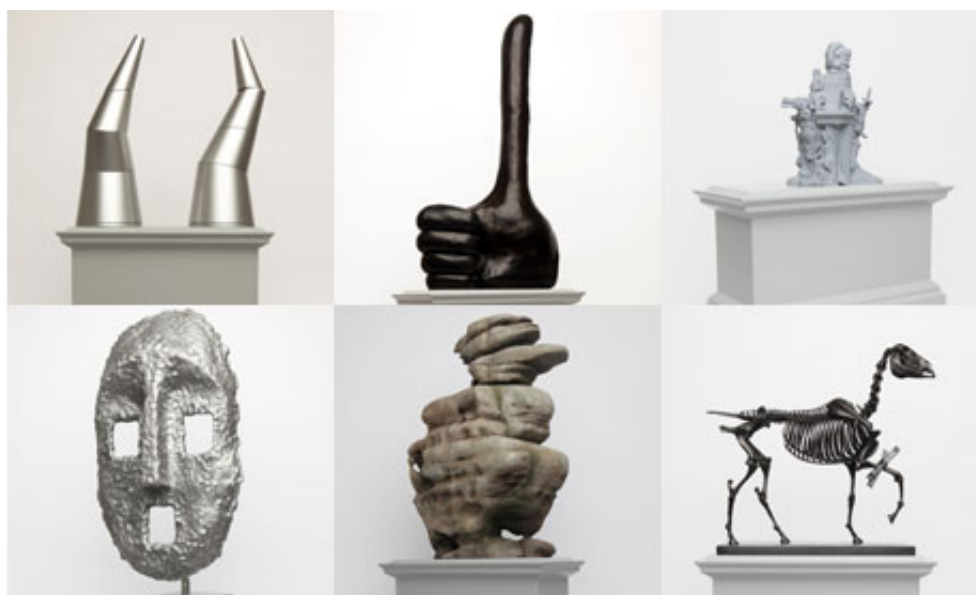


London's fourth plinth: the artists fighting the latest battle of Trafalgar

Models of the six shortlisted projects for Britain's most talked-about public sculpture commission go on show

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The fourth plinth shortlist

Trafalgar Square, London's most grandiose and theatrical public space, is at the moment enlivened by a sculpture of a vast, bright-blue cock. But the next temporary occupant of the square's fourth plinth—left vacant in the 19th century owing to lack of funds for a statue – could be anything, from a giant bronze thumbs-up to an exact replica of a rocky outcrop in Yorkshire.

Models of the six shortlisted projects for Britain's most talked-about public sculpture commission have gone on show to the public.

It is David Shrigley – a figure popular for his mordantly funny drawings, and shortlisted for this year's Turner prize – who is behind the thumbs-up.

The thumb itself is out of proportion to the rest of the hand, and would rise 10 metres high, echoing the phallic rise of Nelson's column. Shrigley said he hoped his optimistic gesture would become "a self-fulfilling prophecy": that the piece "would make Trafalgar Square, London, the UK and the world a better place. And it would be quite a cost-effective way of doing it.

"There's a certain language of civic sculpture, which is supposed to be austere and very formal," he said. "But there is something comic and peculiar about this, albeit that it's a celebratory gesture."

The sculpture would be given the antique patina of the older statues in the square, which include figures of generals Napier and Havelock, George IV and, to complete the trio of Britain's most loathed monarchs, Charles I and James II.

"I was interested in making something that formally fits in with the square but is a bit at odds with it," Shrigley said.

Since the inauguration of the fourth plinth project by the mayor's office in 2005 as a regular series of temporary commissions, the site – in the square's north-west corner, in front of the National Gallery's Sainsbury wing – has hosted works ranging from Marc Quinn's Alison Lapper Pregnant to Yinka Shonibare's Nelson's Ship in a Bottle. As time passes, the challenge is to come up with yet more original and striking ideas – and this time around, for the first time, a moving sculpture has been proposed.

The idea is from the New York-born British artist Liliane Lijn, the only woman on the shortlist. It is for two giant silver cones that will "dance" together, their movements controlled by a self-evolving computer programme. "I want people to identify with the relationship between the two objects," she said, "rather than the objects themselves."

Marcus Coates, a native Londoner, is the artist who has proposed the display resembling a great rocky outcrop – a precise replica of one of the gritstone formations of Brimham Rocks, in Yorkshire, which Henry Moore cited as an inspiration for his work. Having made a 3D scan of one of the formations, he hopes to cast it in resin and have it painted to mimic the precise patina of the stone. "The square is a theatre, a celebration of human progress and achievement," said Coates. "What excited me was to do something that celebrated the absence of the human." – something that at least purported to be unspeakably ancient, predating human history by millennia. The outcrop, he said, would become a kind of canvas on to which visitors to Trafalgar Square could project their own imaginations.

Mark Leckey is the other Londoner on the list. The winner of the 2008 Turner prize has offered a sculptural bouillabaisse of all the other statues in the square: a magpie's nest of swords, coats of arms, random limbs and Charles I's extravagant moustache (not unlike, as it happens, Leckey's own).

The most overtly political of the projects is Hans Haacke's Gift Horse – a riderless skeleton of a horse, which echoes the equestrian statue of William III that was originally planned for the plinth. Woven through the bones will be an electronic ribbon showing the live ticker of the London Stock Exchange. The most senior of the artists, born in Germany in 1936, he is perhaps the lineup's most established contender. A permanent sculpture by him has been installed in the Reichstag, in Berlin; and when he represented his nation at the Venice Biennale in 1993, he pickaxed up the marble floor of Germany's Nazi-era pavilion.

The lineup is completed by the Swiss Ugo Rondinone, whose aluminium-and-steel Moon Mask, seemingly inspired by ancient folk art, but of no one specific culture, would act as "an abstract sentinel facing out over the square".

The chosen works will be seen by 40,000 people a day – the number the mayor's office says pass through the square.

Two of the shortlisted projects will be selected early next year by a panel including the artist Jeremy Deller and Iwona Blazwick, director of the Whitechapel gallery. The chosen artists' works will be installed in the square in 2015 and 2016.

The models are on show to the public in the rocky church, Trafalgar Square, London, until 17 November.