

Iván ARGOTE

*Autre,
Living Monuments*

September 2021

IVÁN ARGOTE

LIVING MONUMENTS



Iván Argote, *Wild Flowers: A Chest*, 2021. Bronze sculpture with live wild flowers, 60 x 159 x 111 cm | 23 5/8 x 62 5/8 x 43 11/16 in. Photographer: Guillaume Ziccarelli. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin

We have conceived and built monuments in homage to periods and historical characters that represent supposed key moments in the lives of people in today's nations. However, it is not adequate to say "we have conceived," but rather, "some have conceived," because in reality, the events we remember and celebrate have always been political decisions made by those in power.

Our cities of earth covered by thin layers of asphalt celebrate in corners, squares and facades, fixed, solid, persistent characters. Men of stone and metal who do not die and do not speak or move. They are based on the naive idea that what we do will last forever; that they will see us and we will see them until the end of days. We have become so used to always seeing them everywhere that we have forgotten their names. We have become accustomed to their violent authoritarianism to the point of thinking that it is normal to have them, to live with them, and to keep them in silence without saying or changing anything.

These beings of stone and metal represent a legacy written by few, which is not shared by the wider population. The old tale that history is written by the victors has never ceased to be true, not only in war, but also in economics, science, philosophy, culture, and knowledge. A great majority of these men of stone and metal speak to us of a military history, full of heroes and anti-heroes, of battles, of vanquishers and vanquished. They are adorned with myriad allegories and mannerisms of power, sometimes with humiliating and derogatory images of the dominated.

This tradition has no laws. Nothing governs it or has ever governed it. The street has never been a place of democratic or collective decisions, much less the constructed symbols and marks that we call monuments. To this day, it is only a few who decide for us what should be done based on ideological notions. The street is a mirror of injustices that reminds us second by second of past and present hierarchies. It validates differences and it dis-

criminate, particularly against the weak, while protecting and taking care of the wealthy. This system is a pure invention, a myth that we can no longer accept as natural or normal.

Our cities and towns are the fruits of all of our labor, of millions and millions of people, who day by day, hour by hour, have built them, cleaned them, cared for them, and fixed them. Our history is not the history of a handful of people of stone and metal that rise above us. It is a more complex history, carved as a whole, full of pain, of injustices that are still very latent, but it is also a history full of poetry, of fantasies, dreams, and songs. Instead, when walking our streets, we are used to a mute, hard, and insensitive public space.

"... Let's imagine a living, mutant monument that does not have to last forever, that does not always have to tell the same story, that can disappear, transform, transvestite itself. A monument that is fragile, complex, breathing, moving, vegetable, animal, organic. A monument that is calm, rare and nonchalant, without any spirit of domination, discreet, austere. A tender, critical, profound and joyful monument."

In terms of symbols and representation, our cities are rarely adorned with narratives other than patriotic and military pride. There are no spaces for reflection, for critical thinking. There are no spaces of representation that celebrate the common people, the cultures who have been crushed. There is an eagerness for power to appear perfect, smooth, flat, without roughness, reliefs, or incongruities. But we know very well that this is far from true.

Our monuments represent an arrogant version of our humanity, the one that feels above life and other beings. This clumsy vision does not deserve to be continued. We need to create new and different cosmogonies of our own, far away

from an obtuse canon that is ceaselessly navel-gazing.

Let's invent new relationships with the symbols we have, nothing obliges us to preserve an unjust system that pushes us to confrontation and dissociation. Let's allow ourselves to create new uses that are critical of our icons and of ourselves. Ones that allow us to dismantle with grace, and even joy, the cynicism and arrogance of the past and of the present, and to draw both a tolerant and tolerable future. Let us go case by case, city by city, neighborhood by neighborhood, inventing anew our public space.

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I don't know what forms it could take, possibly thousands, but it could be an interesting collective exercise. For years, I have played freely to create proposals in this direction. Here, I propose a retrospective guide to various interventions and proposals I have made in the last fifteen years, including some recent ones presented at Perrotin Gallery in New York, in the exhibition *A Place For Us*.



MIRAGES

From a very young age I was interested in the statues I observed in parks and streets. Growing up in a family of militants who thought critically about history and the present, I always looked with critical eyes at the symbols in the city. During my university days in Colombia, some nights after drinking with friends, we would climb up the statues and monuments, playing with them, talking to them, challenging them.

One of my first actions with a statue was *Glup Glup Monument* in 2009, where I submerged a statue of Simón Bolívar inside a fountain. The image of Bolívar, liberator of Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru and Panama, has been used by all kinds of political tendencies in Latin America. I found a plaster bust of Bolívar abandoned in the faculty of arts and the image of the liberator submerged up to his neck in water came to me. I took it to a nearby fountain in Bogotá, where I placed it without asking permission. The bust was there for several months until the plaster began to crumble. It eventually dissolved in the water.

