

THE COMMON GUILD

Visual arts: Projects / Events / Exhibitions



Photos by Isobel Lutz-Smith

COMMENTARIES Sam Durant 'Iconoclasm'

17 May – 11 July 2021



Loss Remains

Over the course of May to July 2021, Sam Durant's *Iconoclasm* project in Glasgow brought his series of fourteen drawings of images depicting historic moments of collective monument destruction into the contemporary public space of the city.¹ Iconoclasm, the deliberate defacing and destruction of monuments and images, is a word that literally means 'breaking images', originating from the Greek *eikon* (image) and *klastes* (breaker).² As the drawings' location-date titles reveal, Durant selected images of monument destruction that took place as early as 1572 and as recent as 2017, at diverse sites, including Durham, USA, Fort-de-France, Martinique, Harbin, China, Paris, France and Mosul, Iraq. With *Iconoclasm* the artist placed into public space drawings that exposed viewers to episodes from iconoclasm's long history and extensive geographies; drawings that became in themselves ephemeral monuments to iconoclasm, visually compelling and yet physically vulnerable. By extension, contemporary viewers in Glasgow became witnesses to destruction at one remove.³

Durant's *Iconoclasm* presents glimpses of important but often forgotten and ignored ideas: monument toppling is as old as the oldest monuments. It accompanies the rise and fall of leaders, regimes, symbols, and political and social groups. It marks contested territory as sites for protest, victory or defeat. It can be a rejection of subjugation and a demand for power. From ancient Mesopotamia and Classic-period Maya Mesoamerica, Late Antique Rome and the Roman Empire, to sixteenth-century Reformation England and New Spain, to Revolutionary France and Mexico, to contemporary post-colonial and European countries, and the United States, it takes place all over the world.⁴ Statues commemorating gods, emperors, religious figures, military leaders, and serving as symbols of idolatry, imperialism or white supremacy itself, have been raised up and deposed, their subjects first honoured, and later rejected.

In 2021, the deposition of monuments can feel like a timely, contemporary subject,

happening everywhere from Bristol to Baghdad, Cape Town to Charlottesville, but it has always existed.⁵ Collective depositions, the taking down of monuments by social and political groups, are consistently part of the life cycle of monuments, as are written and visual representations of the events. Curiously, such representations can appear before as well as after the moment when monuments fall, anticipating and fuelling iconoclasm. Iconoclastic acts have a long history, and representations of them do too.

Cross-culturally, monument depositions often generate contemporary eyewitness accounts – written, visualised and spoken – which may multiply and disseminate. Eyewitness accounts frequently become regarded as records, as objective evidence of the event, when in fact they remain subjective and limited, only representing specific moments and aspects of individual or group experiences. Accounts of monument toppling may alienate social groups, portraying them as an uncivilised and irrational 'Other' enacting 'frenzied' spontaneous activities.⁶ And yet a deposition is an established convention, as well as an action that requires forethought and planning to accomplish. When regimes write their own histories of self-initiated monument removals, events are described as organised, triumphant and just.

Depositions of contested monuments and their representation can contribute to the formation of national, collective historic, and mythologised narratives. This practice also has a long history, from the seventeenth century toppling of the Cheapside Cross in London to the 2017 removal of confederate monuments in Memphis, Tennessee.

In 1776 during the Revolutionary War in the US, the Declaration of Independence was read out in New York City after the toppling of a monument to King George III. Beheaded and broken into pieces, almost all of the statue's gilded lead was transformed into bullets to be fired back at the British (some fragments were saved, buried and discovered in the nineteenth century). Celebratory representations of the deposition took the form of historical accounts, with prints, paintings, re-enactments, carnival floats, and museum displays gaining traction in the nineteenth

and twentieth centuries.⁷ The Museum of the American Revolution in Philadelphia made a film and a full-scale replica of the monument in 2017.⁸ When protests around confederate monuments and their removal gained attention in the same year, the George III monument deposition became a meme about positive revolutionary action.

