

ART MUSINGS

# Art Musing: Monumental Questions

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*content warning: colonialism, racism, civil war*

Looking beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, the year 2020 may well be known as the year of the monument. In previous years, there had been little international debate surrounding the continued presence of colonial monuments—a representation of a bygone and problematic history. Indeed, in 1927, writer Robert Musil famously proclaimed that “there is nothing in the world so invisible as a monument”. Yet 2020 saw monuments suddenly and violently thrust into the spotlight, particularly as part of the growing international Black Lives Matter movement. The movement itself has a longer history, yet it cannot be denied that the activism of 2020 was very much wrapped up in the symbolism of the monument. As part of these protests, statues of problematic figures were toppled in the United States and the U.K. Closer to home, the days leading up to 26 January have been a time of public protest in Australia for the past several years, annually renewing the debate around Indigenous sovereignty and inequality. And here in Melbourne, the St Kilda monument to Captain Cook has become a popular target for iconoclastic statements.

For Melbourne-based contemporary artist, Nina Sanadze, witnessing the fervour brings back painful memories. Born in the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic, Nina was forced to flee her home for Moscow during civil unrest in the early 1990s. “I was about fifteen. Tanks were going past my balcony and I was just hiding, trying to see. I was pretty scared. It was pretty loud. A hundred people died in the clashes. There were just bombs and kind of burning around the government building.” As Communist regimes fell across the Eastern Bloc, citizens witnessed the toppling of monuments to Soviet heroes intertwined with the violence against the broader population.

Drawing from these formative years, Nina’s artwork centres around exploring the physicality and the narratives of public monuments in different societies. In her 2020 installation, *Curtain Call*, Nina brings together her Soviet past and her post-colonial Australian present. The work displays the disembodied marble head of Tsar Alexander II between two aluminium silhouettes of Nina’s own creation. These silhouettes are simplistic representations of the enormous monuments to Queen Victoria and her son Edward VII in the Melbourne Botanical Gardens. By representing the figures together, Nina draws attention to the familial ties between the former and present imperial houses of Europe and invites us to consider their respective histories. Where the Romanov dynasty in Russia fell violently, the British monarchy still exists.

An extra layer is added to the work when the story of the marble head is revealed. Discarded in the 1920s during Georgia’s period of forced Sovietisation, the head was rescued by future Soviet state sculptor, Valentin Topuridze. Topuridze and his descendants kept it safe for the next hundred years until gifting it to Nina. In addition to the marble head, Nina was gifted the remaining models for Topuridze’s communist sculptures, which she now uses extensively in her work.

However, things have changed dramatically since Nina began exploring monuments through her art. This change in thought has directly impacted Nina’s work, leading to the cancellation of one project, *Grass Monument*, which she had been developing for close to a year. In an attempt to neutralise the controversial St Kilda monument to Captain Cook, Nina had been working with the Boong Wurrung Foundation to replace the foreign grass around the monument with a garden of fauna indigenous to the region. “The Kikuyu grass is the most colonial symbol you can imagine. It’s taking away the diversity and invaded very quietly. It’s a very pretty looking garden, but actually it exterminated everything that was there before. To me, that is pretty scary.” At the time of the proposal, Nina’s artwork was symbolically progressive, “poetically” moving forward in the only way that seemed possible. Yet, since the development in the monument debate, the foundation has withdrawn its support. Nina has respected this decision declaring that instead of the installation, “the proposal is the outcome, a well-intended gesture and some grass-food for thought.”

The cancellation of *Grass Monument* and the increased discussion around monuments helps Nina to constantly reassess her thinking around monuments. “It taught me there is no real answers. I followed each monument’s falling and I think each monument has its own story.” However, Nina does have one strong opinion: that the monuments should fall until there is deep change within society. “It seems joyful that finally people can go and [topple monuments] and vent their absolute frustration. But the community becomes divided and it feels like war. I’m scared of conflict where people just kill each other for whatever ideology and for whatever history that hasn’t been dealt with. That’s my trauma coming from civil war.”

While Nina’s Soviet past has caused her to be cautious at the sight of falling monuments, it also offers her unique perspective on the debate. “When all the people went to pull down the Soviet monuments there was this truth telling but we never got to the bottom of it. In the end, they wanted to bring back Stalin. The monuments should go when we’ve genuinely made the changes on the inside rather than superficially removing them and not dealing with the history, not having a museum of the genocide that happened. Not telling that story. Just removing one or two monuments, that’s not going to do it.”

Learn more about Nina’s work at [ninasanadze.com](http://ninasanadze.com)

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