

MEMORIAL (COLLAPSE)

Ledelle Moe

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Paula Crawford

We are conscious of our duty as fulfillers—at the same time we are faced with the unavoidable task of critical communication within a world which is empty and is not less full of injustices, punishments and sufferings because it is empty—and we feel also the responsibility for reawakening the old dreams which sleep in statues of stone in the ruined ancient monuments, in the wide-stretching silence in planetary plains, in dense primeval forests, in rivers which roar like thunder.

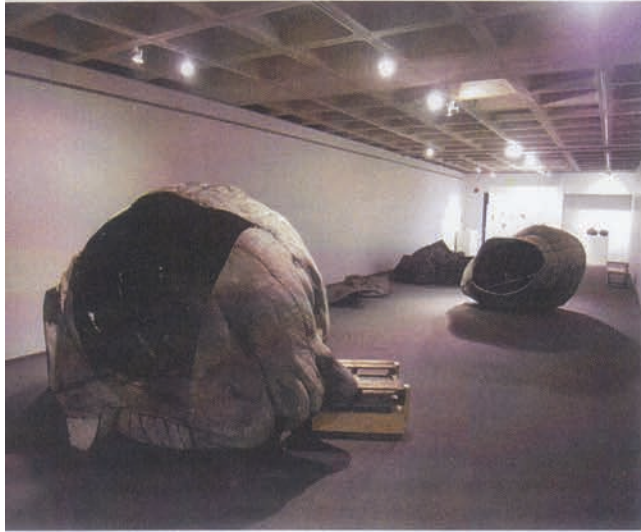
-Pablo Neruda¹

It is the immensity of their sheer mass that registers first. They have filled the gallery space. No, displaced it, like objects dropped into a glass of water. These colossal concrete human heads, whose cheeks rest peacefully on the floor, as if asleep, seem to be born from a violent and forgotten history. In fact, they were welded, fastened, and poured into existence by South African sculptor Ledelle Moe, and then assembled on site.

At almost human height, even on their sides, Moe's heads are monumental in scale but devoid of pomposity. There is a pervasive sense of history and of loss when one confronts this work, as if another time and place have collapsed, leaving this massive relic, which still holds its humanity. The elephant hide-like concrete skin that Moe has scored and rubbed with oil is visceral, full of its own past, confined by its own weight. Part corpse, part fallen monument, the heads are hollow, almost enterable, like caves. The steel armatures reveal themselves as skeletons or Frankenstein grafts, but also as the innocent bones of architecture. This web of contradictory impulses forms Moe's visual rhetoric—a balancing act between animal and mineral, figure and environment, and ultimately pathos and logos.

In his book *The Shape of a Pocket*, art writer John Berger argues that we have been disconnected from the visual, describing our postmodern reality as a spectacle—a "game that nobody plays and everybody can watch."² "Imagine, suddenly, the substantial material world (tomatoes, rain, birds, stones, melons, fish, eels, termites, mothers, dogs, mildew, salt water) in revolt against the endless stream of images which tell lies about them and in which they are imprisoned!"³ It is from this mendacious stream, which also feeds us violence and starvation, that Moe pulls her source images and begins their transformation into matter.

Moe's work evokes images of war, loss, and human suffering, the kind that daily cross our television screens and populate our newspapers. The fall of the Twin



left *Memorial (Collapse)*, 2005
 installation view
 Anderson Gallery, Des Moines, IA

right *Disgraced Monuments*, 1993,
 directed by Mark Lewis and Laura Mulvey,
 Monumental pictures, Channel Four, Canada.
 Film stills from the documentary showing the
 destruction of Soviet Monuments.

previous *Memorial (Collapse)*, 2005
 installation view
 Anderson Gallery, Des Moines, IA

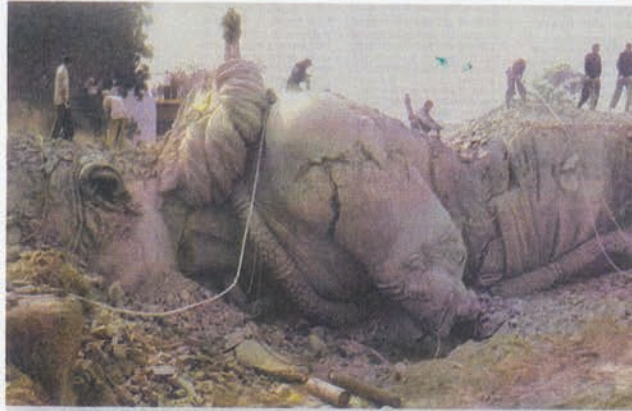
Towers, the toppled statue of Saddam Hussein, and the dusty explosions in Afghanistan of the giant Buddhas, along with so many other images of human collapse and disarray. If such pictures as they come into our living rooms and onto our breakfast tables are intangible, vanishing as quickly as they arrive, Moe reissues them as disturbingly material, reified in thousands of pounds of concrete and steel, and blurred by the struggle of their formation.

Moe's imagery and her impulse to convert the insubstantial into solid matter may be connected to her own history as a white South African, born into apartheid and raised in the complexities of the country's political climate. In a sense, Moe's South Africa was a place in which the "real" was collapsing in on itself and the ideal was becoming material truth. She speaks of "permanence and impermanence, strength and vulnerability" as constant themes in her work, and makes an explicit connection between iconic strength and the magnitude of its collapse.

For one of her heads, Moe took from the Internet a news photo of a young man killed in a recent massacre in Liberia. "I was intrigued," she recalls, "by the gentleness and peace on his face, and the relationship of this to the brutality of his murder." Her initial impulse was to somehow create a memorial to this anonymous victim, without objectifying him. But in the specifics of one man's political tragedy Moe uncovers the inevitable repetition of human folly, violence, and suffering. The portrait is personal, gentle and deeply human. But it is also as anonymous as a

left *Memorial (Collapse)*, 2005
Installation view
Anderson Gallery, Des Moines, IA

right *A Fallen Giant*, Agence France-Presse
The New York Times, January 9, 2003
Front page article showing the collapse of a
108-foot sculpture of the Lord Krishna in India.



A Fallen Giant

Indian laborers used drills yesterday to break up a 108-foot statue of the Hindu god Lord Krishna that fell Monday as it neared completion near New Delhi. A poor foundation was blamed for the collapse, in which three workers were killed. The statue had been under construction for six years.

landscape. This contradiction occurs in the dedicated transformation of image into solid matter. For in a sense, when Moe rematerializes her images, they become singular, static, and again of the world.

This is an interesting paradox. On the one hand, the emotional force of Moe's work relies heavily on this sense of the specific. Each hand-wrought surface is as unique and revealing of its history as the craggy face of someone who has lived hard. On the other hand, any one of these giant heads seems to stand in for the many. The carved features are precise enough to point to identity without fixing it. And perhaps, because Moe's subjects are just anonymous enough (the young man killed in Liberia), we don't bring to them pre-inscribed narratives, as with heroic statues found in parks or presidents carved into mountains. Indeed, they offer themselves as open tableaux to which we bring our own mythologies.

One is neither seduced nor pushed away by this work. It neither advertises itself nor indulges in cheap emotional manipulation. Rather, one stands among these massive forms, lets them enter the spleen as well as the head, and acknowledges the magnitude of them.

Paula Crawford is the director of The Fine Arts Gallery at George Mason University.

1 The Nobel Prize in Literature 1971. Presentation Speech, December 13, 1971

2 Berger, John, *The Shape of a Pocket*, New York: Pantheon Books, 2001, pg. 13.

3 *Ibid.*, pg. 202.