

# Rewriting The Monumental

*The young Australian sculptor Alexander Seton is an artist of our times. His subversive sculptures challenge us on many levels. At the same time, he forces us to rethink classical marble. Flawlessly sculpting everyday objects with contemporary concerns, cynicism, and wit, he flouts our perceptions of marble as a cultural giant.*

By Gina Fairley

**Above:** Alexander Seton, **Insert Grievance Here**, 2011, Bianco marble, eyelets, watercolor, halyard, steel, 50 x 30 x 4 cm. Image: Courtesy of the Artist and Sullivan+Strumpf Gallery, Sydney.



A seated figure in track pants and a hoodie—that long-sleeve hooded garment ubiquitous in urban culture—is not the image one immediately conjures up when we think of marble sculptures and yet it is an image that has defined the career of Alexander Seton along with T-shirts with slogans, worn mattresses, traffic barricades, and blow up toys, all meticulously defined in stone.

Our collective perceptions of marble assign it to the hallowed halls of Western art, its pinnacle defined by Greek and Roman classics such as the *Three Goddess* (c.438-32 B.C.), the Parthenon's east pediment with its cloth-draped flesh, or the Louvre's triumphant *Nike of Samothrace* (c.200-190 B.C.), a virtuoso in technique from the Hellenistic period, to Michelangelo's emotive *Pietà* (c.1498) and Bernini's Baroque *Fontana dei Quattro Fiumi* (1651) for its celebrated spectacle and political allegory. They rattle off the tongue with a knowing. Simply, marble has claimed culture important.

Seton's sculptures by contrast step outside the heroics of his material, choosing banal, even fashionable subjects, to brand immortal. Treated with the same level of fastidious skill and an intellectual rigor that elevates his subjects, Seton is arguably a fabricator of icons of our times. Writer and art historian Sasha Grisham agrees. He described Seton as an artist "... anchored within his own generation with its doubts and affirmations,"<sup>1</sup> adding that Seton has been able to step outside the "ideological baggage" that weights much of contemporary sculpture and installation today. It is perhaps this truth that surprisingly makes sense of Seton's choice of marble.



Alexander Seton, *Sculpture No.23*, 2003, green marble, 200 x 110 x 110 cm. Image: Courtesy of the Artist.



Alexander Seton, *I used to Play: Grand Piano* (from *On Hold* series), 2008, Wombeyan marble, 30 x 45 x 55 cm. Image: Courtesy of the Artist and Jan Murphy Gallery, Brisbane.

Marble as a material is very soft, its fine grain allowing it to be refined and polished to a flesh-like realism. It was this malleability, both physically and metaphorically, that attracted Seton, its historical frame translated to plastic garbage bags, pillows, and leather handbags, for example, with uncompromising skill.

What is perhaps more surprising than Seton's unconventional subjects is that his education in crafting his sculptures has been largely 'self-directed,' as he described, acquired through residencies and tutelage by fellow artists and artisans. Born in 1977, Alexander Seton grew up in the Southern Highlands region of Australia's New South Wales where his fascination with marble was inspired by the location of a quarry down the road from his home, situating

the material more within the realm of the everyday than the revered. It is this elemental foundation of familiarity, paired with a degree in art theory and history from the College of Fine Arts (University of New South Wales, 2005) that places Seton's practice foremost within the realm of the conceptual, his phenomenal skill a bonus to the translation of those ideas.

Looking over Seton's career, then, we are piqued to read meaning into his objects; searching for a reason 'why' or challenged by his perceived greatness in the banal. From his earliest experiments in marble we can trace a progression of persistent objects, for example, the repetition of wrapped and draped objects. *Sculpture No.23* (2003), a crate-like form chiseled from green marble bound with rope and labeled fragile for Sydney's *Sculpture by the Sea* festival, is expounded through the series *On Hold* (2008, Jan Murphy Gallery Brisbane), iconic forms such as a pram, lawn mower, and wheelchair covered with marble 'dust sheets.' The object is unmistakable and yet by veiling it Seton has charged it with emotion, drawing upon collective understanding and personal memories. He gives us a title to trigger or hypothesize a narrative, *I used to Play: Grand Piano* (2008) and *Scar or a Bruise: Wheelchair* (2008). Is it the preservation of an ideal, a failed aspiration, or a buried emotion? His genius lies in their simplicity.