In 2011, also in Bogotá, I covered with mirrors a bust representing Francisco de Orellana, a conquistador who even today is considered the first to discover the Amazon. His statue is in the National Park, in the center of the city. Its pedestal reads "Colombia to the Discoverer of the Amazon." It always seemed to me an absurd and offensive monument, which ignores and dishonors all the indigenous peoples and cultures that predate the Spanish invasion and still persist today. I used mirrors to make his image disappear and highlight the value of everything else that was not him—the context, us, nature. In a beautiful revenge, it is the surrounding nature that devours his image, creating a beautiful mirage.



IVÁN ARGOTE Living Monuments

(1) Iván Argote, *Glup Glup (Monument)*, 2009, HD video, Courtesy of Iván Argote. (2) Iván Argote, *Etcétera: en couvrant avec des miroirs Francisco de Orellana, le soi-disant découvreur de l'Amazonie*. Parc national, Bogotá, 2012 - 2018, Framed C-print 161 x 161 x 5 cm | 63 3/8 x 63 3/8 x 1 15/16 in, Photographer: Guillaume Ziccarelli. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin

(1) Iván Argote, *Turistas (Don Enrique II)*, 2012, C-print, Framed: 165 x 125 x 5 cm | 64 15/16 x 49 3/16 x 1 15/16 in. Courtesy of Iván Argote (2) Iván Argote, *Turistas (Don García)*, 2012, C-print, Courtesy of Iván Argote

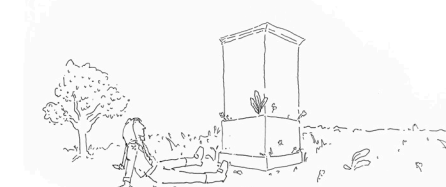
MESTIZOS

I think we deserve mutant monuments that represent our complexity, our contradictions and mixture. Since 2012, I have made a series of interventions called *Turistas*, in which I cover statues of Spanish Kings and conquistadors with typical ponchos from Central and South America. I started in Madrid. During my first visit to the city, I felt a very strange sense of belonging and not belonging at the same time. I felt a bond with Spain, and at the same time, a rejection, or a lack of knowledge. Spain's imperial greatness and current wealth is still tied to so many years of colonization, and it seems dishonest to me that this is not recognized with a critical spirit and humility. It is so deeply rooted that the national holiday in Spain is celebrated on October 12, a day that

used to be Columbus Day for countries all over the world, many of which are now celebrating in honor of their own indigenous populations. I find it sad that Spain, a country so rich in culture, does not choose something better to celebrate as a day of national pride.

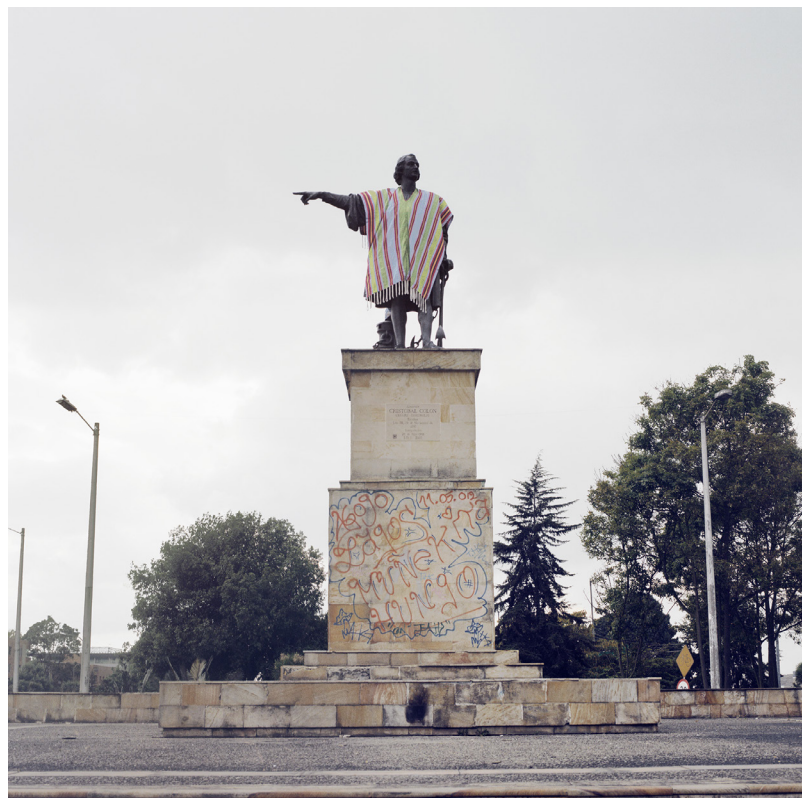
During a residency in Barcelona around 2013, on a night walk along the Ramblas, I came to the Columbus traffic circle. It is surrounded by lions, adorned with all sorts of allegories to travel, bravery and "knowledge." On one side, there is a supremely violent image of evangelization. We see a priest standing, leading an indigenous man who is kneeling beside him, kissing a cross. I could not believe that even today, these types of images are still celebrated—because to leave

