

Monumental Amrita Hepi

20 February – 24 April
Presented with Perth Festival



Presented in Perth for the first time and created by Bundjalung/Ngāpuhi artist and choreographer Amrita Hepi, *Monumental* presents a video installation that casts a central colonial figure within a continual sunrise... or is it a sunset?

This central figure is serenaded by a group of dancers, Hepi among them, and then eventually toppled and replaced.

In the wake of Black Lives Matter protests and renewed calls for the removal of inherited monuments that symbolise colonialism and its ongoing legacies, *Monumental* offers a charged meditation on the tradition of building monuments, questioning who and what gets memorialised.

Amrita Hepi
Monumental, 2020
HD video, colour, sound
4 minutes
sculpture: mixed media, variable dimensions

Artist / Choreographer: Amrita Hepi
Producer: Zoe Theodore
Performers: Sarah Aitken,
Ngioka Bunda-Heath, Sammy Hammat,
Amrita Hepi, Jessie Oshodi,
Michaela Ottone, Luigi Vescio

Film Direction / Editor: Antuong Nguyen
Film Production: Silky Jazz Films
Director of Photography: Joey Knox
Sound Composition: Daniel Jenatsch
Colour Grade: Abe Wynen

Production Designer: Aleisa Jelbart
1st AC: Bonita Carzino
Gaffer: James Thompson
Grip: Akash Vijayakumar
Production Coordinator: Erik North
Production Officer: Tim Mcleod

Courtesy the artist & Anna Schwartz Gallery.

Commissioned by and exhibited at Gertrude Contemporary in 2021, with support from the Australia Council.

Performing Protest Audience Engagement with Amrita Hepi's Monumental Text by Anador Walsh

'Anything you do on camera is like a performance'.
— Martine Syms ¹

It is the first opening of 2021 and arrives off the back of year one of the COVID-19 pandemic, which for Melburnians, was spent almost entirely inside. The air is thick with humidity and the atmosphere is reminiscent of a night club: the door, guarded by Gertrude staff, has a pass in, pass out policy; there are throngs of sweaty bodies moving through the space and a line six deep for the bar. A whisper ripples through the crowd 'Amrita's about to start' and I am ushered into the darkened space of the gallery. With 'Monumental' projected against the wall behind her, Amrita Hepi mounts a ramp-like plinth and begins to perform. Everywhere I look, the darkness around me is punctuated by a sea of smartphones, pressed to blue lit faces. Later, I will see so much footage of this performance and its associated video work disseminated on social media, that I will begin to consider the overlaps between how we now engage with art and how we participate in protest in this stage of late capitalism – the age of the image.

Presented for only the second time, this time at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts (PICA) for Perth Festival 2022, *Monumental* (2021) is a single-channel video installation by Bundjalung and Ngāpuhi artist Amrita Hepi that asks us to look beyond the question of whether statues memorialising colonial figures should be removed and to consider the 'dialectical value of their memorialisation' – namely, what was the initial purpose of these monuments and what do they mean in the present context?² In posing these questions, Hepi choreographs a performance for the camera that employs a layered vernacular of classical and contemporary imagery and movement. This layering speaks to both the way that the myth of so-called Australian national identity continues to be perpetuated and how we experience the world in this present moment, in a self-mediated capacity, through the intermediaries of screens and images.

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In 2020, the murder of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin saw the emergence of an international movement of Black and Indigenous Lives Matter protests and the toppling of contentious, historical monuments the world across. Meanwhile in so-called Australia, Thomas Woolner's statue of Captain Cook in Hyde Park, Sydney, was placed under police protection by the New South Wales Government. It is this image – of a colonial nation defending British sovereignty and the doctrine of terra nullius, using the agents of its carceral system – that *Monumental* takes as its starting point. Situated within the tradition of fallism, *Monumental* is a legacy of South African artist Sethembile Msezane performing as the colonially co-opted Zimbabwean Chapungu bird as Cape Town University's Cecil Rhodes statue fell on April 9, 2015, and British artist Marc Quinn's replacing of the monument of Edward Colston in Bristol with a sculpture of Black Lives Matter activist Jen Reid, after it had been knocked from its plinth and rolled into the Bristol Harbour on 7 June, 2020.³