As with all Seton's sculptures they are never just 'a simple read.' There is further historical play going on here to their materiality. On the one hand, there is Man Ray's *The Enigma of Isidore Ducasse* (1920), an ambiguous form wrapped in a blanket and twine, its truth in its concealment and intrigue. On the other hand, there are the works of Christo and Jean-Claude,

whose first project, *Wrapped Coast* (1969), was a short distance from the theatrical placement of Seton's *Sculpture No.23* on Bondi's coastline.

The writer Adam Gezy draws the comparison, "In their case the act of concealing something so difficult to conceal and so recognizable became the main event .... Crucially, in Seton's sculptures the 'real' object is not there."<sup>2</sup> Seton is able to move marble beyond allegory using its potency to connect with viewers in their contemporary reality.

**T**his emotive underbelly is further fleshed out by stripping the object of its cloak. Seton's repeated interest in T-shirts, shoes, and handbags act as a badge of identity and aspiration. Consider this chain of artworks: a black V-neck sweater hanging on a clothes rack titled *Wear Me (Adam)* (2004) with women's soft leather boots in black Yass marble, *Wear Me (Eve)* play out the theater of seduction from the sexes to consumerism. The following year a 1970s-style T-shirt with the slogan 'Marble is dead' hangs in the exhibition *We've Got to Get Out of This Place* (2005) alongside a woman's handbag *My own private tardis* (2005), both using the synthetic material Caesarstone®. And the exhibition *Assembly* (2009), focused on the semantics of T-Shirt images against the egalitarian white garment, eventually becomes a sophisticated



**Alexander Seton, Reverse Garbage**, 2005, Belgian marble and polyethylene ribbon, 70 x 50 cm. Image: Courtesy of the Artist.

dialogue on the complexities of contemporary society globally through Seton's most celebrated installation *Elegy On Resistance* at *ArtHK12*, which placed the gang-tag of the 'hoodie' sweatshirt within the seat of the international art market. Was it just a different kind of dealing?

In an interview Seton commented, "Using everyday objects such as T-shirts I'm able to reach into elements of pop, elements of personal, elements of physical, and elements of the everyday

manufactured world. I use them as a canvas on which I can draw out tales ... because they're related and accessible."<sup>3</sup>

What is further interesting to Seton's choice of object is his presentation of them. Seton uses dramatic lighting to build theatrics and to spotlight his subjects metaphorically in their challenged reality. Their staging is deeply choreographed, whether presented on pedestals, hanging from a clothes rack or laid out on a gallery floor. Seton manipulates the still-life genre drawing it back into a three-dimensional consideration where the viewer becomes embedded in Seton's consideration. For many of us it offers a visual double take. What are we looking at? It is a disorientation replaced by amusement, then a questioning.

That blur of storytelling and reality is superbly illustrated through Seton's installation *The Razor* (2005), a cameo of objects casually arranged on carved bathroom tiles including a discarded lace bra and panties and droplets of water playing off the translucency of the material. Carved out of Calacatta marble and obsessively exacting, the illusion, however, is foiled. Amidst the choreographed narrative Seton adds a real razor blade to "break the sense of monument."<sup>4</sup>

The blade, together with the cold clarity of the marble and bathroom setting, alludes to a snapshot of frozen terror



**Above left: Alexander Seton, RTW I**, 2005, Caesarstone® and stainless steel, 85 x 52 x 10 cm. **Above right: Alexander Seton, Wear Me (Eve)**, 2004, Yass marble, 42 x 26 x 35 cm. Images: Courtesy of the Artist.



