

THE COMMON GUILD

Visual arts: Projects / Events / Exhibitions



COMMENTARIES Sam Durant 'Iconoclasm'

17 May – 11 July 2021



Iconoclasm Drawings

From May to July 2021, driving or walking along the streets of Glasgow, you might have come across a billboard or a poster that did not seem to be selling you anything but instead seemed to document snapshots from history, moments of change. Sam Durant's *Iconoclasm* drawings depict 'politically motivated destructions'. He says of the work, 'The project tries to show that violent responses to symbols are not confined to a particular place or time, culture, faith or political system'¹. Durant's drawings depict acts of destruction from 1572 (Utrecht – ornaments in St Martin's Cathedral) to 2017 (Durham, North Carolina – a Confederate Soldiers Monument), and in between; Port Said in 1956, Accra in 1966, Fort-de-France in 1991, Caracas in 2004, amongst other places. I rather like the fact that Durant names the statues not for the time they were erected, or by name, but for place and the moment of their destruction.

In execution, they hold a quietness at odds with the events the works portray. The graphite pencil softens the threat and removes the usual urgency of the black and white photojournalism that has constituted much of Durant's original source material, but still an undiminished power remains. *Tehran, 1979; Caracas, 2004; Durham, 2017* (all 2018); are moments freeze-framed that capture the teetering seconds before the statues' tumble to their destruction; and in the latter two, while we can see the ropes and bands around the monuments, those who are doing the pulling are outside the image, and I wonder who they are and what led them to that side and that moment. In *Madrid, 1936* (2018), a line of men, dark in the foreground, take aim at a statue of Jesus during the Spanish Civil War. This drawing was positioned on Glasgow's Broomielaw, not far from where *La Pasionara* overlooks the Clyde. The statue was fundraised for by the Trade Unionists in the 1970s, and erected by City of Glasgow and the Labour Movement to celebrate Dolores Ibárruri, the Spanish Civil War heroine. It also commemorates the Scottish men and women who died fighting fascism during the Spanish Civil war.²

Durant's billboards don't ask anything of us except, perhaps to look and consider. They don't ask us to buy, or click, or check something out. They don't warn us about anything, at least, not directly. How do they function in a world where we're seemingly inured to advertising, or we let advertising passively wash over us? How do we know what to take from them?

Here in Glasgow, these drawings are pasted onto billboards (and with the rise of digital technologies, perhaps these too will soon become things of the past). They are placed upon the messy layers of history that the city is built on – tight against red brick walls, beside graffitied Victorian railway bridges, next to plywood hoardings with willowherbs and buddleia bushes sprouting up around them; sandstone tenements, modern apartment buildings, scaffolded high-rises or timberyards behind them. They feel like exhortations or provocations to tear something down, but, seen in these more peripheral locations, what should come down and who will do it?

The monuments that Durant depicts in their final moments before destruction are artefacts from different eras, holding within them, variously, histories of colonialism, oppression, white supremacy and totalitarianism; particular value systems which have been venerated, and crucially, sometimes still are. What of that moment of their destruction? How fleeting, or ongoing is the feeling of power gained from these acts and what of the psychic and physical re-constructions thereafter?

What Durant's work shows us is that the impetus to remove isn't new and there's a continuity between then and now. How do we deal with the palimpsests of history that underpin our cities and our lives? If we see the physical removal of Imperialist markers, does that always come with a wholesale rejection of the ideas which underpinned their original veneration and the impetus to fortify those ideas in stone or bronze?³ Of course, there's so much of Glasgow and Scotland's colonial past that lies hidden in plain sight – in street names and statues, never mind the buildings themselves. How many monuments have faded into the background to become

raptor posts, or resting points for pigeons, or a shaded spot with a bench where we can eat our lunch? What will cause them to be scrutinised again, what will create a rage strong enough to topple them?

In September 2021, in Richmond, Virginia, the statue of Robert E. Lee – a Confederate General during the American Civil War – was dismantled after lawsuits seeking to prevent its removal were finally dismissed. In recent photographs, it wasn't the statue itself – a sombre bronze equestrian on a grey granite pedestal – that arrested my attention. Sitting watchfully, high above any pedestrian eyeline, the statue's presence could perhaps be ignored as one tactically navigates city space and one's place in the world. The statue still has those who look up to it, but for me, it was the brightly spray-painted graffiti prominent on its plinth and the words of protest below that drew my eye – “black and brown unity”, “BLM”... and that anger, these sentiments surely endure and represent historical artefacts in themselves.

In the Scottish Highlands, on a hill above the Dornoch Firth, there's a 100-foot-high statue of the Duke of Sutherland that can be seen from miles away. From that vantage point presumably he's able to see some of the lands from where he evicted his tenants during the Highland Clearances. There have been sporadic demands to topple the Duke. In 1994 a group of activists called for the Highland Council to destroy the statue. Their suggestion was not to remove it, but to break it up so that people might wander amongst its ruins. In its place, they wanted the plinth to hold a memorial to the thousands of families he cast from their homes and the villages he burned in the name of 'improvement'.⁴

How do we retain a knowledge of the past and place it contextually in the present? Where are the giants that now need razed and taken to task, and what do we do with the virtual, faceless monoliths that wield so much of the power that needs to be challenged and overthrown? Durant's *Iconoclasm* shows us there's nothing new in our attempts to tear things down, and hints too at the ghosts that still remain in the aftermath of destruction.

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1 Sam Durant, *Iconoclasm*, Detroit, Library Street Collective, 2020.

2 This statue is made of fibre-glass because of insufficient funds to cast the statue in bronze.

3 As I write this in September 2021, I see a story online about how a sculpture in a park in Sheffield, built to draw attention to women's safety and to protest violence against women, was razed to the ground. Made of wood. Of course.

4 Neal Ascherson, 'Blow up the Duke of Sutherland, but leave his limbs among the heather', *The Independent*, Saturday 8 October, 1994. Available: www.independent.co.uk/voices/blow-up-the-duke-of-sutherland-but-leave-his-limbs-among-the-heather-1441798.html



Title Page
Sam Durant
Madrid, 1936, 2018
Graphite on paper
Drawing in collaboration with Sam George

Top
Budapest, 1956, 2018
Installation view, Govan Road, Glasgow, 2021

Bottom
Durham, 2007, 2018
Installation view, Garscube Road, Glasgow, 2021