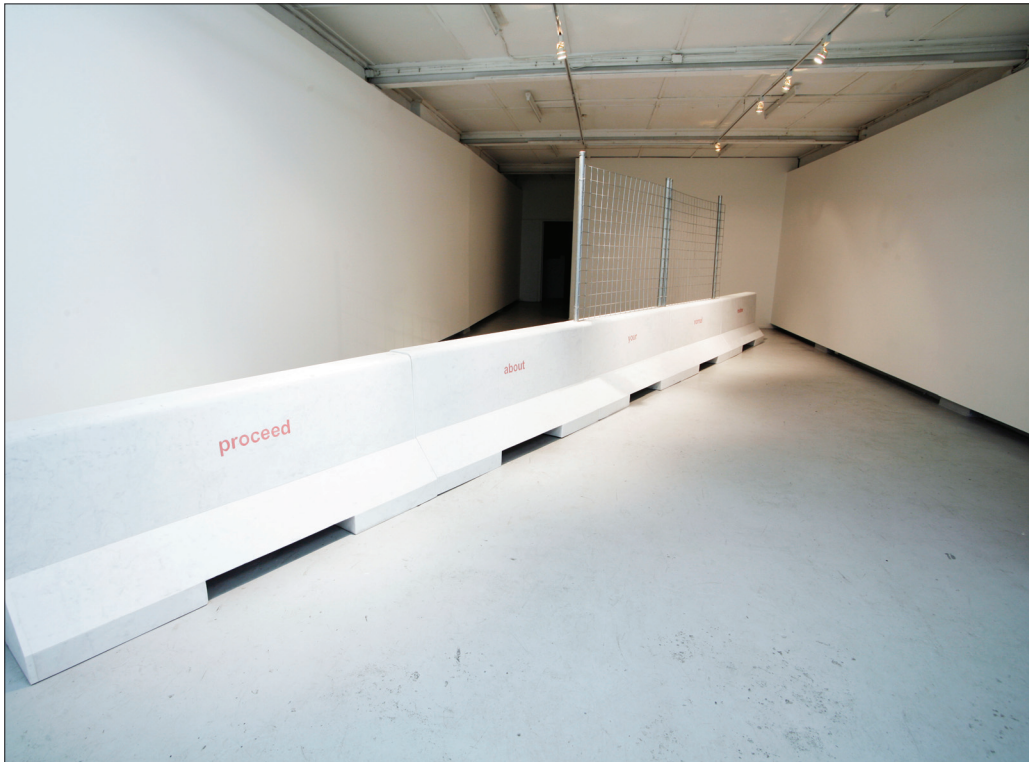


The failing wall



Set in stone *Seton seeks to break down the barriers of modern times*

A contemporary sculptor raises a marble monument to APEC



When do temporary powers become permanent? And is the first step in that process their acceptance? They're the questions Alex Seton's new show asks, by recreating the provisional barrier erected during APEC in an immortal medium – marble.

Dissecting the Chalkhorse space at an odd angle, the barricade seems pointless, impotent. It's threatening, but also arbitrary. "There were all sorts of things showing that the barricade at APEC wasn't actually maintaining control zones," says Seton, who returned from a residency in China to find his home city walled

in. "And the question then became 'who is it trying to keep out?'" By removing even the pretence of utility, the work heightens the propagandistic value of the structure to the point where it subverts itself. Realised in marble, its menace is reduced to "mere power".

Some time ago Seton became interested in what marble signified as a material, and as his artistic practice progressed and became more assured, the material has become a signifier of his own. "People have a view that there's a hierarchy of artistic material, and marble sits on top, for whatever reason. It may be because of its association with great or allegedly great classical sculpture, but certainly when I present my new media or photography work alongside the sculpture, people see them as 'lesser' art for whatever reason, and I like to play with that expectation."

He's dismissive of the amount of preparation involved ("a lot of sanding and polishing"), and is not forthcoming about his clear ability as an artisan, but marble is a notoriously labour intensive and difficult medium to work in. It's also extremely expensive: just the raw materials of Panoply cost more than \$15,000.

The unavoidable classical association in Seton's work often crops up in unexpected ways. His work Standing

Mannequin Target is a white marble replica of a computerised, human-shaped shooting target that the SAS and army use for shooting practice. It has no arms in its original form, because shots to the extremities are not lethal, and therefore not worth collecting as data. Transformed into stone, this strange object becomes a discreet torso the recalls a toppled Venus De Milo.

"Seton's work captures the anxieties we face"

The title of the show, Panoply, also resonates with antiquity. "The word panoply comes from the ancient Greek [*pan-o-plia*], which means a full set of armour," says the artist. "It was a trophy of battle. So for example in Sophocles' play *Ajax*, Ajax becomes enraged when Achilles' armour is awarded to someone else. I wanted to invoke that double meaning of an comprehensive collection and a military display."

Ordinance has featured before in Seton's work. One of his finest sculptures is a dual-sided marble block, one side of which is a meticulously realised façade of a Le Corbusier apartment block, the other the blunt, lethal face of a Claymore mine. It's

an original, articulate statement of the connection between forms of state violence: war on the one hand, social engineering on the other, both expressed in their latent form. Panoply, however, is less nuanced in the political statement that it makes, showing Seton's unrepentant belief in the power of the transgressive.

There's a satirical intent as well, found in the miniature red and green barricades (made from marble and resin) threaded with Popsicle sticks. The title is an imperative: Please do not lick the artwork. Its statement about the populace is stark: they're not just apathetic about infringements on freedom, but positively lapping them up.

Confronted with the threat of political violence (and the different kind of political violence that springs up in response to it), the question raised most often in contemporary art practice, and that Seton raises explicitly, is "what does this say about us?" It's a telling phrasing, that having highlighted the dangers of "us versus them" thinking, the artist still phrases his theoretical terrain in those terms. It's important for artists to exercise their "civic duty", as Seton calls it, interrogating the power structures and the shifting means of societal control that are so much a feature of our times. But when the concentration is solely on threats of the internal kind, the shadow cast, that civic duty can start to look like narcissism.

That terrorism in its modern form could itself be the product of forces that are themselves oppressive (and antithetically opposed to art) is an idea that's explored much more tentatively. Perhaps fears that trying to realise this kind of an Other is an inherently compromised or even racist project gives pause, or there are fears it would be politically expedient for the wrong people. But too often, its absence feels like a failure of imagination, or a lack of curiosity.

The scale and aesthetic quality of Seton's work move it beyond dogmatism, and the carefully chosen subjects in his new media work capture the bewildering anxieties we face. Misadventure is a series of five photos of a man trying to put a bottle of water into one of the taped-up bins that were such a feature of APEC. The bottle drops to the ground, and the anonymous figure ends up just placing the bottle on top of the plastic-shrouded container, already negotiating this bizarre negation of the every day as though it's routine. We are surveilling the whole process.

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