**Alexander Seton, *Unsettled*, 2006, Wombeyan marble, 45 x 75 x 200 cm. Image: Courtesy of the Artist.**

weighted with intrigue and seduction. Seton challenges our cognitive processes, what we see and our compulsion to construct meaning. We observe this again with the artwork *Reverse Garbage* (2005), a banal garbage bag carved from black Belgian marble, highly polished to reflect the plasticity of the mass-produced item, its plastic yellow Polyethylene tie making 'real' the scenario faced by audiences. This device teeters not only between illusion and reality, but moves beyond the object's mere function as facsimile to that of commentary. Speaking with Seton he said, "Clinical reproduction tends to have an awkward illusory quality. I want to hit the perceptual reset button so I can engage the critical and conceptual faculties that allow concepts to flow back and forth between the art object and its audience."<sup>5</sup>

This channel of dialogue is one Seton has mastered through his reproduction of pillow and mattress forms. In 2004, Seton presented a single pillow, *A Young Man's Dream*, in Carrara marble presented upon a high-gloss black surface. The staging of the sculpture was deeply intentional, and if anything reverted to marble's traditional role of imbuing monumentality or the heroic. The following year saw *Soft Sequence* (2005), a line of six cushions in various types of marble, some defying

gravity standing erect, others falling onto their neighboring forms, and the rolled mattress *Reward* (2005).

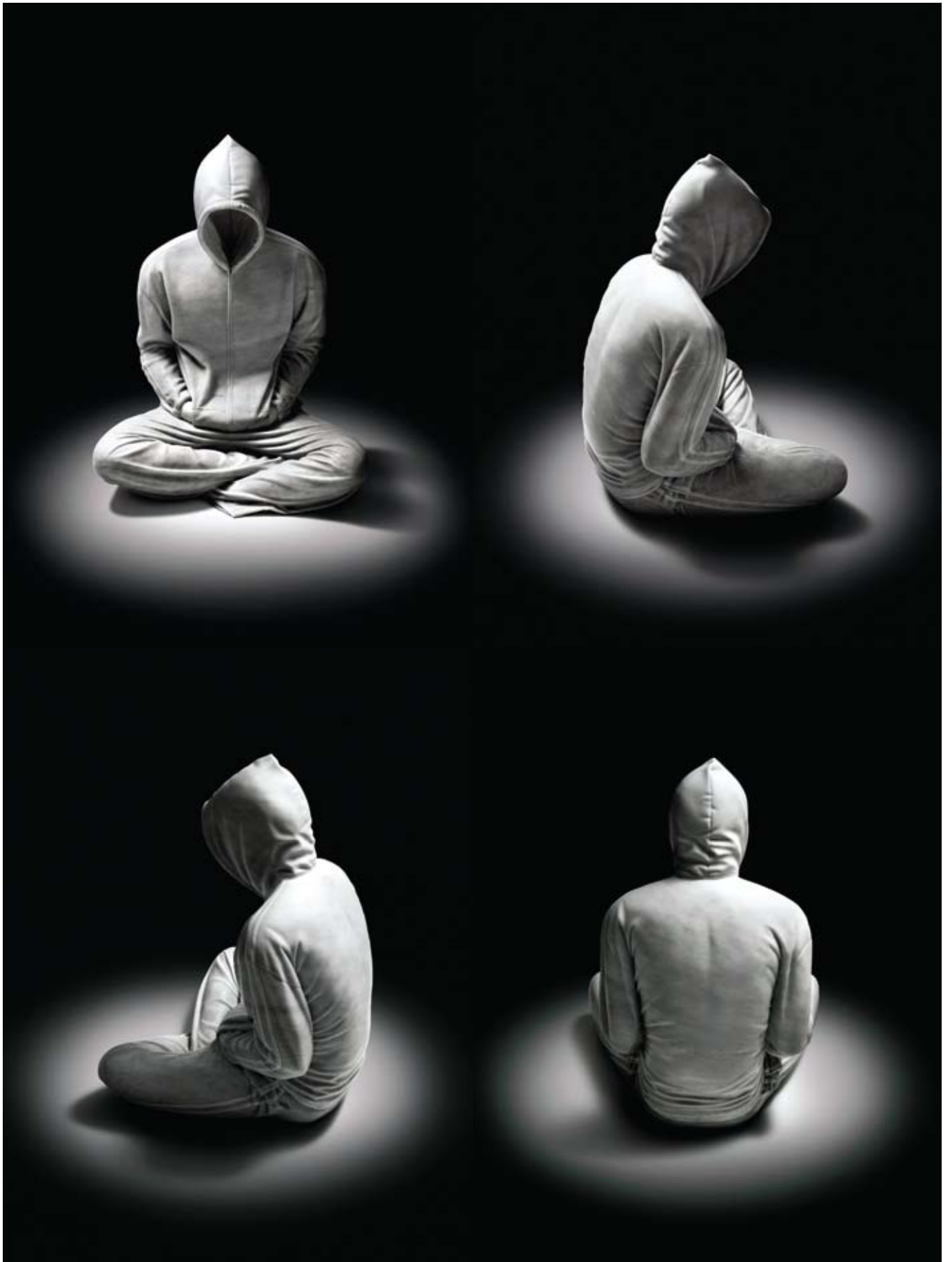
**T**he breakthrough of this grouping was their patinas. They simulated the worn character of bedding, their fabric ribs and stains of use mimicked through Seton's masterly handling of the marble's surface building illusion. *Reward* is etched with the text 'you've earned it' and it was a direct precursor to two key works that followed: *Unsettled* (2006) and the series *Security Blanket* (2007). *Unsettled* was an outdoor installation for the prestigious Helen Lempriere National Sculpture Award and was presented in the grounds of the ritzy Werribee Mansion Hotel, a high-end boutique hotel by designer Philip Stark. An anonymous figure nestled within a sleeping bag in the park grounds, it referenced both the mythology of the Australian swagman (itinerant bushman) and the increasing number of homeless who populate our city's parks by night. Seton said he "enjoyed creating a work that was a litmus test of the audience's preconceptions and dispositions."<sup>6</sup>

