

# Freeze Frame As Big Men Fly



**As footy-mad fans pose for an art missionary, Suzy Freeman-Greene strikes a stance, too.**

IN THE HAPPY PRINCE, OSCAR Wilde's classic fairytale, a gilded statue comes magically to life. This golden prince has eyes of bright sapphires and a glowing ruby on his sword hilt. But he must spend his days observing the misery and poverty of the city around him.

One day, the sobbing prince enlists a swallow to help share his wealth. The bird distributes the jewels; then the prince asks him to remove his gold, leaf-by-leaf, and give it to the poor. When the mayor notices how shabby the statue looks, he orders that it be torn down and replaced by a likeness of him. But God sends down an angel to bring the prince's heart, and the swallow, up to join him in heaven.

Wilde's is a beautiful fable about empathy and generosity. It's also a subversive take on the role of monuments and their historical relationship to power. I thought of it recently as I joined a line of people posing as statues in Federation Square for a project by New York artist Chris Doyle. Here was a chance for us to reclaim the lofty cliché of the urban monument. We might find our inner hero, perhaps even our secret prince.

We looked, first of all, at a clipboard containing pictures of statues from around the world. Then we chose one to mimic for the camera. Amid countless soldiers and goddesses, I spotted Julius Caesar, Atlas holding up the planet, a bullfighter, a cherub, Jesus, Abraham Lincoln, Beethoven, Napoleon and an English dandy. Most of the women were naked or bare-breasted. Many of the men held a sword or a gun.

I chose a sculpture of a woman sitting cross-legged, with her head bent forward and a hand cupped beneath her chin. Though the pose was uncomfortable, I enjoyed the peaceful stillness of the moment.

Next, a tousle-haired youth wearing a Hawks' footy jumper did a wonderful version of Rodin's *The Thinker*. He crouched forward, with back arched and chin resting on a hand, while holding a suitably ponderous expression.

"Do you know how hard that was?" he exclaimed afterwards.

Doyle's Ecstatic City project was commissioned by the Melbourne International Arts Festival. It's all about cities: the monuments that come to exemplify them and the people who live and work there.

In a previous work called Leap, Doyle projected video images of jumping people onto a 20-metre-high screen at Manhattan's Columbus Circle. For the festival, he has asked Melburnians to help him create animated projections of a clock face (inspired by Flinders Street Station); a human fountain (a homage to all those fountains turned off in the drought) and a living statue.

On the Friday before the Grand Final, Doyle and his team descended on Fed Square to film and take photographs. Doyle planned to spend the following week furiously editing the footage on his laptop. The end result will be part of a "miniplex marina" he is building in the NGV International moat. A walkway will lead to three rooms showing videos made by local artists. Projected on the miniplex exterior will be Doyle's animations. The fountain footage - with bodies leaping upwards like plumes of water - will also be projected 12-metres high onto the exterior of the NGV.

It may sound complicated but Doyle has done this kind of thing before. The end results are exquisite and poetic, recasting citizens as heroic figures. On his video projection The Moons, in Kansas City, people seem to fly through the air like astronauts or superheroes. For that shoot, he asked them to jump on trampolines to propel their bodies higher.

Doyle dreams a lot about flying and he's fascinated by flight as a metaphor for human aspiration. Jumping is also about letting go, he says. As people ascend, they often look ecstatic.

At the same time, Doyle wants to celebrate the contributions of ordinary people to the lives of cities. When asked to decorate a Kansas City courthouse, he frescoed the ceiling with life-sized portraits of county employees - from a sheriff to the county chief executive. There were plenty of paintings of retired judges, he observed. But would the maintenance guy be remembered when he retired?

A similar concern animates an earlier work called Commutable. Here, Doyle took a graffiti-ridden staircase leading to a bridge in Brooklyn and gilded the steps. As commuters walked over it, day after day, month after month, the gold leaf gradually wore off, making its way into the world. "In a way, you are monumentalising the act of going to work," explains Doyle. Oscar Wilde would surely have approved.

Doyle was excited about the prospect of filming Melburnians filled with footy fever. "I think of myself as an art missionary in many ways," he said. "I am out there proselytising, persuading people that they need not be afraid of art-making so I am looking forward to mixing with the crowds."

For his fountain shoot, he had enlisted Charlie Samuels, an extreme sports photographer who is used to freezing motion. Samuels would also oversee a team of volunteers - students at the Victorian College of the Arts - who were filming and co-ordinating on the day.

Doyle darted between three locations, where men, women and children (many dressed as Cats and Hawks) waited to be shot against a black backdrop. "People here are more open-minded and uninhibited than they are in America," he told me happily.

While the fountain jump was pure fun, the clock segment was harder to do. We were asked to mime a random job while being filmed for 15 seconds. Mine was "guitarist" and I found it surprisingly difficult to strum without music for that amount of time. Others did much better. A Canadian backpacker made a fantastic traffic cop; a middle-aged man played "air tennis" and a teenager did some fluid, imaginary house painting.

Interestingly, those who looked flamboyant didn't necessarily act that way before a lens. Take the guy with dyed blond hair, gelled out from his head like some extravagant pom pom. That hair screamed, "Look at me"

but its owner was a surprisingly tentative air guitarist. (Not that I can talk. I shudder to think of my efforts going public.)

Doyle says we toiling humans will become the hands of his projected clock. He will edit our movements, both slowing and speeding them. Work, he says, is largely how we fill our time. And this piece is a meditation on time.

People seemed to most enjoy striving for their heroic selves: from a woman in a pink singlet posing as the god Mercury to a bearded man in a turban who seemed to be some sort of bodybuilder. At the end of their official pose, each person was asked how they'd like to be remembered for posterity. A young guy from Wodonga lunged forward on one knee, with one arm raised high, the other thrust behind him. The intensity of his expression was fantastic. A pregnant woman simply cupped her hands under her belly, in a gesture of protection and love.

Later, I walked down to Swanston Street to watch those other heroes in the Grand Final parade. As a man nearby yelled "Go Maxy!" and "Go Johnno", I marvelled at the footballers' muscly arms and young faces. Behind me, the human statues were still posing.

Ecstatic City is an installation in the NGV International Moat, October 9-25 between 11am and midnight.

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