



## UOA D32

ART AND DESIGN:  
HISTORY, THEORY AND PRACTICE



**RESEARCHER**

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Jonathan Owen

**OUTPUT TITLE**

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*Untitled*

**OUTPUT TYPE**

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Artefact: Sculpture

**DATE**

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2016

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FIG. 1  
*Untitled*, 2016, installed in the  
Burns Monument for Edinburgh  
Art Festival. Photo courtesy of  
Edinburgh Art Festival.



## 01 / STATEMENT

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The output is a life-size figurative sculpture, produced as a publicly-funded commission for Edinburgh Art Festival, 2016, an annual city-wide festival of international contemporary art.

It was made by carving into a section of a 19th century marble statue to alter its shape by replacing the torso with movable, interlinking forms. This intervention rendered the statue unstable, leaving it intact and upright but shifted into a new posture. The work is one of a series of deconstructions of neoclassical sculpture that Owen has made over the past five years.

For the duration of the festival, the work was exhibited inside the Burns Monument, a neoclassical temple on Edinburgh's Calton Hill. It received an audience of 13,058 people. The sculpture was subsequently exhibited at Frieze London, 2016, where it was acquired for the collection of the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. It was exhibited in the NGV Triennial 2017–2018, with an audience of 1,231,742 people.

## 02 / RESEARCH DIMENSIONS

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FIG. 2  
*Untitled*, 2016, detail.  
Photo John McKenzie.