The political tone to this installation defined a kind of politically alert evolution that was becoming more prominent

in Seton's work. *Security Blanket* (2007), and the subsequent exhibitions *Panoply* (2007), *Flags* (2011), and *Elegy of Resistance* (2011) engage contentious themes from national security, forced border controls, the senselessness of conflict, and institutional force. Simply the work was turning from the wow-factor of a soft object drawn from a hard material to the hard line foundation of ideas within the object.

The exhibition *Security Blanket* (Jan Manton Gallery, Brisbane) took the innocence of childhood play and the kind of psychological protection that an eider-down blanket offers, and overlaid that with miniature objects to debunk that zone of comfort. Made from Wombeyan marble, the quarry of Seton's childhood, the material had a further personal tug for him.

The common object to the series was the 'doona' [duvet] itself, sometimes folded neatly and at other times thrown on the gallery floor with teen abandon. Atop each blanket sat an object arranged with the tone of play: a toy jeep navigating the blanket's soft mounds in the sculpture, *Resistance is all you've got*, or neat story-book houses arranged with domestic aspiration upon a folded 'doona' in *I am more terrified than you*. Its title reeks of my own fear of suburbia. The mattress in this series offers a wonderful parallel to



Alexander Seton, **Soloist**, 2012, Bianco Carrara marble, 95 x 75 x 70 cm. Photographs by Per Ericson. Image: Courtesy the Artist and Sullivan+Strumpf Gallery.

the folkloric 'swag,' the rolled bed-mat of the Australian bushman and his lack of material need.

It is a tension played out in the words 'yours' and 'mine' carved either side of a fence-like divide in the blanket, *You are too afraid to ask*, evoking the temporality of belongings, relationships, and domestic utopia. The intimate nature of the eiderdown allows an immediate connection for viewers, slowing revealing its barbed message: What does security mean?

Seton's interest in constructs of 'security' runs like a thread of conspiracy across his later career. His exhibition *Panoply* (ChalkHorse Gallery, Sydney) was held during the 2007 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Summit, in Sydney. Recreating plastic street barricades at life-scale, Seton explored the temporality of these barriers as more permanent constructs of social control. In this exhibition five such barriers divided the gallery space, making it impossible to penetrate physically (and perhaps also as a wry comment on aspects of conceptual art.) The title of the installation *Barrier (proceed about your normal routine)* (2007) was carved into each in irony. Seton is both subverting our flows of movement and forcing us to rethink our channeled understanding of what is 'normal.'

