© Liane Lang – *Grand Gesture*

Liane Lang

Monumental Misconceptions

At first glance, Liane Lang's epic photographs appear to be of people standing or lying in various poses beside massive carved monuments in a former Communist country. From languid maidens resting on a huge bronze sculpture to what seems to be a group of melancholy women grieving at an unnamed tomb, these are far removed from the ubiquitous tourist shot. Although visitors to the park often stand in front of these massive sculptures, using them as a dramatic backdrop for their travel shots, their relationship to the monuments is rarely articulated or explored in visual form. The artist mentions that the curator Alexa Czismadia "notes that people don't know how to behave toward them so they pose for photographs." Lang explains: "This is a sort of default interaction we have with objects. The park makes a point not to treat them as art works, visitors can climb the sculptures if they like (and can manage it)." Adopting a more reflective approach, the London based artist Lang attempts to work with the sense of history embedded in these monuments to social realism, and her constructed images take on an entirely different relationship to memory and location.

Lang was recently offered a residency in Budapest to take a series of photographs in the area. As her oeuvre has previously included juxtaposing fictive human figures in similar constructed landscapes, she continues her practice in another site of largely forgotten heroes. In fact, the "models" in these images are not real—Lang meticulously constructs life-like figures that she carefully places alongside existing objects. She explains, "There are no actual people in the photographs, only latex sculptures." By juxtaposing her "unreal" bodies alongside huge statues from the past, she calls attention to the construction of ideals, the nascent clash of ideologies and engenders an imaginary but productive conflation of the past with the present.

Lang was invited by the Hungarian curator Alexa Czismadia to make work in the Memento Sculpture Park, a public space on the outskirts of Budapest. When asked about her first encounter with the monuments, the artist "found them initially puzzling and in some cases comical." For a British subject, the fictive narratives surrounding these giant remnants of the former Communist era are different to those shared by local people. "The visitors to the park are, significantly, mainly not Hungarians but tourists or locals taking tourists to the park. Hungarians are not that interested in visiting the park. The sculptures have now been far out of town in a suburban field for twenty years, so many people won't even remember where they once stood," Lang explains. She found the huge monuments monolithic in more ways than one; "I found out more about them as I was working with them. Scaling a twenty-foot giant and holding on to a rifle butt to stop yourself from being blown off a ladder makes you engage with an object in a different way. That said, the totalitarian sculptures are not in themselves complex or multi-layered, ambiguities emerge accidentally or through changing them." Lang produces remarkable encounters between her own and the historic sculptures. In Bird of Prey a bronze eagle grasps a decapitated hand in its fearsome beak, its talons gripping an iron bar. Although Lang has only temporarily placed this small limb here, it's as if this trace of a vulnerable human will be held, trapped by a greater power throughout eternity. The artist revivifies our relationship with the colossus, inviting the viewer to draw on their knowledge of not only Soviet ideology but also enduring Greek myths. In Threat of Peace, muscular stone figures carry a coffin shaped stone. Like Hercules they strain under its colossal weight, burdened forever with their onerous task. Underneath the memorial Lang has carefully placed a crouching woman, as if she is acknowledging the sculpture's weight of tremendous sadness, yet her posture also suggests that the hyperbolic gestures of the four groaning male statues is ludicrous, overblown and absurdly extravagant for our post-Communist era. As an outsider, Lang acknowledges that she has a different relationship to these monuments to people who have lived in a socialist state.

The process of making these photographs is arduous and time consuming. Using her friends as models, she says, "The casting process of making the sculptures takes weeks and much material and equipment," so she had to finish her human props before she left for Hungary. She then had had four weeks in Budapest to take all the images. She tends to insert female models rather than men, raising questions about the relationship women had with what was undeniably a very masculine, militarised state. In addition, as elsewhere in the world, there are fewer sculptures of either mythical or actual women. She noticed, "There were a vanishingly small number of female characters present in the Communist sculptures and the ones that are there are, as usual, allegorical. The starting point for my intervention was contrast, a small, human scale, seemingly warm figure nestling against the monolith."

What is remarkable about Lang's work is that she can combine the irreverent, and playful with a sense of melancholy associated with oppressive authority. In Memorial (Lajos Kossuth) a female figure wearing sensuous red silk stands in front of a huge stone monument. It is if we are seeing an outdoor stage; the grandiloquent gesture of the bronze statue pointing a finger heavenwards on top of the stone edifice resembling operatic grandeur. As in Greek tragedy, the scene is dramatic yet also incorporates a post-modern questioning of pomposity and arbitrary authority. The artist's women often seem to take on

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© Liane Lang – *Support Groupe*

the role of a silent chorus, responding to these giant megaliths as if they were taciturn, impassive gods. Lang stresses that there is a slightly different emphasis, however in her current work. "I have made several works in the past using mythological characters, particularly Galatea, the sculpture that comes to life. The figures in the Budapest series are much more contemporary, maybe even a bit bourgeois." There is something solemn and dramatic about their poses, reminiscent of the potent images of the mothers who protest in Latin American squares about the disappeared.

