

New Contemporary Arts Center Exhibit Explores what Society Deems as Important Monuments and Heroes

Artist Luis Camnitzer's exhibit shines a light on the nameless trailblazers who've made a lasting impact on art, design and culture.

By Kelsey Graham
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Photo: Calcagno Cullen "Monument to the Unknown Act of Kindness" at the Contemporary Arts Center's Monuments to Unknown Heroes exhibit.

There are some artists, architects, heroes and monuments many learn about in school, while others are hidden in plain sight even though they've made a lasting impact on society — until now.

From April 28 through August 27, the Contemporary Arts Center will be hosting conceptual artist Luis Camnitzer's exhibit, Monuments to Unknown Heroes, to shine a light on the nameless trailblazers who've made a lasting impact on art, design and culture.

The exhibit will showcase various perspectives society often upholds when it comes to beloved and notable monuments while questioning "the socio-political and economic underpinnings that typically accompany the production of public monuments," per an exhibit description on CAC's website, which the artist believes truly came to light during the pandemic. The topic of reconsidering public monuments and who America upholds as a "hero" was most recently seen during the Black Lives Matter movement, where tensions over public monuments, especially those that promoted oppression and racism, heightened nationwide.

"The project came about in the COVID environment," Camnitzer told CityBeat. "There was a harsh accentuation of inequities in our society, with the paradox that white-collar professionals were able to escape the dangers of the outer world by staying locked within four walls, while first responders and people without white-collar jobs had little choice but to breathe fresh air."

Camnitzer is a celebrated artist and educator who has been at the forefront of the conceptual art movement since the 1960s. His work often questions the status quo and focuses on social justice issues. Born in Germany, he moved to Uruguay when he was a toddler. He studied art at Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes, Universidad de la República in Montevideo, and then studied sculpture at the Akademie der Bildenden Künste in Munich.

While most people have turned to a more virtual life since the beginning of the pandemic, Camnitzer took it as an opportunity to rethink the idea of space regarding how art is showcased. "Art shifted from physical venues to the ether, in effect giving license for alternative exhibitions and the possibility of celebrating our own heroes," he said.

Camnitzer decided to focus the exhibit on monuments due to their often large-scale impact and the importance society puts upon the structures themselves and those they're often named after.

"Monuments celebrate individuals perceived as having done a significant service, too often in dubious causes, for powerful interests," he said. "Yet, most heroic acts are anonymous and performed as help to fellow citizens, often with implications that call into question the legitimacy of those financing monuments."

Before experiencing *Monuments to Unknown Heroes*, it's essential to understand the meaning behind conceptual art displays. Where most art exhibits display polished paintings, sculptures, ceramics, and more as the finished product, conceptual art is more about the process, thoughts, and social impact behind the pieces displayed. It doesn't deal with one medium but instead often combines paintings, sculpture, and more to bring the exhibit's intended meaning to life.

Monuments to Unknown Heroes is a collaboration between Camnitzer's overarching goal for the exhibit and images submitted through an open-call process that will appear in the show.

"When I invited the celebrated conceptual artist Luis Camnitzer to create an exhibition for the CAC, he surprised me by proposing a project that would amplify the voices of many other artists and not his own," said CAC senior curator at large, Amara Antilla. "*Monuments to Unknown Heroes* really exemplifies the CAC's commitment to community engagement and public exchange."

The exhibit will showcase over 100 posters the CAC describes as "proposals for monuments." For Camnitzer, monuments can also be more grounded and celebrate often overlooked individuals, such as nurses who are vital to our society's well-being.

As a group, the photos will tell a story of how society memorializes spaces and gives them meaning and importance. The exhibit features various images, allowing the artist freedom to express the exhibit's theme in their own way, such as through illustrated posters with thoughtful statements to pictures of works of art that reference the working class, like banana workers.

Similar to the building blocks of conceptual art, Antilla believes museums should play a role in the "open dialogue" of society, displaying various viewpoints to paint a clearer picture of the exhibit's intent.

"In this case, the topic of "public monuments" is put in the hands of more than 100 local and international creatives," she says. "It asks, which individuals, histories, or events have been overlooked or under-recognized and yet should be memorialized? Some participants approach this prompt with humor or irony, and others take a serious look at the ways in which more complex and inclusive national, cultural, and personal histories might occupy public spaces, thereby transforming our collective memory."

At the end of the exhibit, Camnitzer hopes viewers take away a different perspective of who we honor as a "hero" in society and use our individual freedom to make our own choices and decisions about who should be celebrated as one. "Leaving aside the situation that prompted the idea, it is about having the freedom to choose our own heroes instead of just having them land on us," he said. "There always are more unrecognized heroes than recognized ones, and it's in our hands to correct that."

Monuments to Unknown Heroes runs from April 28 through Aug. 27 at the Contemporary Arts Center, 44 E. Sixth St., Downtown. Info: contemporaryartscenter.org.