decade ago, for instance, how many Oxford students would have recognised the slightly crumpled man roosting atop Oriel College, now widely known to be the contentious Cecil Rhodes?). Rather than fretting over whether our renewed interest in these statues is part of "cancel culture", we might ask instead: what was the purpose of the monument in the first place? Was it really to open us up to the past meaningfully, or merely a symbol of an established order?

## HOLLYBUSH GARDENS



Phyllida Barlow's 'untitled: hostage' (2022) © Rob Harris

As I turn to leave, I encounter Phyllida Barlow's "untitled: hostage" (2022): two stumps — bearing a scarlet gash — suffocated in a threatening black hood. The eerie object is accompanied by a harrowing text in which the artist remembers watching footage with an Iranian student of a woman being stoned in her home country. The text captures snatches of panicked conversation as the artist gradually realises she is looking at a woman's body "shrouded, wrapped and tied up". She recalls feeling ashamed to be witnessing the killing but being unable to look away. Here, the monument has taken root in the mind: haunting, threatening and eternal. Testament, indeed.

To April 3, [goldsmithscca.art](https://www.goldsmithscca.art)

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