In Waking the Dead, a severed arm is poised on top of a magnificent carved marble dress, the limb's subdued pinkness contrasting with the cold stone and the iconic likeness of a woman placing a hand on her face, as if she is silencing herself, suppressing something unbearable and, therefore, unspeakable. In Girls, two of Lang's beautiful young women lie on the ground in front of a huge pair of caressing angels, their solid bronze wings forever stiff. Is one of the girls partly hiding behind or comforting the other? Is she hanging on or protecting her silent friend? Placing the bodies underneath the angels, their frozen look of sexual abandonment revealing their oblivion to worldly matters, we are reminded of the visual vocabulary associated with certain poses and which gestures have become normative in public places. One of the girls also has a blissful look on her face but she seems so much more quotidian—not a mythical figure but someone much closer to us mortal viewers. This clever juxtaposition emphasises how the unyielding corporeality of the monuments cannot be disassociated from the bathos of a contemporary visit and how complicated the responses to socialist nostalgia found in this rural setting can be. When asked about the significance of the statues, Lang says, "It would be very sad if they were destroyed, though I think that the period of Communist iconoclasm has now passed. To paraphrase Ernö Marosi, the Communist monuments have entered purgatory and their way to artistic and historical significance will be via their rarity value."

In Eternal Companion Lang places two hands on a sculpture, their tender gestures imbue the clichéd objects with a generous pathos, bringing what has been abstracted closer to us, subtly modulating the seated bronze woman's wistful aura of remembrance. In photographs taken in the Kerepeszi Cemetery, again, the weight of history is subverted by the intimate, sensual positioning of Lang's inanimate bodies alongside carved memorials, encounters which might or might not be ironic but which retain a curious, seductive optimism. These are affecting works that simultaneously value and question the role of monuments and the ways in which human beings commemorate and cling on to the past. In The Dog a gentle stone hound lying at the foot of his headless master seems to be looking at a decapitated head that Lang has adroitly placed amongst the green ivy. The sleeping countenance is not shocking but rather assumes the role of a solid ghost, the body part is both out of place but at the same time seems to belong to this overgrown corner of the graveyard. There is something uncanny, or as Freud would say, "Das Unheimliche", about Lang's ingenious juxtapositions. The neglected memorial to an unnamed soldier with his carved stone greatcoat is made strange, "unhomely", but Lang also acknowledges the residue of pathos associated with such sentimental memorials. The "uncanny", often described as the "return of the repressed", is unsettling because the boundaries between what is alive and dead are left deliberately unclear. The uncanny object remains puzzling, disconcerting because its status can't easily be located or fixed. The art critic Hal Foster describes it as an instance when the "past and present become confused," when a "fracturing, splitting, or doubling of subjectivity" occurs. This is exactly what happens when Lang places her uncannily human bodies next to these idealised representations of mythical or socialist figures. The contiguity of two different ways to represent the human body invites imaginative deconstruction of the visual language associated with Eastern European communism, what Jacques Derrida

© Liane Lang – *Runners*

© Liane Lang – *Tread*

would describe as "utterance 'always already' invested with meaning". Lang often makes video animations where, in one sequence, her latex models spew out an abundance of black silk—an endless stream of sorrowful bile from their open mouths. It is difficult to imagine a more perfect example of the uncanny, the potent nexus of a dead body, inert cultural memory and what seems resolutely alive, resistant to cliché; alert and cognisant. She alerts us to what is already invested with meaning, but then re-imagines our relationship with the shared aesthetic and political history we partially recognise but are barely conscious of. As Lang describes, "I think of myself as an animator and in that sense my work is always primarily concerned with the object. The readings that emerge should therefore emerge from the object, be informed by it. That is why the pictures are not directly commenting on the role of women or the post-communist condition etc, rather in the juxtaposition of objects, which have strong social and political context."

Astonishingly, although this recent series consists only of still images, the artist appears to make sentient the huge figures and her own sculpted bodies by including them both in the scene, even though here she doesn't use stop-frame animation. In doing so, Lang encourages us to be active viewers, pondering on the role of history and memory rather than acquiescing recipients of what seems immutable, burdensome. Her compelling work is a salient reminder that we can revere and encourage the dialogic rather than the monolithic.

Text By Siobhan Wall

Liane Lang photographs from the series Casts will be soon available on EYEMAZING Editions.

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