

**Iván ARGOTE**

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*Iván Argote's Anarchy of Optimism*

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# Iván Argote's Anarchy of Optimism

*In his new show at Perrotin Gallery, the Colombia-born artist builds an anti-imperialist future*

by DANIEL FELSENTHAL | July 23, 2021



**Installation view of 'Iván Argote: A Place For Us'** PHOTO BY GUILLAUME ZICCARELLI / COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND PERROTIN

Today, as too many American liberals sleepily watch our country drift to the right, it can be easy to forget the radical political future that seemed possible in the summer of 2020. Faced with a surprising mainstreaming of previously niche discussions — abolishing police departments and prisons, taking down statues of conquistadors and Confederate leaders — leftists could briefly pose a utopian question to the establishment: *What will replace the institutions we've built after they're gone?*

Even as the widespread passions of our pandemic-era politics cool, the righteous battles of last year roll on. At least, officials have torn monuments to racists and colonial figureheads from their mounts of honor. In the past month alone, the House voted to remove all visages of the rebel South from the Capitol. (Yet again! Good luck in the Senate!) Charlottesville, Virginia, took down two statues, of Robert E. Lee and Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson, hoisting them from their plinths with yellow harnesses. Who knows what will stand, sit, or grow in their places, though the multimedia artist Iván Argote has some ideas. In *A Place For Us*, his exhibition at the Perrotin Gallery on the Lower East Side, Argote covers generic shapes of an obelisk, bust, and column with mirrored panels, as though to proffer that future memorials should be reflections of their immediate surroundings. In *Bondage*, a series of oil paintings on slabs of concrete, he shows how the construction gear worn by the statues during their dislocation made them look like submissives in a BDSM scene. We can only wonder what General Lee’s safewords might be — *I surrender?*

The 37-year-old artist isn’t joking about history, but instead proposing that playfulness and intimacy might be ingredients in a complicated antidote. Born in Colombia and based in Paris, Argote has been making work about monuments for approximately a decade, although he began his career as a prank artist. In one “intervention,” from 2009, he announced to a crowd in a Métro elevator that he had recently moved to France and asked them to sing “Happy Birthday” to him on camera. For a different, brazenly guerilla stunt, he spray-painted over a couple of (glass-covered) paintings by Piet Mondrian at the Pompidou. In yet another, this time even riskier, Argote administered electric jolts to parked NYC police cars so that they rocked with the rhythm of fornicating lovebirds. Bolstering these pieces is a faux naïveté that cherry-picks from Western philosophy about resisting power, as well as how people navigate collective rituals and memory. Foucault, Halbwachs, and Courbet are all obvious touchstones, though Argote’s art never feels academic. He doesn’t deal with established ideas for their monumental brilliance, but rather for their mutable beauty.

His gorgeous 30-minute film *The Messengers* (2014) — not included in the Perrotin show — centers around two young, innocent-looking Americans as they wander in Mompox, Colombia, and Arcos de la Frontera, Spain, chatting like close friends. As the “old” and “new” worlds blend and separate, so do the subjects of their lively, often funny conversations. Dick jokes dovetail with discussions of Tatlin’s tower. Socialist hero Rosa Luxemburg appears in reminiscences about childhood. Like the characters, the viewer is a flaneur through history and the present, through time and nations, dead seriousness and play.

*A Place For Us* has a similar peripatetic energy and no wall labels, tossing visitors into a futuristic public space. The first work we see is a photograph that documents an intervention Argote did in his native Bogotá in 2012, when he covered a statue of conquistador Francisco de Orellana in a mirrored shell. In the glossy large C-print, the shell reflects the foliage of the adjacent park, conveying how nature could replace a historical symbol of oppression: The colonizer becomes an indelible blip on a lush tree line.

