

MIWA KOMATSU • SAM LOCK • FLORYAN VARENNES • SHEN WEI
HYEMI KIM • REMUS GRECU • GILL GATFIELD • LI LINLIN • HILARIO GALGUERA
IMAGE CAPITAL AT THE MAST FOUNDATION • PICASSO • NIKI DE SAINT PHALLE
PETER BUGGENHOUT • FERNAND LÉGER

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ON The

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Miwa Komatsu,
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TOTEMS : MONUMENTS

Gill Gatfield UNITY

by **Roxane Latrèche**



At once totem and monument, personal spiritual token and collective unyielding pillar, Gill Gatfield's UNITY probes the symbols for which it stands. Among the sinuous waters and alleys of Venice, its two specifically-sited I-forms materialise. One nestled on a wall; a jewel among the many pendants that adorn the halls of the 15th-century Palazzo Bembo, built on the Canal Grande to house the treasures of a noble merchant family – Harmony, a miniature sculpture, a crest to its surroundings. The other erected on the ground; a virtual stela among the perennial pines of the Giardini della Marinaressa, confronting the storied lagoon as have for centuries warring and parading ships – Native Tongue XR, a monumental digital structure, a vestige of its histories.

Brought together, these two abstract figures compose UNITY, an indissoluble amalgam of symbolisms, bridging the personal and the collective, the physical and the spiritual, the earth-bound and the mystical realms. Seemingly established identities permeate from the artworks – in their form, in the materials that constitute them, in their connection to site. Transcendental symbolisms, perceptible yet elusive; not directly familiar, yet promptly assigned to a different culture, a different epoch, a different land, to an Other, whichever it might be.

Enigmatic yet intelligible, both structures speak through their evocative I-forms, traversing cultures and knowledge systems, expressing a signified presence – a first-form, recalling at once the elementary shape of a human body and a spirit figure, an object of belief. The fluid form stands firmly as though affirming its existence. As a first personal pronoun, it is equally the backbone of the many, of the whole. Individual when single: I. Universal when multiplied: III. UNITY calls to a reconsidered materiality. Tightly bonded together, the three micro figures that form Harmony stand both independently and united as perfect complements. Carved from Kahurangi pounamu, river gold and Tākaka marble – ancient materials from Aotearoa

New Zealand – they hold the wairua, spiritual essence and connection to ancestors and to whenua, their origins and land. Nixed in a square of black velvet as a glass-guarded jewel, the whole is framed in a gold laurel crown, a fleuron of Classicism and stately symbol of victory and peace. Further along the Venetian waters, appearing through and dissolving into the metaverse, Native Tongue XR escapes materiality. Rendered in extended reality, it projects the digital twin of an ancient kauri sculpture, carved from the heartwood of a majestic indigenous tree, buried in Aotearoa over 45,000 years ago at the end of the last Ice Age.

Gill Gatfield, Harmony, 2022.

© Artist,

Photography by Danilo Santana David



Gill Gatfield, Native Tongue XR, 2018-2022. 'Personal Structures', European Cultural Centre, Riva dei Sette Martiri, Venice. © Artist

If their forms and materials lend the two artworks a foreign yet familiar symbolism, their specific placements further cultivate this estrangement. They appear at one with their respective sites while engaging in a stealth-like context critique.

A composite of precious minerals and stones secreted away behind glass and displayed seductively between arched Palazzo windows, Harmony shines among the innumerable treasures that have traversed and inhabited the canals and callette of Venice, and glisten still from the showcase glazed arches of the neighbouring Ponte di Rialto. Amidst these coveted and transacted objects of desire, Harmony enshrines an individualistic drive to possess in resolute I-figures, held beyond arm's reach. In the Giardini, Native Tongue XR appears rooted in the shallow depths of the Venetian soil and casts a long shadow on the land. A mirage of a forest giant which fell eons ago to the polar winds of climate change, the enduring I-column bears witness to the island-city's precarity as the maritime pines bow to the winds of the lagoon, as the waters of Venice rise and fall, and as the ships of merchants and spectators come and go. Where Harmony strikes by its presence, Native Tongue XR troubles by its absence.

The minuteness of one and ephemerality of the other are as evident as they are mystical, as fragile and transitory as they are enduring and timeless, like the towering edifices that

surround them. Both artworks stand as foreign and unexplored I-lands in this floating island city, exotic and isolated in their Palazzo and Giardini, evoking the lands to which they call.

Native yet estranged, intimate yet distant, they bear the question: for whom do they stand? In UNITY, the monument becomes totem; the totem, monument. Fitting in the palm of a child's hand, but untouchable – Harmony, both close and out of reach, a carved gem in a gilded crown; Native Tongue XR, summoned at will from a hand-held mobile device, a three-meterhigh alter ego in every pocket. These democratizing monuments address the individual person, just as in the moment of materialising (and dematerialising) they renounce prescribing identities. Simultaneously, the I-structures approach the viewers as a collective of individual I's, just as they emancipate themselves from prescriptive identities. Disrupting the habitual trinity of form, material, and place, viewers are faced with the seeming void of the unknown, embodied in the abyssal black velvet that lodges Harmony and in the brief emptiness that precedes Native Tongue XR's appearance on a screen. The former calls to an emptiness, an intentional void that asks for a deconstruction and unknowing of identities; the latter, enjoining a gradual rebirth and rebuilding of new ones.



Gill Gatfield, Harmony, 2022.

© Artist, Photography by Danilo Santana David



In this absence, viewers are better able to perceive their own presence, their present existence in a given time and space, in a given epoch and geography. Conveying the notion that this void is not nothingness, but a form of unknown, the artworks resist set meanings, instead engaging their audience in a process of unknowing past knowledge. To the dual fear and magnetism of being lost in this unknown, UNITY, through the beacons of Harmony and Native Tongue XR, confronts the growing wonder of wandering, with purpose, in new knowledge. Headstones not to a person, a time, nor a space, but totems shared by the collective: monuments to Humanity and the Biosphere. The void, in sum, allows for a deconstruction and reconstruction, a rebirth, which by shedding set identities, is both deeply personal and interpersonal – a rebirth, at once individual and collective, otherworldly and of the Earth.

Gill Gatfield, Native Tongue XR, 2018-2022.
Personal Structures', European Cultural Centre,
Riva dei Sette Matiri, Venice. © Artist



Gill Gatfield, Native Tongue XR, 2018-2022. „Personal Structures’ European Cultural Centre, Giardini della Marinaressa, Venice. © Artist



Gill Gatfield, Harmony, 2022. „Personal Structures’ European Cultural Centre, Palazzo Bembo, Venice. © Artist, Photograph by Matteo Losurdo