

firstdraft

Gallery 3

30 April 2023 – 14 May 2023

Public Art

Nick Breedon

Nick Breedon's solo exhibition *Public Art* interrogates the function and possibilities of public art in queer/trans/crip futurity. Monumental sculptures in bronze, aluminium and concrete act as propositional public artworks, or works about the field and culture of public art. Appropriating, and literally stealing materials from the canon of western monumental sculpture, *Public Art* draws from niche internet queer culture to explore modalities for representation, playing with the tension between visibility and safety; legibility, and intellectual accessibility. *Public Art* reimagines public art as a departure from neoliberal propaganda and instead as a tool and resource for collective affirmation, liberation, and solidarity.

Public Art is presented across Gallery 3 and the courtyard.

Some works included in *Public Art* will be scheduled for activation across 12:30pm-1:00pm daily or by request.

Special thanks to:

Kiera Brew Kurec, Firstdraft team and board of directors past and present; Cherie Schweitzer, Rory Moy, Lynda Roberts; Bianca Hester, Astrid Lorange, David Eastwood, Sarah Poulgrain, Tyza and Bree, Riana Head-Toussaint; Thom, Karam, Megan, Alex, Petra, Tanya, Naoko, Dan and the ENG Makerspace team; Laura Couttie and Zoe Theodore; Talia Smith, Nuala Furtado, Emily Parsons-Lord; Ev Ida Morris, Tara Heffernan, Mark Friedlander and Ellen, Pat and Miška; Rose, Ewen Coates; and Sab D'Souza.

Gallery 1
Wh0r3s 4eva
Curated by Katie Winten

Gallery 2
Act III: Love
(or what if this is love?)
Maissa Alameddine

Gallery 4
Far from heaven
Foong / McGrath

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Gallery 3 artworks: (clockwise from left)

For sales enquiries, please email
nbreedon@gmail.com

Fantasy Sword, 2022–2023

Hand cast, stolen brass 'love locks' (padlocks)
170 x 30 x 10cm

Vaccines Made Me Gay, 2020–2022

Patinated bronze
120 x 100 x 50cm

Woah I'm Kind of Hyper, 2022–2023

Custom etched and anodised hand machined
aluminium
70 x 10 x 50cm

Fountain, 2023

reinforced concrete, recirculating fountain
pump, unspecified fluid
170 x 120 x 120cm

Untitled (Key), 2023

steel casting mould with negative of
unauthorised MLAK keyform
16 10 x 2cm

Keys cast from the mould are available for self identifying crips/disabled people, trans people, queers, needle users, or anyone else who feels they would genuinely benefit from access to MLAK facilities. You are not required to prove your need. Please be conscious of the artist's labour and material in acquiring a key, it is not a souvenir. A key can be requested from staff or you can contact the artist on instagram at @nicebreeeze

Courtyard artworks:

Eternal Flame, 2020–2023

Bronze casting, custom plinth and gas
components, gas, fire, rage
70 x 10 x 50cm

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across 12:30pm-1:00pm daily or by request.

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Nick Breedon's practice incorporates iconography from popular culture, niche queer cultural artefacts and art history, in materials and techniques loaned from the canon of classical sculpture and traditional craft. Breedon's work explores the interplay of identarianism and visual internet culture under late-stage capitalism.

Nick is currently undertaking an MFA at University of New South Wales Art and Design and has exhibited in numerous solo and group gallery and institutional exhibitions, along with various public art projects.

Exhibitions include: *Bongs and Commodores*, Alaska Projects – Sydney; *A Lot of Luck*, Bus Projects – Melbourne; *Feelings*, Firstdraft – Sydney and West Space – Melbourne; *Sierpinski Mountain*, TCB art Inc. – Melbourne. Public art projects: *Monument to the People and Monotone Rainbow*, Testing Grounds – Melbourne; *Let's Get Metaphysical* – Splendour in the Grass Festival Arts Program. Group exhibitions: *I Will Tell You My Story*, UTS Gallery – Sydney; *Onside*, Casula Powerhouse – Sydney; *Big Numbers*, 55 Sydenham Road, Marrickville – Sydney; *On Hubris, Irony and Schadenfreude*, Lon Gallery – Melbourne; *Off Grid*, Blindside – Melbourne; and *Full Court Press*, Arterial Gallery – Sydney. Breedon has been a finalist in the Wyndham Art Prize, Blake Prize, Darebin Art Prize, Kate Derum & Irene Davies Awards for Small Tapestries, and Wangaratta Contemporary Textiles Prize. Breedon's work is featured in the collections of Artbank, City of Melbourne; and various private collections. Nick is co-host and co-creator of arts industry podcast Pro Prac.

