

Sophie von Hellermann

Monumental

Opening: Friday, 26 January 2024, 6–9 pm

Exhibition: 27 January – 09 March 2024

"Monumental" is a term commonly associated with impressive buildings such as monuments, which serve to commemorate specific individuals or events. However, monuments go beyond their commemorative function and convey overarching messages, often propagating the prevailing ideas of influential figures from specific historical periods. They have a significant socio-political impact, portraying the respective individuals as heroic figures when placed on pedestals.

In recent decades, the perception of monuments and the associated heroization has undergone significant changes. There has been a rise in protests and discussions surrounding monuments that honor former colonial rulers or other controversial politicians and entrepreneurs. The imagery of historical figures being forcefully removed from their pedestals has become widespread worldwide. Equestrian statues, large busts of intellectuals and notable personalities, as well as bronze or marble statues, adorn and shape the urban landscape. However, we often pass by them without contemplating who or what is being commemorated.

Contemporary society no longer focuses on constructing a national memory through "positive identification". Instead, memorials are utilized to commemorate moments of historical terror, etching them into the collective memory through "negative identification". The current debates surrounding memorials are characterized by conflicting demands. On one hand, history should not be erased, and no new heroic sculptures should be erected. On the other hand, controversial sculptures from the past remain standing in public spaces, while no new statues are erected to honor individuals who could be positively revered in present times.

"Monumental" is also the title of Sophie von Hellermann's third solo exhibition at Galerie Wentrup. In this exhibition, the artist invites us to explore her thoughts on the theme of monuments, creating a park-like atmosphere that stretches across the gallery walls. The walls are painted with landscapes, and large-format canvases depicting monument motifs are installed within them. Von Hellermann skillfully connects current events with classical mythology and literature, creating complex narratives that blend imagination and reality both stylistically and thematically. She describes her works as "fleeting dream images," a quality that is reflected in her painting style. Using pure pigment and broad brushstrokes on unprimed canvas, her paintings exude a sense of weightlessness.

One of her works, titled *Peace* (2024), is painted in yellow-golden pastel tones and depicts a marching angel. This piece alludes to the peace monument (Friedensdenkmal) erected in Munich at the end of the 19th century. The angel portrayed is not a traditional Christian angel, but rather a representation of Nike, the Greek goddess of war and peace. In her right hand, she holds an olive branch as a symbol of peace, while in her left hand, she holds the Palladion, an image of the goddess Athena, who symbolizes battle and wisdom. Von Hellermann's focus is on the motif of peace, rather than the triumph of one country over another. The Angel of Peace in her painting serves as a contemporary memorial.

In another painting titled *Das Marmorbild* (The marble statue, 2024), von Hellermann explores the concept of monuments in a broader sense, delving into the realms of literature and mythology. Inspired by Joseph von Eichendorff's romantic novella of the same name from 1819, she portrays the moment of encounter between the young protagonist, Florio, and a seemingly alive Venus statue by a pond at night. Eichendorff's novella draws from Western mythology, specifically the story of Pygmalion from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, where an artist from Cyprus falls in love with a statue he has created. Pygmalion's statue appears to have a life of its own, making it a myth of the incarnation of an image and a founding myth of autonomous artwork.

Sophie von Hellermann (*1975 in Munich) currently lives and works in London and Margate. She is a Professor of Painting at the State Academy of Fine Arts in Karlsruhe.

Von Hellermann has held solo exhibitions at various prestigious institutions, including Turner Contemporary, Margate, GB | Kunstverein Hannover, DE; Neuer Aachener Kunstverein, DE | Kunstverein Konstanz, DE | Le Consortium, Dijon, FR; and Saatchi Gallery, London, GB.

In 2022, she was commissioned to create a site-specific painting for the interior of Schloss Freienwalde. Her works are currently on display in the group exhibition "50 Paintings" at the Milwaukee Art Museum.

She has also participated in group exhibitions at notable venues such as Hayward Gallery, London, GB | Elmhurst Art Museum, US | Dortmunder Kunstverein, DE | Bonner Kunstverein, DE | Kunsthalle Bielefeld, DE | The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, US | Tate Britain in London, GB; Centre Pompidou, Paris, FR; and Museum van Hedendaagse Kuns, Antwerpen, BE.

Works by Sophie von Hellermann can be found in the collections of the Berger Collection in Hong Kong, HK | Collection of Edison Cheng, Hong Kong, HK | Glenbow Museum, Calgary, CA | Hall Art Foundation, North Adams, Massachusetts, US | Los Angeles County Museum of Art in Los Angeles, US; Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase, New York, US | Rachofsky Collection, Dallas, US | RISD Museum in Rhode Island, US | Saatchi

Collection in London, GB | Wemhöner Collection, Berlin, DE | Start Museum, Shanghai, CN | The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, US | X Museum in Beijing, CN; and Zabłudowicz Collection in London, GB.