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From Thomas Jefferson To Hillary Clinton, This Timely Monument Commemorates More Than Two Centuries Of Graceful Losers

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Arts

critic-at-large

Over the past several months, homeowners across America have planted their lawns with garish plastic signs endorsing Donald Trump or Joe Biden. Against this predictably polarized political backdrop, one lawn in Orange County stands out for promoting candidates you won't find on the 2020 ballot. There's a poster endorsing Hillary Clinton. Another plugs John McCain. You'll also see signs promoting Herbert Hoover and Thomas Jefferson. There's even one touting the infamous Aaron Burr.

The owners of the house have not lost their mind. The fifty-eight signs, endorsing the runner-up in every presidential election in American history, are collectively meant to stand as a monument to what might have been – to choices not made – as Americans prepare to make a monumental political decision.

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Nina Katchadourian, *Monument to the Unelected* (2020 installation), Orange, CA. Courtesy of Grand ...

[+] NINA KATCHADOURIAN

The Monument to the Unelected, which is simultaneously installed in front of private homes in California, Arizona and Wisconsin, was first presented by the American artist Nina Katchadourian in 2008, and has subsequently been exhibited every four years. Each time, Katchadourian has updated it, working with the designer Evan Gaffney, who has styled all of the signs to have a contemporary look so that they blend into the election-season landscape visually even as their content stands out.

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The juxtaposition is often funny, especially in cases where names from the 18th century are set in improbably modern typefaces, suggesting that even the Founding Fathers were really just coarse politicians. But Katchadourian's project is not merely satirical, and the implications are anything but cynical. In fact, twelve years after it was first commissioned by the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art and installed in several outdoor spaces around Phoenix, Katchadourian's *Monument* may be one of the most penetrating political artworks of the present moment.

The Monument to the Unelected is most obviously relevant as a symbol of the peaceful transfer of power that has followed every election cycle in US history, but is now threatened by Trump's refusal to commit to accepting a loss at the polls. The sight of fifty-eight graceful losers, many of whom stepped aside after a term in office, is poignant in a way that was not apparent when Katchadourian created the work. What was manifestly apolitical in 2008 has become more politically fraught than issues such as universal healthcare and gun control. This shift in meaning is all the more significant because it highlights the fact that the politically neutral basis for accommodating political difference has become politicized. The 2020 election has become a referendum on democracy itself.

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AARON BURR



**Is My
President**

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Even laden with this crucial new political message, Katchadourian’s artwork retains the philosophical weightiness that made it so meaningful in past iterations. This intellectual heft makes it current on another level, as a counterexample to the hollow political posturing of Trump’s proposed [National Garden of American Heroes](#), and as an illustration of how future monuments can treat history with fitting complexity.

As a monument to losers, Katchadourian’s work is emphatically antiheroic, perversely celebrating political oblivion, while also provocatively conjuring alternate realities in which the losers were victorious. Katchadourian has described it as “a view of the country’s collective political road not taken”, and has explained that her strategy is to “point to history in order to point to this present moment, and the history we are about to make.” As a monument to alternate realities, it is a prompt to consider missed opportunities as well as averted catastrophes, all of which can inform decisions we make today. To learn from the past requires both historical knowledge and negative capability.

The Monument to the Unelected is actually a monument to responsibility. As impressive as that may be, it doesn’t come with any guarantees. Whether responsibility will be victorious – or Katchadourian’s monument will become a memorial – will be decided by all Americans on November 3, 2020.

Organized by a consortium of arts organizations including the Grand Central Art Center and the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art, the Monument to the Unelected can currently be viewed at locations including 896 S. Oakwood St., Orange, CA and 2506 North 13th Street, Phoenix, AZ.

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I am a critic and artist, most recently the author of "You Belong to the Universe: Buckminster Fuller and the Future" and "Forged: Why Fakes Are the Great Art of Our..."

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