Acts of remembering fallen monuments do not always take the form of texts, images or material objects; although more ephemeral, the spoken word and the archaeological record also capture iconoclastic events. Not all monuments were, or are, conventional statues or memorials: sites in landscapes, such as fields, woodlands, individual trees, bushes or rocks associated with religious ritual also embody the status of monument. The destruction of these ritual sites may be prehistoric, as in for example, the clearance of sacred woodland by the Romans in Late Iron Age Anglesey, or more recent.⁹ In Guinea in the 1990s, Baga elders routinely pointed out to younger people the absence of a sacred bush or a field destroyed by Muslim missionaries – an important part of their religious instruction and interpretation of the landscape.¹⁰

Taken together, these representations all commit to memory the loss of contested monuments and the struggles they embody. This remembering of loss happens out of necessity, as a way of marking collective experience in shared public space. Deposed monuments, as broken symbols loved, despised or ignored, can generate strange legacies through the images, stories and material remains left behind. Some are also completely forgotten. Paradoxically, the process of remembering and forgetting works two ways: past regimes and ideologies can be both remembered and forgotten by erecting monuments, as well as by taking them down.

Dr Stacy Boldrick is author of *Iconoclasm and the Museum* (Routledge 2020).

1 Sam Durant, *Iconoclasm*, Detroit, 2020.

2 Richard Clay, 'Contested Objects, Contested Terms', in Stacy Boldrick and Richard Clay (eds), *Iconoclasm: Contested Objects, Contested Terms*, Aldershot, 2007 / London and New York, 2017, p. 5–11.

3 Matthew Bowman, 'Representing Destruction', *Art Monthly*, 449, September 2021, p. 5–8.

4 See Josh Ellenbogen and Aaron Tugendhaft (eds), *Idol Anxiety*, Stanford, 2011. Sources for the topics listed include: Megan E. O'Neil (Classic-period Maya), Bryan Ward-Perkins (Late Antique Rome), Margaret Aston (Reformation England), David Tavárez (Colonial Mexico), Richard Clay and Emmanuel Fureix (French Revolutionary and later iconoclasm), and Adrian Bantjes (Revolutionary Mexico). The literature on U.S. monument toppling is vast: see the work of Kirk Savage and Dell Upton, and Erin Thompson's forthcoming *Smashing Statues*, 2022. See also Dario Gamboni, *The Destruction of Art*, 2nd edn, London, 2018; James Noyes, *The Politics of Iconoclasm*, New York, 2013; Brian Kwoba, Roseanne Chantiluke, Athinangamso Nkopo (eds), *Rhodes Must Fall: The Struggle to Decolonise the Racist Heart of Empire*, London, 2018; J. A. G. Zarandona and N. Munawar, 'The unfallen statues of Hafez Al-Assad', *City. Analysis of Urban Change, Theory, Action*, Vol. 24, Issue 3–4, 2020.

5 Stacy Boldrick, *Iconoclasm and the Museum*, London, 2020, p. 84–132.

6 For examples see Aaron Tugendhaft, *The Idols of Isis: From Assyria to the Internet*, Chicago, 2020; Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality*, London and New York, 1992, p. 35–39.

7 Wendy Bellion, *Iconoclasm in New York: Revolution to Reenactment* University Park, PA, 2019.

8 Boldrick, *Iconoclasm and the Museum*, p. 98–108.

9 Henry Chapman, *Iconoclasm and Later Prehistory*, London, 2018. See also Deborah Cherry (ed), *The Afterlives of Monuments*, London, 2014.

10 Ramon Sarró, *The Politics of Religious Change on the Upper Guinea Coast: Iconoclasm Done and Undone*, London, 2009.



Title Page
Sam Durant
Accra, 1966, 2018
Installation view, Chisholm Street, Glasgow, 2021

Top
Fort-de-France, 1991, 2018
Installation view, London Road, Glasgow, 2021

Bottom
Utrecht, 1572, 2018
Graphite on paper
Drawing in collaboration with Sam George