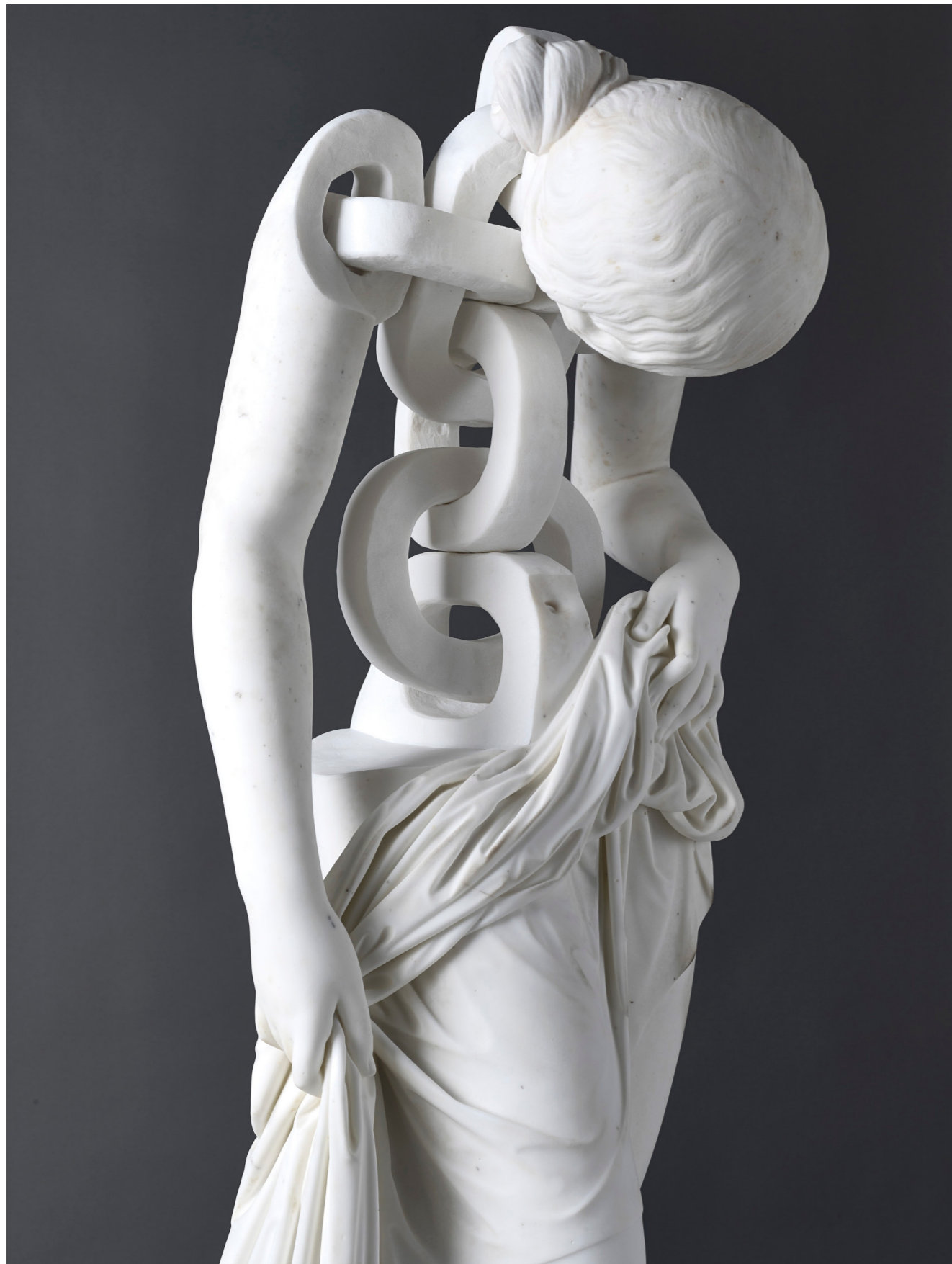


The output is a life-size marble figurative statue, made by re-carving a 19th century original. Owen carved into a section of the original statue, collapsing its form and transforming its torso into movable, interlinking chain-like forms.

As such, the work is at once an extension of the genre of the readymade, an exploration through practice of the legacy and potential of this genre, and a material commentary on the values associated with 'classical' sculpture. The output brings together practice-research through sculpture with research into the history of European Neoclassical sculpture and carving techniques and processes.

FIG. 3

*Untitled*, 2016, detail.  
Photo John McKenzie.



## 03 / ORIGINALITY

How can the controlled de-stabilisation of readymade objects, previously valued for their material and cultural stability, be invested as a method of reactivation and an incitement for reflection?

Owen's work situates itself within the field of re-appropriation and détournement. It contributes to the genre of the 'assisted readymade' in sculptural practice. Whilst such practices typically consist of the application of secondary processes to everyday, mass-produced objects, Owen's selection of rarefied, unique, hand-made and expensive artworks as his 'readymades' alters the framework of investigation and the implications of such artistic intervention. In this way, the work generates new knowledge of the genre of the readymade and its relation to art history.

Owen further extends the genre of the assisted readymade by employing the same processes that were originally used to create the object. Here, he carves into an already-carved object in order to transform it and bring attention to questions raised by the act of carving itself and the histories it implicates.

The combination of a pre-existing, high status object and a transformative process that undermines and subverts without destroying it is a novel contribution.

**FIG. 4**  
*Untitled*, 2016, installed in the Burns Monument for Edinburgh Art Festival. Photo Jonathan Owen.



Owen combines two very different traditions of carving by hand. The original statue was made by a sculptor using Carrara marble, and the finesse of the work indicates high-quality tools and the specialist training customary for artists of the period. This is a unique example of neoclassical statues that embody certain ideals and worldviews, including that of patriarchy. Exposing and subverting the values associated with such 'classicism', Owen deliberately applies rustic folk carving techniques to carve into the original.

These techniques, common to Scrimshaw and Whimsy carving, are usually associated with amateur practices. In this way, opposing cultural values are made to collide to create a new work that questions the relationships between power, permanence and inherited archetypal images and ideals of the human body. Intact, but reconstructed into a new form, the work invites us to reflect on the legacy of certain histories of sculpture, and the values embedded within them.

FIG. 5  
*Untitled*, 2016, installed in the  
 Burns Monument for Edinburgh  
 Art Festival. Photo Jonathan Owen.



## 04 / RIGOUR

The original statue was made in Rome in the 1830s by English sculptor Richard Wyatt. Owen acquired it from auction at Christie's, London, following 12 months of research within auctions across Europe and America.

Antique marble sculptures frequently appear at auction, but only a minority were appropriate for Owen's purposes since a combination of technical and conceptual considerations, such as their structural potential for transformation and their existing symbolic connotations, needed to be evaluated.

This output was the culmination of a five-year period of research and experimentation, during which Owen tested the material parameters of other neoclassical marble sculptures, developing carving methods and researched the historical context of these objects.

The early phase of this research led to a series of smaller works, made using life-size neoclassical marble busts. In *Untitled*, 2015, (FIG 9) the stone comprising the head of an 18th century bust was carved into moveable chain links holding the weight of a suspended marble sphere. These smaller works have all been exhibited internationally, and this example was acquired for the Logan Collection, Colorado, USA.

According to conventions of Western craft techniques such as Whimsy carving and Scrimshaw, moveable links are carved from material (usually wood) of a uniform cuboid or cylindrical shape.

Applying this technique to the irregular, organic form of the human figure was a strategy for problematising the process of carving, and interrogating the ideological interrelations between technique, process, form and value.

