

Monika Weiss

Nirbhaya

The Center of Polish Sculpture, Chapel Gallery

Curator: Weronika Elertowska

Monika Weiss is a prominent Polish-American artist who lives and works in New York, where she has been running her studio since 2001. In 1984–1989 she studied painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, obtaining a diploma in the studio of prof. Ryszard Winiarski and prof. Stefan Gierowski. Since 2011, he has been teaching at Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts, Washington University in St. Louis. Over the past twenty-five years, the artist developed a unique aesthetic language marked by profound emotional impact. Her artworks focus on the politics and poetics of memory, evoking histories that are omitted or erased from collective consciousness. In her realizations, the artist presents a woman's body, including her own, as a vehicle of memory and a potential site of transformation.

The exhibition at the Chapel Gallery is dedicated to Monika Weiss's latest project - the *Nirbhaya* monument. In addition to the three-dimensional model of the monument, the exhibition features also three large-scale drawings from *Dafne (for Nirbhaya)* series [2020], a drawing triptych *Sustenazo (Nosze)* [2010], from the collection of the Center for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle, as well as a series of nineteen short experimental films and related musical compositions created by the artist, under the joint title *Two Laments (19 Cantos)* [2015-2020].

Nirbhaya is a project whose seemingly most apparent inspiration is the India Gate, referring to the classicist architecture of the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, designed by the British architect Edwin Lutyens. Located in the most important and representative point of New Delhi, the building is dedicated to 70,000 Indian soldiers who died while serving in the British army during World War I and during 3rd British-Afghan war. Monika Weiss's sculpture, suggesting in its form these historical objects, expresses the artist's determined, feminist attitude. It is probably the first such monumental memorial dedicated to thousands of women who experience violence every day. The use of classical aesthetics, so eagerly used by great powers in the era of developing colonialism, forces us to broaden our reflection. The violent nature of the conquests by the former conquerors continues to be a current problem that we can still relate to everyday life. Ultimately, it is a work of art whose origins relate to the cruel murder of Jyoti Singh. The body of a raped, tortured and finally murdered young woman is juxtaposed with the body of a culturally colonized, destroyed and raped city, and the causes of this violence seem to be the same. Aggression is

always closely related to a sense of superiority and justified - depending on the needs - by gender, social status or geographical location.

The way in which the artist views the idea of commemoration is particularly important. Society and culture constantly remind us that experiencing rape is something shameful, something we should hide. We usually don't see people who experience violence of any kind as heroes, as those who resist, and yet their actions are undoubtedly heroic. Monika Weiss leaves us with a question about contemporary social roles and the resulting oppressiveness, and about the forgotten suffering, which does not receive the right to representation and commemoration.

Both in *Nirbhaya* and in the cycle *Two Laments (19 Cantos)* we find the form of Lament as a song that for the artist has a revolutionary potential. Lament as a form derives from ancient Greek funeral rituals that were dedicated to a deceased person and expressing regret for their departure. By evoking lament (train, mourning cry), the artist creates a monument to the right to mourn loss and a memorial to all those who are fighting violence. Therefore, if we consider the lamentation as revolutionary, *Nirbhaya* becomes a monument to revolutionists fighting for the rights of those who experience violence.

In Monika Weiss's project, the triumphal arch is resting on the ground, it becomes an ancient sarcophagus filled with water. The India Gate, losing its vertical heroic power, turns into a symbol of fluidity. *Nirbhaya* is also a project about the possibility of memory; about bending over a monumental form that no longer controls us.

An important part of the artist's project, which has been in development since 2015, is an ambisonic sound station. *Nirbhaya* will be presented in two venues - at the Center of Polish Sculpture in Oronsko and in the United States, thanks to a collaboration with the Streaming Museum in New York and production support from the Lamar Johnson Collaborative. *Nirbhaya*'s sketches and highlights were published in the latest issue of Centerpoint Now magazine, released on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the United Nations. The exhibition is summarized in a bilingual catalog to be published in July 2021, which includes an extensive essay by Griselda Pollock, winner of the 2020 Holberg Prize (University of Leeds, UK), and texts by Mark McDonald (The Metropolitan Museum of Art), Kalliopi Minioudaki (Athens), Meena Alexander (India/New York), and Buzz Spector (Washington University, New York).

Institutions involved in organizing: Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts, Washington University in St. Louis, Hyphen Hub in New York, and Harvestworks in New York, US Embassy in Warsaw. *Nirbhaya* exhibition was accompanied by panel discussions organized by The Center for Architecture & Design St. Louis at the Kranzberg Art Foundation, held in March and April 2021. The project will be fully realized if additional funding of **€3,000** is secured.