

Sandow Birk



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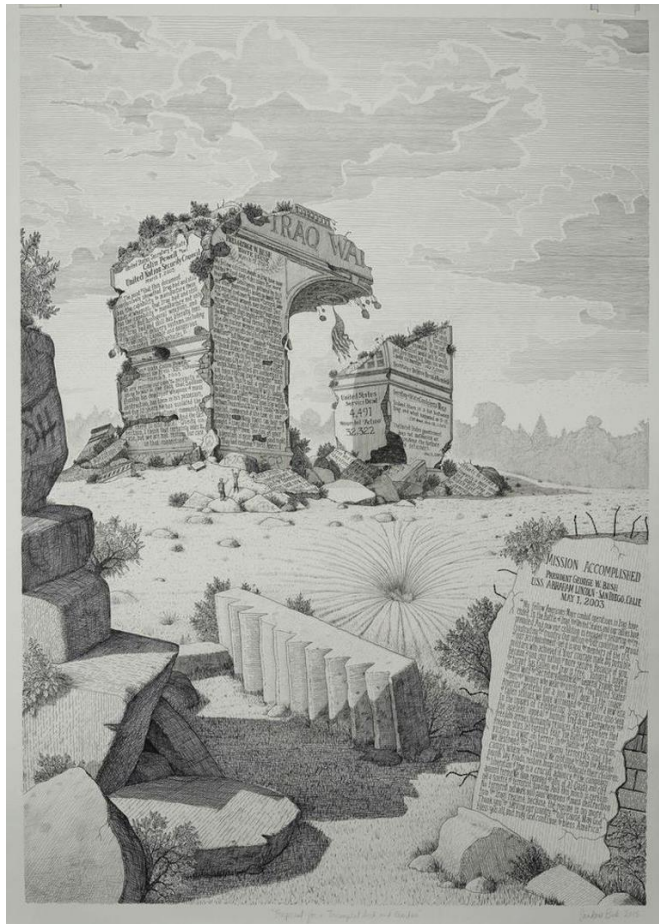
Sandow Birk: Imaginary Monuments

By Shotgun Reviews
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In the early 16th century, Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I hired Albrecht Dürer to create an elaborate, 11-by-9-foot multi-block woodcut of an imaginary monument. Each column and ornament in Dürer's *Triumphal Arch* (c. 1526) symbolized one of the emperor's personal or political accomplishments. It was a wildly successful piece of nationalist propaganda. In his latest show at Catharine Clark Gallery, Sandow Birk presents thirteen new large-scale ink drawings and two direct gravure etchings modeled on Dürer's *Triumphal Arch*. In each drawing and etching, Birk features at least one iconic, politically charged text and a monumental structure that symbolizes its legacy—especially its unintended social or economic ramifications. Like Dürer's *Triumphal Arch*, Birk's *Imaginary Monuments* are immaculate and wonderfully detailed, but their message is far more complex.

Birk's monuments are imaginary not only because they can never exist (their fanciful architecture precludes their realization), but also because they illustrate an American social imaginary; they feature texts that give the nation its ideological form. These texts include: the first letter sent by Christopher Columbus to Ferdinand and Isabella in 1493, which describes New World treasures as ripe for exploitation¹; the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in which Mexico cedes much of the land that now comprises the American Southwest²; and the "Mission Accomplished" speech of 2003 in which President George W. Bush announces the end of major combat operations in the Iraq War.³ The so-called victories that these texts document have been deployed to bolster an American myth: that the United States is an invincible land of wealth and opportunity. Birk gives these texts their due weight—their monuments are heavy blocks or pillars of stone—but also reminds viewers of the immense bloodshed and injustice

that haunts them. Each monument is marred and defaced, and surrounded by symbols of its text's complex history: burning crosses, electric fences, and tattered flags. Birk's *Proposal for a Monument to Christóbal Colón* (2015) is especially poignant; a droplet of bright red blood trickles down a globe, from the northernmost point of Canada to the southern tip of Chile. This is the only instance of color in the show.



Sandow Birk. *Proposal for a Triumphal Arch and Garden*, 2015; ink on paper; 60 x 42 in. Courtesy of Catharine Clark Gallery.

While some of Birk's symbols criticize a social imaginary, others illustrate opportunities for redemption and change. The graffiti that covers many of the crumbling monuments cites resonant sentiments from activist movements. In *Proposal for a Monument to the NYPD* (2015), for example, the phrases "I can't breathe," "Cops kill," and "Black Lives Matter," are scrawled over the chipped lettering of the NYPD Patrol Guide, which outlines situations that sanction the use of deadly force by police.⁴ If official proclamations written in stone fall to ruins, perhaps unsanctioned movements

can succeed where they failed. Sandow Birk's *Imaginary Monuments* are by no means nationalist propaganda, but rather a call for the critical consideration of the pillars of our society.

Bryndis Hafthorsdottir is a freelance writer based in San Francisco and Iceland. She is currently pursuing a Master's degree in Visual and Critical Studies at California College of the Arts.

***Sandow Birk / Imaginary Monuments* is on view at Catharine Clark Gallery, in San Francisco, through January 2, 2016.**

Notes

1. Christopher Columbus, "Epistola Christofori Colom...de insulis Indie supra Gangem," The Gilder Lehrman Collection, April 1493, <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/sites/default/files/inline-pdfs/t-01427.pdf>
2. Treaty of Peace, Friendship, Limits, and Settlement With the Republic of Mexico, U.S.–Mexico, Feb. 2, 1848, <https://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=llsl&fileName=009/llsl009.db&recNum=975>
3. Jarrett Murphy, "Text of Bush Speech," CBS News, May 1, 2003, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/text-of-bush-speech-01-05-2003/>
4. "NYPD Patrol Guide," <http://www.nyc.gov/html/ccrb/html/nypd-patrol-guide/nypd-patrol-guide.shtml>