Scattered around on the gallery's floors and walls are pieces from a replica of the statue of George Washington located at Wall Street's Federal Hall. Working with both a local foundry and experts on regional vegetation, Argote recasts our first president's severed body as planters for native plants and flowers. A pair of original sculptures, *Bells*, uses the same material, bronze, an indication of how to recycle the founding father's effigy into Argote's own monuments. Spelling out "Radical Tenderness" and "A Place For Us" with filigrees of vines, the *Bells* are easy to disregard for their near-cheugy, tasteless appearance. Yet in the context of the exhibition, the sculptures capture our attention for being thin, non-obtrusive, porous, and definitely not phallic; they function like statues without ego, objects to peer past and through.

While prior artworks by older artists have proposed themselves as anti-nationalistic monuments, such as *Gift Horse*, by Hans Haacke, which gazed at the long entwinement of monarchical power and Capitalism, Argote shows an unexpected optimism. In one sense, this demonstrates that the issues he's tackling are relatively solvable — tearing down representations of dead imperialists is an easy task compared to, say, redesigning municipal services after police departments are dissolved. But in another way, his sensibility is radical. One can be hopeful, Argote seems to tell us, without being naïve. We simply must make the world reflect its occupants instead of a self-aggrandizing notion of its past.

Yet Argote struggles with how much to craft his work, particularly in his naturalistic videos, which sometimes experiment chaotically with the possibilities of random interpersonal connection. A grainy 2009 film of the artist pretending that passengers on a Paris bus are members of his family is so shaky that we lose the underlying idea. Elsewhere, Argote treats his documentation as art itself, not as incidental to performance. The polished *Altruism* (2011) consists of him licking a pole on a packed Parisian underground train. Using a tripod, and with a knack for how his body appears on camera, he frames his act as fervent and private, while scandalized passengers turn their heads in the background. The final seconds of *I Just Want To Give You Money* (2007), in which he tries to give small change to disgruntled Métro passengers, achieve something similar.

Turning his handheld, mini DV camera onto his own reflection in the subway door, the work transforms from a clever antic into a moving picture of an expatriate's sadness and alienation in an anonymous metropolis.

The one video included in *A Place For Us* logs a fascinating digital intervention. In the middle of the pandemic, Argote circulated CGI-doctored footage of a construction crew ripping a statue of the French military leader Joseph Gallieni from its pedestal in Paris's 7th arrondissement, accompanied by a "fake news" article credited to the journalist Pablo Pillaud-Vivien. The hoax caused such a kerfuffle on social media that Paris mayor Anne Hidalgo sent staffers to Gallieni's perch in order to ensure that the fin de siècle slaughterer and torturer of African, Asian, and Caribbean people was still where the city had left him. While the intervention itself was a bravura feat, Argote memorializes it at Perrotin with an awkwardly edited, lazily shot, behind-the-scenes video, marked by inexplicable instances of soft focus and a staid interview with the influential political theorist Françoise Vergés. The artist could have documented his deep fake with myriad more elegant contemporary means — such as a screen displaying the tweets of those who believed that the statue was gone. Then again, he might just have let his original prank live online, without retrofitting it for a gallery.

Like many contemporary installations, among them Simon Denny's recent exhibition *Mine*, at Petzel Gallery, *A Place for Us* is powerful not necessarily for the individual works but because of the logic that links them, and how it allows for an environment of theme, form, and feeling. One can deride leftism in art using whatever cliché you choose — *Preaching to the choir? Yelling into a well?* — but as the past year has shown, it's far easier to watch the world sour into its familiar state of greedy mediocrity than it is to agitate constantly. What separates Argote from the activist set is that his ideas aren't only political. They're beautiful, and, at their best, they offer a spiritual alternative to doom without duping us about the urgency of the present. Wandering around *A Place For Us*, we stop and smell the flowers. We see our reflections in the mirrored sides of an obelisk and wonder whether humanity itself is monumental — or maybe this thought, too, has a gross stench of self-centeredness, the same trait that got us into such a mess in the first place. ❖

*Iván Argote: A Place For Us*

*Perrotin Gallery*

*130 Orchard Street (Between Rivington and Delancey)*

[Perrotin.com](http://Perrotin.com)

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