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Written by **Tara Heffernan**

In 2022, dating app Tinder announced their Big Rainbow Project: a large rainbow monument that would be installed in a regional Australian town. Partly a nod to Australia's love of big, kitschy monuments, like the big pineapple and the big prawn, the project's aim was to 'symbolise inclusiveness, diversity, respect and pride for the LGBTIQ+ community and allies'.^[i] Speaking on the project, representatives of Tinder insisted on the virtues of visibility, reiterating in public statements the very real difficulties faced by LGBTIQ+ individuals living in communities where they feel pressured to conceal their identities for fear of retribution.^[ii] Indeed, representation matters. A sense of belonging and increased protections can stem from an active community. But what does it mean when such endeavours are backed by corporations worth billions of dollars? Pride is now thoroughly embraced by the market, while liberal institutions eagerly sap the last dregs of subversive potential from the label while boasting alignment with progressive politics. Indeed, the rainbow—present too on the pride flag—is an oppressively positive, homogenising symbol, so ubiquitous and generic that it perfectly harmonises with corporate aesthetics.^[iii] The omnipresence of the rainbow symbol seems to eclipse its real-world referent, as if there's no more natural rainbows left to behold. No nature and no freedom from "feelings" based solutions that do little to acknowledge the complex terrain of desire and the ambivalence of othered experience. Queerness has become another arm of the commodification of desire. It is this climate of declarative acceptance and marketised queer friendliness that Nick Breedon confronts. In an exhibition about public art, Breedon interrogates what public art can and can't do, challenging the distinctions between monuments and anti-monuments, art and activism, and the unproductive binarism of capitalist-driven liberal moral orthodoxy.

Their work incorporates puns, memes, populist political talking points and art history references. Militant and unyielding, yet refreshingly ambivalent, Breedon carries an ironic humour throughout. Case in point, *Eternal Flame* (2023) is a bronze cast of a hand flipping the bird. From the tip of the erect middle finger, a flame emerges. Importantly, it is directed toward *Statue of James Cook* in Hyde Park. It appeals to cliché—a fire inside coming out of the body in a rouge street gesture. The sculpture also serves as a commentary on the role of the traditional monument itself, acknowledging its status as a hard, solid symbol of power which presides over a space. Sometimes this power is obvious. Colonial monuments, for example, serve as overt reminders of violent colonial histories and the taking of land. However, there's room for ambiguity. Auguste Rodin's *Monument to Balzac* (1892-1897)—a cast of

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which stands proud and grotesque in the National Gallery of Victoria's sculpture garden—is an erect, phallic sculpture that aggressively asserts Honoré de Balzac deep intellectual command of nature and culture from its vantage point in curated green spaces.[iv] Like the Balzac monument (which was originally rejected by the Société des gens de lettres de France and deemed repulsive by critics), *Eternal Flame* embraces vulgar realism as a powerful affront to polite society.[v]

Another work that might recall the fragmented bodies of Rodin is *Vaccines Made Me Gay* (2022). This crude chest plate is inspired by a longstanding online conspiracy suggesting that vaccines cause autism, and a more recent myth perpetuated by QAnon insisting that Covid vaccines led to homosexual tendencies.[vi] Breedon's sculpture suffices as a self-reflexive rejoinder to a culture wars debate that doesn't fall back on liberal slacktivist tut tutting. Instead, Breedon deploys humour to troll the anti-authoritarian, homophobic, reactionary stance. The tee-shirt graphic recalls the campy, kitsch comic book superheroes of the past.[vii] But the chest is grotesque. Ribs protrude from within the "teeshirt" as flesh is rotting off the bone. Regardless of the real implications of the vaccine and the Covid-19 pandemic, debate around the vaccine and the figure of the antivaxxer became heavily morally coded. With this in mind, Breedon may be sneering at the rigidity of thought on both sides: the anti-vaxxers and the strict adherents of Covid-19 restrictions. Each extreme placed undue faith in rule-following (or breaking) as a means of preservation.[viii]

An ominous precursor to the Big Rainbow Project—and perhaps a darker, silent inspiration—was the removal or vandalism of monuments featuring colonial figures following George Floyd's murder in 2020. Exploitative company backing aside, simply erecting new monuments risks insisting on new confining strictures or painting dubiously broad strokes in the name of "representation". Indeed, progress is embedded in the ideology of capitalism. Gestures towards inclusivity and "equity" may be necessary and admirable, but they can also let people fall through the gaps of bureaucracy while maintaining the aura of benevolence. Breedon confronts this bureaucratic benevolence with *Untitled (Keys)* (2022). The work is a steel, gravity fed mould for casting copies of MLAK keys (Master Locksmiths Access Keys), that provides access to public bathrooms for disabled people. To obtain the key through the MLAK program, one must have documentation provided by a doctor regarding their status as disabled, and pay a fee.[ix] This financial and bureaucratic gatekeeping creates unnecessary barriers to access. *Untitled (Keys)* highlights the conditionality of "accessibility" and tests the possibilities of the art as a resource through the guerrilla circumvention of medical models of disability, and provides a radical reinterpretation of the term "Public Art".