**T**he final act of this security play was witnessed by Asia's collecting circles at *ArtHK12*, where Seton's installation *Elegy On Resistance* (2012), a suite of marble CCTV cameras, *Quartet 1–4*, surveying a crowd gathering around a seated hooded figure, *Soloist*. The audience is integral to this work. The theatrics of the installation, while consistent with Seton's earlier work, was a wry comment on the staging of art fairs and its pantomime of the 'watched.' Seton's degree in art theory continues to carry traction, becoming a mature evolution of expression.

At the time of writing Seton's essay for *ArtHK12*, Adam Frost observed that in the United States a black male youth wearing a hoodie pulled deep over his face was shot and killed in Florida, suspected of breaking-and-entering. The reality of this event parallels Seton's dramatization exposing the clichéd branding of social injustice and the classic contemporary tale of urban culture and a growing culture of fear. It is no coincidence that the garment's name derives from the colloquial term for a gangster—a hoodlum.

Seton has used the semiotics of clothing as an equitable metaphor to the notions of 'privilege and power' that the marble sculpture of yesteryear espoused but has usurped that by the lowest social tier. He then flips it again as the desirable



**Alexander Seton, *You are too afraid to ask*, 2007, Caesarstone®, steel, and Wombeyan marble, 50 x 46 x 72 cm. Image: Courtesy the Artist and Jan Murphy Gallery, Brisbane.**

art object, his presentation in *ArtHK12* was his most commercially successful exhibition to date.

Seton draws another curious bow. The title comprising this installation *Soloist, Chorus, and Quartet* clearly points to a musical reference, perhaps an operatic tragedy. The *Chorus* represented as sweat-shirts on hangers, like a gang, surround and support the central figure. In his artist's statement he wrote, "These are to be seen as skins or iterations of the central figure, ... a Greek chorus to the plight of the beleaguered protagonist."<sup>7</sup>

Attention is focused on our contemporary hero who, in another twist, is seated in the Lotus pose of the Buddha. It is a maddening conundrum. As the face of the figure is hollowed out, we are to believe his anonymity also speaks of the disconnection from ego or self that Buddhism teaches, and yet this invisibility is highly visible in the context of the art fair.

This invisibility is a subject Seton approached with great sensitivity in an earlier installation entitled *As of Today* (2011): 23 folded flags delicately carved in Queensland marble subtly toned a skin-like pink and tied with rope in a ceremonial fashion. They 'stood-in' for soldiers killed during Australia's engagement in the war in Afghanistan, formally termed Operation SLIPPER. A similar installation was part of his exhibition *Flags* some months later at Sullivan + Stumpf Gallery, this time six marble works marking further deaths.

The sculptural material is a poignant reminder of the cold reality of continuing deaths, their somber arrangement respectful and calling on military traditions. Marble has long been the material of

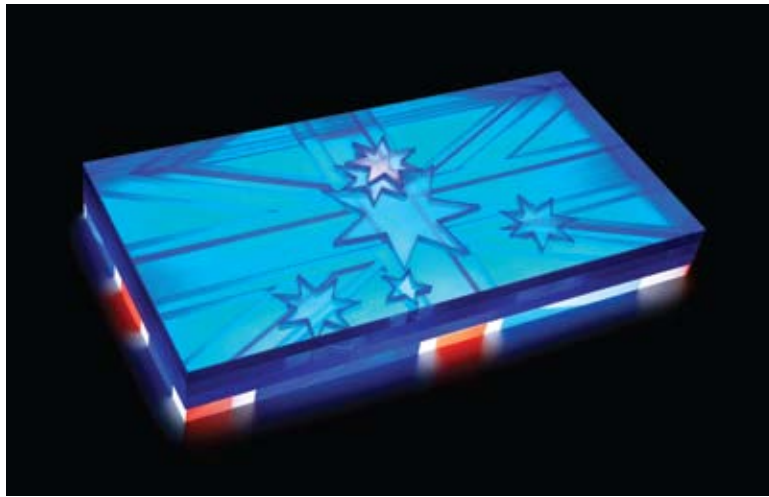
gravestones and tombs, updated by Seton to a more current reminder, striped of allegory. The lessons of time remain a cold reminder of the contemporary situation.

