

Iván ARGOTE

Curbed,

Prankster Artist Iván Argote Took Me on a Tour of New York's Least-Loved Monuments

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Prankster Artist Iván Argote Took Me on a Tour of New York's Least-Loved Monuments

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Iván Argote and curator Julio César Morales.
Photo: Guillaume Ziccarelli/Courtesy of
Perrotin and Iván Argote

"My performances intend to show that public spaces are in fact not that public," says artist Iván Argote, ducking overhanging tree branches from the top of a double-decker tour bus. The Paris-based Colombian is giving a tour of several "interventions" he has done on problematic city statuary as part of a show he has at Perrotin called "A Place for Us," which documents similar tweaks he has made of monuments in Bogotá.

He has previously dressed monuments of Spanish conquerors in ponchos or hidden bronze replicas of "new world discoverers" behind mirrors. For his photography series "Horses" in 2011, he digitally removed George Washington from his monument in Union Square and Henry

IV from his on Paris's Pont Neuf. The pictures show their horses alone on the pedestals. The centerpiece of the current show is his installation *Wild Flowers*, which turns casts of torsos, hands, and feet from the George Washington monument on Wall Street into planters; there is also a large wall drawing of a figure of a politician — he might just be Donald Trump — who has slipped in the shower.

A doe-eyed 30-something with a soft voice, Argote has generally found his way through performing on public monuments without any permission. His explanation to the police who approached him while putting a poncho over Madrid's Don García monument in 2012 was simple: "He must be cold, so I am putting a poncho over this guy." He and his friend, curator Julio César Morales, emceed the tour. They started out by talking about "radical tenderness," which is a term Argote uses for his acts of leaving subtle but striking accents on monuments. "There is a way to be critical but not necessarily enter the realm of confrontation," he said.

Our first stop was the widely despised Teddy Roosevelt monument at the Museum of Natural History, which depicts him on horseback in the company of two anonymous men, an African and a Native American, who walk beneath him. Even Roosevelt's descendents are on board with the monument's removal, and the city's Public Design Commission has recently approved its relocation. In the meantime, the museum added a plaque that addresses the controversy by pointing out the two polarized opinions about what is represented: "a heroic group" or "symbol of racial hierarchy." Protestors covered the three men with a parachute and drenched the plinth with blood-colored red paint; Argote was more subtle. Amidst the museumgoers and selfie-seekers, he and Morales pasted another acknowledgment over the museum's, asking, "What about the two other men? Who are they? What are their names?" We slowly returned to our bus wondering whether the sticker would live there for hours, days, or months.

En route to our next stop, Argote told us growing up in a political family in Bogotá. His father was part of a revolutionary group which later established a leftist party. As a film student, he used to sing on the streets of Bogotá with his band and climb onto monuments, like the one of Simon Bolivar in downtown, drunk. Then, he was not yet aware that this would be his practice in less than a decade. In his early 20s, he won an art prize which partially covered his MFA in Paris. His thesis project showed him faux-spraying paint over two Mondrian paintings at the Centre Pompidou. He filmed himself actually approaching to the paintings with a can and later digitally added zigzags over them. The modest provocation caught the attention of dealer Emmanuel Perrotin, who signed him at age 25. Argote, who is a bit of a prankster, used to tell Perrotin to introduce him as his salsa teacher.

Next stop: the Columbus statue by Central Park. When he told the policeman about his intention to put a poncho over Columbus the next day, the official told him that he was free to do so but that then he'd have to arrest him. Instead, we got a recital: a guitarist who was with us started playing his instrument, and we all sang a song that Argote wrote: "Oh, Christopher, I want to poncho you, but they wont let me do it / I know you want your poncho / I come from the Columbus land which you never visited / Oh, Christopher, we know you want to get your own poncho." Argote and Morales later offered the policemen pastries.

The last stop was in front of Trump Tower on Fifth Avenue. In a tongue-in-cheek offering to the former 45th president, Argote dropped a bar of a generic white soap in front of the tower. He gave us each a bar, too, as a souvenir. A woman on the tour who was initially talking to her friend about organizing an NFT exhibition awkwardly made a "dropping the soap in prison" joke. Nobody heard her I think but me.

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