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Breedon's project broaches the multiplicitous manifestations of public art and the symbolic weight of monuments, forging new ways of navigating or reshaping public spaces through artistic intervention. Continuing this exploration, *Fantasy Sword* (2022) pointedly appropriates existing public artworks. A cutting symbolic gesture, Breedon used bolt cutters to collect *love locks* from a public infrastructures and then melted them down to create a golden sword. 'Love locks' are typically padlocks that lovers inscribe with their initials and lock to a public fixture. The key is typically thrown away to symbolise their unbreakable attachment. Their legal status is somewhat contentious. Sometimes love locks are considered vandalism, but often, they have been embraced, and even protected as cute tourist attractions. Breedon highlights that this acceptance relies on an association with white cis-heteronormative love, regardless of the gender identity of those who participate in the trend.[x] Love locks personify "live, laugh, love" culture. You can imagine filter-enhanced images of the love locks on Pinterest or Instagram alongside bridal hair-inspo pics, or misty photographs of sun-dappled kittens in neutral-toned ceramic mugs. Implicit disdain for normies aside, the love lock as commitment ritual is dubious.[xi] Though it might attract those who aspire to trad life—of traditional marriage and family—it remains a rather impetuous act well suited to the narcissistic social-media habit of turning life events and relationships into wholesome props. Moreover, contemporary heteronormative relationships are often complicated by the competitive edge of social media and hook-up culture, and the general precarity of adult life.[xii] Therefore, these love locks might hold an intense amount of hope—a forceful investment in love despite the crushing pressure of contemporary culture. This weighted, psychic energy is forcefully re-appropriated in *Fantasy Sword* which conveys the cruelty, playfulness, and contradiction that all desiring subjects experience. The appropriation of others' desire—which covertly signals ownership and control in a new form—takes on the power vested in the original cutesy gesture.

Of course, the sword is an aggressive phallic symbol. It emerges in other works too, such as *Woah I'm Kinda Hyper* (2023), a gun composed of Monster energy drink cans. The work is, in part, a response to a meme. Proliferated on reddit and other online platforms, *Monster Zero-Sugar Ultra* has come to be associated with trans culture partly due to an alignment between neurodivergence and trans identity—an association that has been thoroughly weaponised in reactionary corners of the internet.[xiii] The work references a meme using the recently popular "Sections of a Joint" template¹⁴ which features a Monster can instead of the usual cannabis joint. The three annotated sections correspond to the amount consumed. The top third reads "gosh this is tasty"; the middle segment reads "woah I'm kinda hyper"; and the final section, corresponding with the nearly empty can, is an emoji of the pink blue and white trans flag. Like a comical exaggeration of the correlation between vaccines and autism/

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homosexuality, it's a joke on cause and effect. *Monster Zero-Sugar Ultra* has come to be a niche trans cultural internet artefact, which many have begun to use in memes, craft projects and other ephemera, including making and sharing tutorials on building a Monster can "gun". The obsessive, almost ruminative care with which this solid aluminium, custom etched and anodized version of the "Monster Can Gun" imbues the object with an almost magical aura, perhaps imbued with the power to turn people trans (perhaps against their will). This subversive gesture highlights the ridiculousness of reactionary grooming rhetoric, while hinting at the increasingly violent discourse around trans expression, and existence. *Woah I'm Kinda Hyper* acts as a form of cultural archiving, and an investment in how hijacked, altered, or reimagined iconography can access different knowledge sets or pose counterpoints to conventional interpretation.

Another work that stems from online talking points is *Fountain* (2023). This sculpture comprises an upturned torso masturbating with a fidget spinner above the form of a backyard clam-shell pool. Water spurts comically from a jet located in the crotch area of the inverted figure. An assertive monument to ejaculation, the work defiantly rebukes the persistent emergence of new research papers conjecturing the nature of vaginal ejaculate.^[xiv] Often, these articles obsessively put forth the ejaculate is urine. Such debate is the kind of ammunition that "I fucking love science" bros froth for. Their enthusiasm made transparent an unrelenting desire to preserve ejaculatory force for cis men only and—covertly—to deny the substance of others' orgasm. "It's just pee" clearly smuggles the delight in attempting to humiliate or invalidate the experience; while routinely ignoring first-hand knowledge of squirting.