The decision to use a marble object created a number of technical difficulties and risks. For instance, the significant weight of the head meant that, when released, it shifted into a different position, causing a redistribution of stress through the statue's structure. The arms became load-bearing forms, with a distinct possibility that they could break when the links and head were released. Resolving such challenges required an improvisational and experimental approach to technique as well as a robust understanding of marble as a material.

Owen's decision to install the work in the Burns Monument – an icon of neoclassical architecture – was a way of further underscoring the questions around Classicism and its contemporary value as raised by the sculpture itself. That the sculpture was displayed as a unique object, the only object within the monument, brought new resonance to ideas of memorial and originality and the survival of the past.

FIGS. 6-8  
Process showing marking,  
grinding and chiselling of  
marble to create interlocking  
links. Photos Jonathan Owen.



FIG. 9  
*Untitled*, 2015, 18th century  
marble bust with further carving.  
Photo John McKenzie.





**FIG. 10**  
*Untitled*, 2016, in the process of carving. Photo Jonathan Owen.



FIG. 11  
*Untitled*, 2016 in progress.  
Photo Jonathan Owen.



FIG. 12  
*More Lasting Than Bronze*, 2016,  
Edinburgh Art Festival Catalogue.  
The cover image is an 'eraser  
drawing' work by Jonathan Owen.



FIG. 13

*Untitled*, 2016. Installation view at National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, for NGV Triennial 2017–2018. Photo courtesy of National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.



## 05 / SIGNIFICANCE

This work makes new use of a problematic historic cultural form, extending existing knowledge and technical practice. It provokes questions of contemporary and future importance concerning the construction, imposition and immortalisation of ideals and archetypes.

During the Edinburgh Festival, 13,058 visitors saw the work. This audience comprised visitors with a specific interest in the Art Festival and a more general international audience visiting Edinburgh International Festival. The work thus reached a diverse public.

Following the festival, the work was exhibited at Frieze London, 2016, where it was acquired for the permanent collection of the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. It was exhibited there as part of the NGV Triennial 2017–2018, which featured the work of artists from 32 countries and received 1,231,742 visitors – the highest attended exhibition in the museum’s history.

For the duration of the Triennale, Owen’s work was installed within the 19th century section of the museum’s collection. This curatorial decision was influenced by Owen’s own use of a 19th century site for the Edinburgh Art Festival commission.



**FIG. 14**  
*Untitled*, 2016. Installation view  
at National Gallery of Victoria,  
Melbourne, for NGV Triennial  
2017–2018. Photo courtesy of  
National Gallery of Victoria,  
Melbourne.



**FIG. 15**  
*Untitled*, 2016 (detail).  
Photo John McKenzie.

## 06 / APPENDIX

**Press**

The work was widely advertised and favourably reviewed in the international and national press, including *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *The Observer*, *The Scotsman*, TV interview on *BBC Scotland*, *Vogue Australia*, *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *NGV Magazine*.

(Quote redacted)

Waldemar Januszczak  
*The Sunday Times, Culture*, 7 August 2016

(Quote redacted)  
*The Guardian*, 2016

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/aug/03/edinburgh-art-festival-review-jonathan-owen-douglas-gordon-joseph-beuys-scottish-endarkenment>

(Quote redacted)

Moira Jeffrey  
*The Scotsman*, 6 August 2016

<https://www.scotsman.com/whats-on/arts-and-entertainment/arts-review-more-lasting-bronze-jonathan-owen-1470497>

(Quote redacted)

Catherine Spencer  
*APOLLO*, 2016

<https://www.apollo-magazine.com/escape-the-fringe-a-guide-to-the-best-of-the-edinburgh-art-festival/>

(Quote redacted)

David Pollock  
*The List*, 2016

<https://edinburghfestival.list.co.uk/article/82859-jonathan-owen/>

**Publications**

*Jonathan Owen*. Hardcover, 88 pages. ISBN: 9780993155147. Published by Ingleby Gallery in August 2016 to coincide with Jonathan Owen's presentation for the Edinburgh Art Festival, this fully illustrated book includes texts by Maria Fusco and Sorcha Carey and an interview with Jonathan Owen.

*National Gallery of Victoria*. Softcover, 688 pages. Fully illustrated in colour. ISBN: 9781925432442, 2017.

**FIG. 16**  
*Jonathan Owen*, published by  
Ingleby Gallery, 2016.



**FIG. 17**  
National Gallery of Victoria  
Triennial Catalogue, 2017–2018.





THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH  
*Edinburgh College of Art*

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