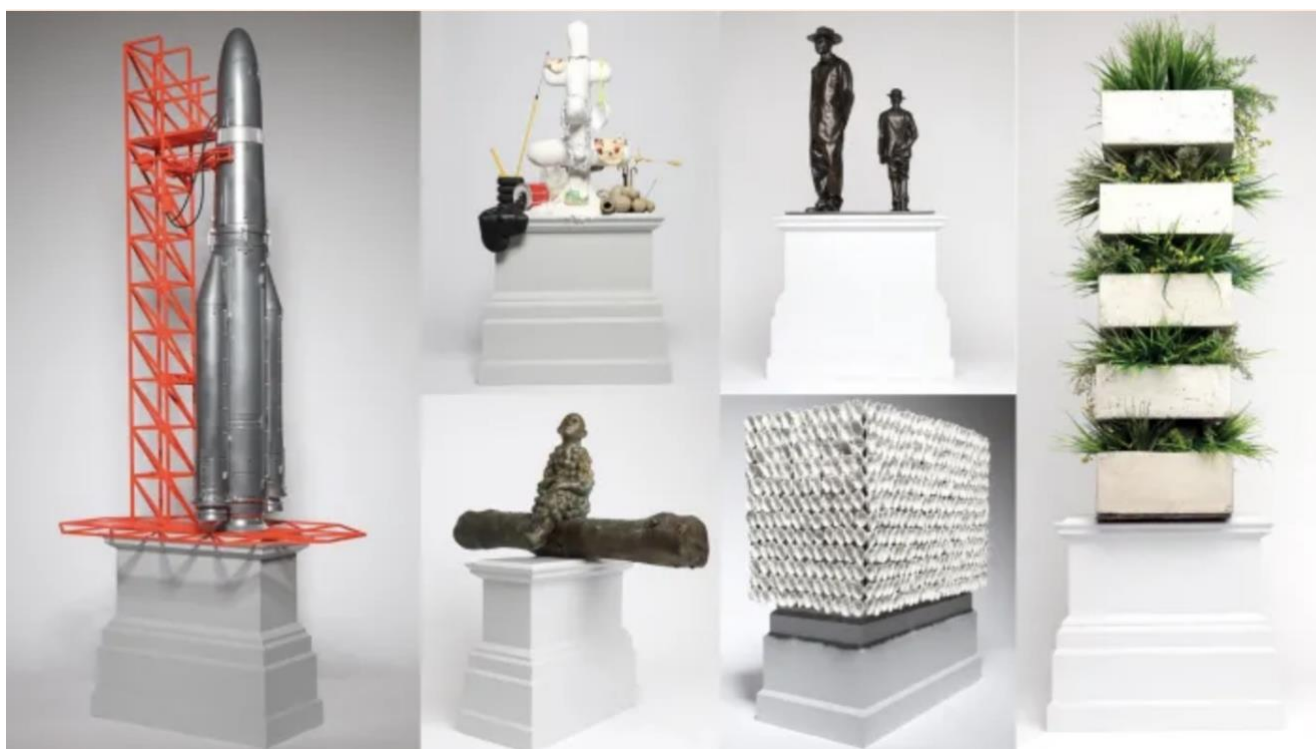


# Radical stirrings on the Fourth Plinth

Shortlisted works for the prestigious site in London's Trafalgar Square are politically charged and varying in quality



Clockwise, from left: Fourth Plinth proposals by Goshka Macuga, Nicole Eisenman, Samson Kambalu, Ibrahim Mahama, Teresa Margolles and Paloma Varga Weisz

Jackie Wullschläger | 22 JUNE 2021

The announcement on June 28 of the two Fourth Plinth sculptures for 2022 and 2024, chosen from a shortlist of six, will sail straight into the storm of Britain's culture wars. How could it not? Whatever occupies the temporary plinth in Trafalgar Square becomes the most visible sculpture in the country and, given the site, inevitably a statement about history and Britishness.