The Big Rainbow Project involved the hands and public images of many—of representatives, influencers and political figures, designers, and fabricators. In a sense, this collective effort echoes the avant-gardist ideal of creating within a community rather than venerating a single authorial figure. It is notable that Breedon's practice, unlike the Big Rainbow and many artistic practices today, engages traditional making processes that have taken decades to learn and cultivate. Outsourcing is startlingly limited and almost perversely avoided. In Public Art, Breedon appropriates, or even steals materials from the public realm, and the outcomes of the works rely on skills gleaned through pirated eBooks, public library books, YouTube tutorials, internet forums, and trial and error. There is no attempt to deny artistic labour and discipline (or undermine its value), but the importance of community emerges in activist gestures like obtaining an MLAK key, just to turn around and steal its form to freely distribute it to others.

Tara Heffernan is an art historian and critic based in Naarm/Melbourne

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- [i] Danielle Delalande, “The Big Rainbow finds its new home in Daylesford”, 3BA, 1 February 2023. URL: <https://www.3ba.com.au/local-news/the-big-rainbow-finds-its-new-home-in-daylesford/>.
- [ii] Bianca Davino, “Regional Australia Is Getting Its Very Own Big Rainbow And You Can Decide Where It Lives”, Refinery29, 4 March 2022. URL: <https://www.refinery29.com/en-au/big-rainbow>.
- [iii] Tellingly, a tacky polyester version introduced the National Gallery of Victoria’s Queer exhibition in 2022 (a queer-focused rehang of the gallery’s collection). The flag’s front-and-centre placement seemed to announce that the permissibility of a “queer-focused” collection rehang was dependant on mainstream acceptance.
- [iv] Importantly, these are most often in cultural precincts: spaces that hold cultural prestige amid curated green spaces and “nature”.
- [v] Rainer Maria Rilke, *Auguste Rodin* (New Hampshire: Steerforth Press, 2011), 80.
- [vi] Johnathan D. Quick and Heidi Larson, “The Vaccine-Autism Myth Started 20 Years Ago. Here’s Why It Still Endures Today”, *TIME*, 28 February 2018. URL: <https://time.com/5175704/andrew-wakefield-vaccine-autism/>; Rachel E. Greenspan and Quispe López, “The latest viral COVID-19 conspiracy theory boosted by QAnon falsely claims vaccines turn children gay or trans”, *Insider.com*, 13 February 2021. URL: <https://www.insider.com/qanon-conspiracy-theory-covid-19-vaccines-turn-kids-trans-gay-2021-2>.
- [vii] These comic book tropes have mutated into the sterile Marvel stock characters of today’s infantilised popular film industry.
- [viii] *Vaccines Made Me Gay* might also act as a middle finger to health and wellness industries and the obsession with maintaining and flaunting perfect bodies (intertwined in the cultural imagination with healthy minds and moral purity). Important commentaries from both queer and disabled writers have emerged on the Covid-19 rhetoric and the insistence on dubious calls for community mindedness (which often ignore the gaping disparities between people stemming from economic inequality, disability, age and socio-political factors). See Blake Smith, “Are Conservatives the New Queers?: The medical fear and moral judgement that once surrounded HIV have re-emerged in the contemptuous debate over how to manage COVID”, *Tablet*, 9 December 2021. URL: <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/arts-letters/articles/conservatives-new-queers>; Laura Doyle, “‘All in this together?’ A commentary on the impact of COVID-19 on disability day services in Ireland”, *Disability and Society* 36, no. 9 (2021), 1538-1542.
- [ix] Master Locksmiths Association of Australia, “MLAK: Master Locksmith Access Key”. URL: <https://masterlocksmiths.com.au/mlak/>.
- [x] Indeed, homonormalisation sterilises the threat (and pleasure) of subversive, ambivalent subjectivities through a condescending overcorrection of bigoted conventions. Indeed, to instate a convention of bourgeoisie coupledness upon queerness (as was smuggled by the marriage equality act) inadvertently venerates a particular model of managing desire.
- [xi] The love lock’s popularity runs almost parallel with the rise of internet-based identity design and projection. And, though their origin date back nearly a century, the love lock became somewhat of a meme in the early 2000s. Ceri Houlbrook, “The lock of love: how leaving padlocks became a modern-day romantic ritual”, *The Conversation*, 11 February 2017. URL: <https://theconversation.com/the-lock-of-love-how-leaving-padlocks-became-a-modern-day-romantic-ritual-72140>.
- [xii] Markers of adult life are becoming harder to achieve today. Many younger people suffer from the brutal housing market, the rising cost of living, job precarity, the growing gig economy, etc.
- [xiii] Bryony White, “The Link Between Autism and Trans Identity”, *The Atlantic*, 16 November 2016, URL: <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2016/11/the-link-between-autism-and-trans-identity/507509/>.
14 <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/sections-of-a-joint>
- [xiv] For a recent overview of the scientific findings, see: *Medical News Today*, “What is female ejaculation?”, 28 September 2022. URL: <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/323953#overview>

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