



Detail from "Proposal" (2005)  
photo: Sam Durant

Sam Durant  
Paula Cooper Gallery  
534 West 21st Street  
Through October 22



## Blood Monument

Artist Sam Durant's "Proposal" is pointed without being preachy, heartrending but not mawkish  
by Jerry Saltz

The idea for Sam Durant's "Proposal for White and Indian Dead Monument Transpositions, Washington, D.C." has the virtue of being simple enough to fit on the front of a T-shirt. In the handy pamphlet accompanying the show, Durant says he wants to "move monuments commemorating lives lost during the Indian Wars to the National Mall in Washington, D.C." This idea is pointed without being preachy, heartrending but not mawkish, and politically incisive if stylistically indebted to artists like Sherrie Levine, Rachel Whiteread, Lothar Baumgarten, Stephen Prina, Allan McCollum, and Sol LeWitt. In fact, if you didn't know whose show this was, the repeating forms, grid configuration, and appropriation strategies might make you think these artists had collaborated on it.

The aesthetic tactic of altering an object's meaning by moving it from one place to another or by changing its material or scale is a ready-made idea descending from Dada and surrealism and honed by Rauschenberg, Johns, Warhol, Koons, and countless others. Durant has relied on this strategy since the mid 1990s in works involving absolutely standard art-world-approved references including modernist architecture, Altamont, Kurt Cobain, Gordon Matta-Clark, and of course, Robert Smithson. He even puts dirt on mirrors and talks about entropy, although he calls it "reverse entropy."

Despite the artistic connections and overfamiliarity of the gesture, Durant's "Proposal" is somber and poignant. His rules for choosing monuments are straightforward. None are to be figurative. All must be vertical shafts or modified obelisks—perhaps to echo the Washington Monument or things more suggestive. A 1927 picture of the 10-foot-high Montana monument to Chief Ouray and Chipeta on the show's postcard is shockingly phallic, wrapped as it is in a condom-like American flag. But Durant isn't only being sassy and sarcastic. "Proposal" cuts deep. Not surprisingly, the vast majority of Indian War monuments commemorate white settlers killed by Indians. Twenty-five of these are to be installed on either side of the reflecting pool between the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument. Five monuments to what are often called "Friendly Indians killed by White Settlers" are to be placed in a loose circular configuration directly in front of the Washington Monument.

Unlike works of art that you hear about but never actually see, Douglas Gordon's "24-Hour Psycho", for example, Durant's "Proposal" is more than just an idea—it's almost tear-jerking. Twenty-five replicas of actual monuments from all over the country—each painted gray, made of a nondescript-looking material—are placed like an eerie oversize chess set in Cooper's grand main gallery. None have commemorative plaques or markings, although the checklist abounds with evocative names like "Birch Coulee Monument to Faithful Indians," "Monument to Heroes of Wounded Knee," and "Okoboji Indian Massacre Monument." By presenting these monuments as uniform and nameless, Durant renders them mute, separates them from time and place, creating an uncanny forest of implacable signs. He crosses the nostalgic-sublime minimalist language of memorials, e.g., Maya Lin's work, with appropriation and creates an unstable hybrid. The gallery becomes a graveyard of lost memories. History thus denied allows tragedy to step forward and consciousness to stir. Critic Scott Rothkopf cannily describes this necropolis as producing "a very creepy rhetorical blankness."

This blankness turns beautiful in a large balsa wood model in the front gallery. Here, you look down on the neoclassic symmetry of the Washington Mall and understand that all this regulation is meant to make history logical and trim. Durant's tiny markers in tidy rows between the Washington and Lincoln monuments cause the historical narrative to herniate. Durant supplies what's missing between the memorials: the Indian Wars that were also genocide.

This is Durant's first solo show in New York since his poor 1997 outing in which he constructed some sort of Cady Noland neo-geo jungle gym out of chrome metal. This was unfortunate, because his 1995 New York debut of burned-out architectural models was so impressive. Regardless, Durant, 44, has become a darling of critics and curators. He has appeared in numerous biennials—including the last Whitney, where he made a faint, not very auspicious, impression. He has had multiple museum exhibitions and was on the April 2003 cover of *Frieze*. Mostly, he's loved for his boring pencil drawings of 1960s protesters and for the lighted signs he makes bearing words from the placards in these drawings. The signs carry traces of utopian pathos, but this is exactly the kind of "political art" that places absolutely nothing at risk. Maybe it's because the 1960s seem more romantic and the clothes looked cool, or that the present is so bewildering, but Durant—like an army of artists lately—is settling for dealing with Nixon rather than Bush and Vietnam instead of Iraq. I'm not saying artists have to make art about the Middle East. But it's time Durant and company considered killing their parents and not just revisiting and deconstructing them in work that's often derivative, complacent, and ineffectual. It's great to see Durant going back to the idea of models, curbing his enthusiasm for approved sources, and getting out of the '60s. He's still drawn to hot-button issues, but there's no denying that "Proposal" is powerful and that the feeling of history unmoored and brought home is as disconcerting as it is affecting.