Made also for this exhibition was a suite of hanging flags, sheets of Bianco marble seemingly fluttering from steel poles and held aloft with halyards and eyelets. Several were painted with watercolor to appear worn or emblazoned with text, others were ironic symbols to 'stand in' for a flag, a workman's singlet or empty concrete bag, for example. Of the more powerful was *No Surrender* (2011), with a burnt torn corner, and *Insert Grievance Here* (2011), a confronting pair to the ironic *Insert Allegiance Here* (2011).

A planted flag, *Brick Pile Monument Series: Blood, Sweat, and Tears* (2011), was equally layered in his dialogue. While it conjures images of Eugene Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* (1830), or the planting of the American flag at Iwo Jima and landing on the moon, the idea of claiming liberty and territory is an immensely heroic gesture worthy of marble. Seton, however, takes a more local reference, that of planting a flag in the remaining materials of a construction site to signify the completion of a project. In today's building boom and a tightening of regulations, such traditional gestures of camaraderie no longer exist. The lament is layered.

What remains as the current across this series is that it is impossible to separate the flag as "a symbol of nationhood and an object under which we both rally and dissent." These polar positions are expressed in Seton's *My Concern will Outlive Yours* (2011), a corpse laid out

unceremoniously, draped with an anonymous flag, and *Advance Australia* (2011), the Australian flag stripped of the Union Jack proudly advocating a new future. One can't help recall Seton's earlier series *On Hold* (2008), however, the Porsche and grand piano have been replaced with a body, equally laid to rest as dreams lost to a tragic end. To die for nation or to construct a nation—are they heroic gestures of patriotism or disillusionments?



**Alexander Seton, *Flag Stack*, 2011, tinted perspex, 8 x 36 x 68 cm. Image: Courtesy of the Artist and Sullivan+Strumpf Gallery, Sydney**

Seton has occasionally played with materials other than marble, attracted by the freedom to carve outside the hierarchy of materials. It was not such an odd transition to move from marble to the synthetic marble Ceasarstone® and to Perspex. For him this has placed greater emphasis on the concept. His recent experiments with Perspex, *Flag Stack* (2011), deconstructs the Australian flag almost like layers in a Adobe Photoshop program, where the Union Jack is separated and pushed to the background. While Seton acknowledges that foundation, rising above it is a

flotilla of stars—the Southern Cross—that geographically, rather than politically, situates Australia. It invites Australian audiences to consider their definition of being Australian, constantly building upon history and meaning to arrive at a more fluid definition in sync with our times.

This is perhaps the most appropriate place to end a discussion on the work of Alexander Seton. As an artist he is consistently mining and challenging our frames of reference, be they from a social, historical or art historical perspective, and we can only expect to be further surprised.

As a sculptor who has chosen marble and the discipline of the carved object, the tensions and contradictions he brings formulaic readings is both powerful and palpable. He rewrites the monumental in the language of our times. Δ

*Notes:*

1. Sasha Grisham, "Stay on message," 2005, catalogue essay, Maunsell Wickes at Barry Stern Galleries, Sydney.
2. Adam Gezy, "All Wrapped Up," 2008, *On Hold* catalogue essay.
3. Owen Craven, 2010 interview retrieved from <http://owencraven.com/2010/07/alexander-seton/>
4. *ibid.*
5. Gina Fairley, e-mail interview with the artist, June 29, 2012.
6. *ibid.*
7. Alexander Seton, *Elegy of Resistance*, 2012, artist's statement.

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**Alexander Seton, *As of Today*, 2012, Queensland marble, halyard, dimensions variable. Photograph by Per Ericson. Image: Courtesy the Artist and Jan Murphy.**