it where it is is to celebrate it. I felt great pain when I saw her, and I said to myself, I want to get drunk with this statue and tell her about all the problems I have with her. Sometimes in Colombia, one talks about family problems while drinking liquor, and this was one of those occasions. I went at 4:00 AM with a bottle of tequila and a bottle of absinthe to get drunk with the statue. Hiding from the police who often pass by, I climbed up and started to drink. All the while, I poured liquor on parts of the statue and set it on fire. The alcohol created a blue fire. I set fire to the priest's face, hands, cross, pelvis, and so on. I wanted as a sort of exorcising ritual, to put an end to this image. Then I left. The statue was left without a trace. Sadly, it is still standing there.



AUTRE MAGAZINE 13 Biodiversity

(1) Iván Argote, *Turistas (Christopher Pointing Out the South , at Bogota)*, 2013, C-print, Courtesy of Iván Argote (2) Cell phone image of artist pouring liquor and lighting statue on fire in Barcelona (3) Iván Argote, *Bondage: Obélisque de Louxor, Paris*, 2021, Oil on concrete, 40.5 x 30 x 3 cm | 15 15/16 x 11 13/16 x 1 3/16 in. Photographer: Guillaume Ziccarelli. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin



(1) Iván Argote, Installation View of *Iván Argote: A Place For Us* at Perrotin New York, 2021. Photographer: Guillaume Ziccarelli. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin (2) Iván Argote, *Wild Flowers: A Trip*, 2021. Bronze sculpture with live wild flowers. 60 x 133 x 102 cm | 23 5/8 x 52 3/8 x 40 3/16 in. Photographer: Guillaume Ziccarelli. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin

FICTIONS

Imagining a new relationship with these symbols is easy. We can all do it. In the exhibition *A Place For Us*, the idea was to explore various mechanisms. In September 2020, I started working with Françoise Vergès (renowned feminist, decolonial thinker and activist) and Pablo Pillaud-Vivien (journalist and activist) to think about an intervention to a monument of Joseph Gallieni, a French colonial military commander, and violent labor enforcer. Gallieni was the manager of countless massacres in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean, who wrote a text called "The Politics of Races", a manual on how to dominate and crush independence movements in the colonies. In the center of Paris there is a monument in his honor, on whose pedestal we see four half-naked women of different races (an African, an Asian, a Caribbean and a European woman) holding him in their arms. These women represent the four continents he dominated. Françoise

and Pablo asked me to imagine something, an intervention of some kind. I imagined that something ephemeral would be interesting but perhaps not far-reaching. I imagined that it would be nice if the mayor's office of Paris would remove the monument for good and I felt frustrated that this day would not come soon. So, I decided to make it up. I disguised myself and my assistants as city workers, rented a giant crane and even hired two actors to look like the administration. We went through the procedure as if we were going to remove the statue. Without any permits, we set everything up, I climbed up, tied the statue down, tied it to the crane, and then we worked with a post-production studio to digitally lift the statue. This one-minute video was then published by Pablo in *Revue Regards*, a serious opinion journal. Pablo wrote a very neutral article in which he said that under pressure from various militant groups, the



Gallieni statue had finally been removed. This generated a great controversy in the media. More than 30,000 views in three hours, hundreds of positive and negative comments, many asking for explanations from the mayor or the president. Four hours later, in the face of great confusion, the mayor's office of the 7th arrondissement sent someone to take a photo and post it to Twitter as confirmation of its continued existence. At that point, we published a second and third article discussing our gesture and asking for a public debate on the issue. The intention of this project was to strike a media blow, to get out of the art sphere, and to propose the issue to the wider public. In France, no colonial statues have ever been removed.

Within these fictional constructions I also proposed a new series of oil paintings on concrete called *Bondage*, where I imagine the moment when some of these uncomfortable monuments are tied up and lifted into the air. I like the idea of eroticizing these statues of stiff men and serious faces, suspending them almost with sexual pleasure. In this series, I represented the statue of Francisco de Orellana in Bogotá, the

statue of Christopher Columbus in Madrid, one of Sebastian de Belalcazar, conqueror and founder of the city of Cali—a statue that was knocked down by the Misak Indians in September of 2020—among others.

One final proposal is my new sculptural series titled *Wild Flowers*. In this series, I reproduced a statue of George Washington that I cut into sections, creating containers for local plants and wild flowers. The idea here is to propose a new use for these statues, to use these cold bodies and transform them into receptacles of life. I think this could work very well in a park or public garden. Many of the statues that are removed end up in museums and cemeteries. I think we can afford more freedom to play. To stop focusing solely on us humans and to let nature manifest itself. By connecting more with other species and undoing the ideological barriers we've constructed between ourselves and the rest of the universe, we can live a more pleasant future in dialogue with each other and our environment. Let's think and change with playfulness and freedom to create new living monuments. A different relationship with the city is possible.

end

