

# ***F.O.A.M.: OBELISK SAN MEI GALLERY***

**Written By Dexter Doak**



Entering Brixton's San Mei Gallery to review F.O.A.M's newest installation, Obelisk, was a fairly disorienting experience. The windows had been whitewashed, temporary protective vinyl panelling had been taped to the floor, and the exhibition space had been stripped to its bare bones.

Unevenly lit by bright, uncovered florescent bulbs, the elegant victorian storeroom which houses the San Mei Gallery upon first glance resembles the site of any one of the innumerable construction projects which have in, recent years, facilitated the transformation of Brixton into an increasingly affluent, unaffordable extension of middle-class bohemian London.

An area once regarded as the undisputed 'cultural capital of the UK's Afro-Caribbean community', Brixton's transition into a district which economically, culturally and demographically resembles previously gentrified areas like Shoreditch, Camden and Clapham appears to follow the formulaic pattern of gentrification which has already claimed so many of London's historically working class neighbourhoods: the creatives move in, the price of housing and other amenities rise beyond the means of the original inhabitants, and the property developers follow. Interrogating this process through a lens which interrogates modern urban gentrification as a physical, near geological phenomenon, Obelisk is a project which testifies to the ability of small, well curated galleries to respond to the encroachment of impersonal,

capital-driven forces which threaten to upend and erase the communities within which they function as a crucial part.

Constructed from the same cheap and easily workable materials as those which have enabled the “ruthless cycles of demolition and development” that have come to define the character of the modern British cityscape, the two focal points of the exhibition, the eponymous obelisks, appearing simultaneously strange and familiar to the modern viewer, present themselves to the viewer as strikingly uncanny objects. While it might seem a little ‘on the nose’ to cite Freud while attempting to describe the effect that two undeniably phallic objects, his observation that once-familiar objects, places or people become ‘uncanny’, (or unheimlich, un-homely), to the eye of the beholder when they are somehow cast in such a light as to appear strange, or out of place, springs to mind as perhaps the most appropriate way to account for the installations’ effect upon

their viewer. Removed from the hammering bustle, noise and industry of their natural environment, these objects, frozen in time and robbed of their context, transcend the immediate functionality of their constituent parts and, instead of operating as mere building blocks to be covered up, become something far more interesting.

Characterised by their creators, Laurence Lumley and Rory Sherlock, the collaborative force behind F.O.A.M, as crude, inherently precarious ‘monuments’, the exhibition’s obelisks, in a sense, appear to function in a manner not entirely dissimilar to Jackson Pollock’s now-inescapable paint splatters. That is to say that these obelisks, in their brutal, rugged simplicity appear to their beholder as the broad brushstrokes of the architectural medium which has formed much of the broader urban environment of which they exist as are both a comment upon, and a constituent part. Intended to be torn down, dissembled and ‘quarried’ for raw materials by a new generation of young architectural students once their time as monuments has expired, Laurence Lumley and Rory Sherlock’s obelisks are objects which have been conceived of, designed and constructed with their own destruction in mind.

A sober reflection upon the practices which have enabled both the scarring of London’s skyline and the displacement of its citizenry, Obelisk is as much a work of art about gentrification as it is about the medium of construction itself. A damning indictment of the shortsighted ideologies and practices which have informed the development of vast swathes of urban Britain, Obelisk, due to its intrinsic precarity also serves as a reminder to its viewer of the fleeting moments of opportunity which arise when objects that were built to be town down are, inevitably, torn down.

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