“The Cenotaph and the Last Post and all that stuff — there's no better way of forgetting something than by commemorating it,” says the smart-arse teacher Irwin in Alan Bennett's *The History Boys*. Few of us can name the permanent inhabitants of Trafalgar Square's first, second and third plinths, homages to royal and imperial power. (I had to look them up: they are George IV and generals Charles Napier and Henry Havelock, who both served in India.) But, at a moment when controversial statues are being removed or questioned — Edward Colston in Bristol, Cecil Rhodes in Oxford — and post-pandemic social values more widely reassessed, the fourth plinth installation, provisional, changing, challenging, an opportunity for an alternative sort of commemoration, really matters.

Acknowledging this, the judges, led by Ekow Eshun, have chosen mostly politically charged proposals. The models, currently displayed at the National Gallery and online, are however staggeringly varied in quality — in visual interest, conceptual intent, expressive scope.

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Antelope' by Samson Kambalu © James O Jenkins

Adopting the vocabulary of traditional memorial statues, Samson Kambalu's "Antelope" is more direct. Kambalu restages as sculpture a 1914 photograph taken in Nyasaland, now Malawi, of pan-Africanist preacher John Chilembwe and British missionary John Chorley. The pair were friends, so this is an image based on harmony, as well as radical stirring: Chilembwe has his hat on, defying a colonial rule forbidding Africans from wearing hats in the presence of white people. A year after the photograph, Chilembwe was killed leading a pro-independence uprising. Kambalu depicts Chorley life-size, Chilembwe much larger than life, asserting the right for his story, and those of unrepresented people across the former British empire, to be heard.

Kambalu, born in Malawi, is an Oxford professor. His first solo museum show, *New Liberia*, currently at Modern Art Oxford, features elephants robed in university academic gowns, while contextualising "Antelope" with further details about Chilembwe's rebellion. Kambalu is an idiosyncratic artist, infusing colonial record with a sense of the absurd.

"Antelope" is timely, answering not just Trafalgar Square's generals but Rhodes and Colston too. Spray-painted, scratched with graffiti, lying horizontal and defeated in a display case after being dragged from the dock, Colston's statue went on show this month at Bristol's M Shed Museum. In its transitional condition, it speaks of social division and historical atrocity. This is the debate coursing around commemorative statues now, to which Kambalu and Mahama add voice.

For visual imagination threaded with social commitment, these two black artists, also the youngest on the shortlist, are the only credible 2022/24 choices. Their competitors, a quartet of more established women artists in their fifties, with international careers, all disappoint.

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Black identity, inextricably tied to British history, concerns us all; transgender prostitutes don't. Across two decades, the Fourth Plinth standouts are those which shaped global icons from a questioning of Britain's relationship with the world: Yinka Shonibare's "Nelson's Ship in a Bottle" and Michael Rakowitz's "The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist", a bull made from date-syrup cans, recreating Iraq's Lamassu statues destroyed by Isis.

"Nelson's Ship" found an appropriate home at Greenwich's National Maritime Museum. Tate secured "The Invisible Enemy" but Rakowitz "wanted to complicate the idea of where my Lamassu reappearance belongs", and persuaded Tate, he told me, "to share custody of the Lamassu with an Iraqi institution, still to be determined (I have always hoped it would be the Mosul Museum). This agreement allows the Lamassu to continue to do its 'work' as a ghost, haunting a western city that went to war with Iraq and raising important and tense questions about repatriation, restoration and care . . . I am ecstatic."

A great sculpture has its own life, the provisional can become quasi-permanent in unexpected ways. That is the benchmark for the future of the Fourth Plinth.

**Shortlist Exhibition, National Gallery, London, to July 4, [nationalgallery.org.uk](http://nationalgallery.org.uk). Samson Kambalu, 'New Liberia', Modern Art Oxford, to September 5, [modernartoxford.org.uk](http://modernartoxford.org.uk)**