

ARTnews

The Defining Public Artworks of 2020, from Toppled Monuments to Messages in the Sky

By Claire Selvin | December 28, 2020



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In a year that left institutions around the world shuttered for months on end, public art took on a new resonance in many cities and provided safe experiences for those seeking a bit of visual relief from quarantine. Public artworks created in 2020 often took up urgent political and social issues, and the very notion of monuments—of which figures were being elevated and how they were rendered—figured in protest movements, opinion pages, and beyond. The guide below represents a survey of some of the year’s most notable projects, controversies, and events involving public art, many of which have already changed the ways we view and think about our histories and environments.

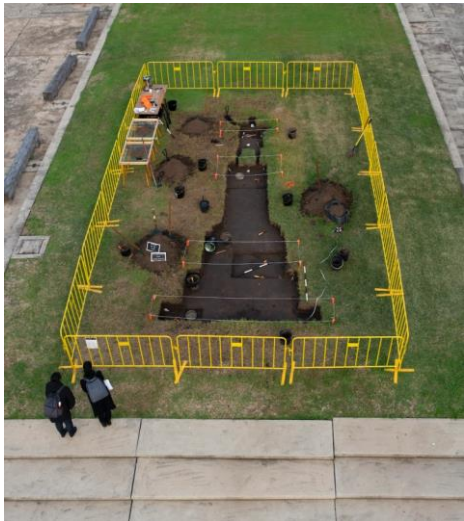


Photo: Courtesy of the artist

Artists created powerful site-specific works utilizing spaces in the land and sky.

Some of the year’s key public artworks made inventive uses of outdoor spaces to address histories of oppression. “In Plain Sight,” a skywriting campaign that took place over the July 4th weekend and featured contributions by 80 artists, situated written messages above 80 ICE detention facilities, immigration courthouses, processing centers, and former internment camps in the U.S. Organized by artist rafa esparza and performance artist and activist Cassils, the project included words by Dread Scott, Hank Willis Thomas, Emory Douglas, Titus Kaphar, and others.

At the Biennale of Sydney in Australia, Nicholas Galanin took up the history of violence against the country’s Aboriginal peoples with *Shadow on the Land, an excavation and bush burial*, which

PETER BLUM GALLERY

figured in *ARTnews*'s list of important artworks this year. A timely ode to ongoing debates about statues of historical figures, the work depicts the dug up outline of a monument to 18th-century British Royal Navy captain James Cook.

Augmented reality artist Nancy Baker Cahill, meanwhile, made her newest animation, titled *Liberty Bell*, available for viewing in locations across the United States. The digital work, which can be experienced through smart devices, features a swaying, abstracted bell accompanied by increasingly cacophonous ringing sounds. Debuting in a U.S. presidential election year, the work considers how notions of freedom and access have impacted America's past and present. The artist, who was included on *ARTnews*'s most recent Deciders list, said that the project's sprawling nature was timed auspiciously, if inadvertently, for the pandemic. "In a moment of social distancing, it can be experienced by most people if they have access to a phone or aren't putting themselves at risk by being outside," she told *ARTnews* this year.