In his essay 'The Island', artist and writer Andrew Brooks writes: 'A national mythology casts settlers as a bunch of resourceful larrikins, petty criminals, and misfits that transformed a rugged frontier outpost into a profitable pastoral economy, all while maintaining a healthy scepticism of British pomposity'.⁴ In *Monumental*, Hepi takes an entrenched tool used to bolster this myth of national identity – sports – and inverts its function, weaponising it as a means of dismantling the quintessential icon of colonial Australia; Captain James Cook. *Monumental* begins with a diverse group of seven dancers, Hepi among them, bathed in the deep orange glow of a bright yellow orb projected into the background. Dressed in white and maroon sportswear and cast in a gentle silhouette, these dancers are surrounded by an assemblage of sports paraphernalia: cricket bats and rowing oars. Behind them, straddling a plinth, looms a large, expanding foam statue of Captain Cook, one hand fixed on his hip. *Monumental* then cycles through nonlinear scenes of the dancers, packed tight around the foot of the plinth, yelling up at Cook; using their hands, feet, and the sporting equipment at hand to destroy him while performing a series of solos, duets and ensemble dancing that is at times balletic and at others reminiscent of classical sculpture.

Spliced between these scenes is a combination of new and archival footage. The sun and Hepi simultaneously rise and fall through the sky. The Rockettes perform 'The Parade of Wooden Soldiers'. Towers of choreographed dancers open the 1980 Moscow Olympics. News and smartphone footage document the resignification of Australian monuments – James Cook drenched in pink paint and Matthew Flinders wearing a face mask inscribed with 'BLM'. In her 2019 book *Performing Image*, art historian and critic Isobel Harbison puts forward a theory of the same name as a means of framing works of art that engage with prosumer culture through the conflation of performance and moving image. She writes: 'Performing Image works represent a cycle of image acquisition, of consumption and production; they are works that step in to these cycles in order to co-exist outside of them...'.⁵ *Monumental* can be classified as being a 'Performing Image' work in that Hepi uses the vocabulary of our time, the image, to situate this work within the broader conversation on monuments that enshrine the colonial project. In doing so, Hepi also codifies the audience's experience of this work. Shown a rapid series of images that elicit a strong emotional response, as is now the tendency at a protest, the audience's knee-jerk reaction is to reach for their smartphone, to document their experience of *Monumental* and to add their voice to this conversation. This engagement is itself a performance, through which the audience becomes aware of their role in the creation of meaning, by way of their active participation in the documentation and dissemination of this work.

As *Monumental* approaches its climax, Daniel Jenatsch's synth-heavy, accompanying soundtrack builds in intensity. Close-ups of smashed expanding foam show Cook, obliterated on the ground. The dancers help one another to mount the plinth. Three seated, three standing and one elevated on the shoulders of another, they build a new, anti-monument with their bodies, the sun at their backs.⁶ *Monumental* then rewinds

and begins again, in an act of self-reflexivity that speaks to the need for monuments to be continually revised in line with shifts in context. In 'Towards Transformative Propaganda: A History of Student Activism at the Australian National University', historian Iva Glisic asks: '...what would a public monument to collective action in the name of transformative politics look like?'⁷ More than an iconoclastic denunciation of settler-colonialism and its perpetuation, Hepi's *Monumental*, through the image of seven bodies tearing down a statue of Cook and erecting something new in its place, proposes an answer to this question that is collaborative and First Nations-led. Additionally, *Monumental*'s structural composition makes us cognisant of the conditions of life 'under the image', in which the unpaid labour of image consumption and production is now an expected norm of human experience.⁸

Anador Walsh is a curator and writer living and working in Naarm (Melbourne). Anador is the founding editor of Performance Review.

Amrita Hepi (b.1989, Townsville of Bundjalung/ Ngāpuhi territories) currently lives and works in Naarm (Melbourne), Australia.

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| 1 | Kathryn O'Regan, "Anything you do on camera is like a performance" – LA artist Martine Syms on being seen in a surveillance society', <i>SLEEK Magazine</i> , January 7 2019, https://www.sleek-mag.com/article/martine-syms-2019/ | 4 | Andrew Brooks, 'The Island', in <i>Homework</i> , ed. Snack Syndicate, (Melbourne: Discipline, 2021), p. 90. |
| 2 | Suzannah Henty, 'In The Soil That Nurtures Us: A Certain Death To The Colonial Myth', <i>Index Journal, Monument</i> , 3 (2021), https://index-journal.org/issues/monument/in-the-soil-that-nurtures-us | 5 | Isobel Harbison, <i>Performing Image</i> (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2019), p. 9. |
| 3 | Iva Glisic, 'Towards Transformative Propaganda: A History of Student Activism at the Australian National University', <i>Index Journal, Monument</i> , 3 (2021), https://index-journal.org/issues/monument/towards-transformative-propaganda-a-history-of-student-activism-at-the-australian-national-university-2020 | 6 | Glisic, 'Towards Transformative Propaganda', p. 3. |
| | | 7 | Ibid, p.12. |
| | | 8 | Harbison, <i>Performing Image</i> , p. 15. |

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