

University for the Creative Arts
Research Project Portfolios

Last Stand

By Catherine Yass



Project Details

Name of Researcher:	Professor Catherine Yass
Name of Output:	<i>Last Stand</i>
UCARO link/s:	https://research.uca.ac.uk/5593/
Output Type:	Q – Digital and Visual Media; artist’s film
Year and mode of dissemination:	<i>Architecture of London</i> exhibition, Guildhall Art Gallery, London, 31 May – 1 December 2019 Upcoming: <i>Falling Away</i> solo exhibition, 2021 London Festival of Architecture, Ambika P3, London (rescheduled from June 2020 due to the COVID-19 outbreak)
Key Words:	London, architecture, building development, cityscape, film
Funding:	Guildhall Art Gallery - £4,128

Synopsis

Last Stand is a research output by Professor Catherine Yass, a 4 minute 10 second film which was shot on 16mm film and transferred to digital media.

In the film, Turner nominee Yass is seen standing on a concrete tower core on a development site in South London, as the camera, suspended from a crane, circles around her. Her film acts as a protest against the ongoing urban development at Nine Elms.

Last Stand was disseminated as part of the exhibition *Architecture of London*, bringing together 80 works by over 60 artists (including Canaletto, Lucian Freud and Frank Auerbach) from the 17th century to the present day. The exhibition explored over 400 years of the capital's ever-evolving cityscape. It drew from the City of London Corporation's extensive art collection to examine the rich

diversity of London's buildings and its varied portrayal by artists.

The exhibition took place in 2019 at the Guildhall Art Gallery, London, where *Last Stand* was shown on a hantarex cube monitor on a concrete plinth, echoing the tower on which the artist is standing in the film. A 2020 solo exhibition of Yass's work, including *Last Stand*, was scheduled to be held at Ambica P3 but has been delayed to 2021 due to Covid-19. The exhibition will focus on the theme of verticality in architecture.

This portfolio outlines the project's underpinning research context, aims and methods and includes images of both the making of and screen shots of the finished film. It also includes information on the research insights, funding and dissemination.



Last Stand film still



Last Stand film still

Context

Last Stand builds upon Yass's long-standing enquiry into buildings as social and political spaces, such as the work for which she was Turner Prize-nominated in 2002, a film focused on a London construction site. A recent strand of her filmic work is particularly interested in the demolition of buildings as much as their construction, as in *Aeolian Piano* (2017) and *Royal London* (2018). These films also develop Yass's concerns with public institutions such as the BBC, the NHS, and, in her latest commission, the Supreme Court.

With *Last Stand*, Yass took a literal 'last stand' against the privatisation of the sky – the way it is being turned into real estate and filled up with concrete. It was a last stand against the dreamless lack of vision that characterises London's development projects; a last stand against the number of developments that do not provide genuinely affordable housing or non-commercial urban infrastructure such as schools, community centres and doctors' surgeries.

Last Stand engaged with the socio-economic and political context of its particular site in Nine Elms. The work considered the ways in which London has always been a mix of diverse cultures and of varied urban spaces that includes both parks and many types of buildings. Recently the balance has tipped in favour of financially-motivated development, and Brexit fears. The film also looked outward from London, with its depiction of the US embassy alluding to a comparable climate under Donald Trump's regime in the United States.

This subject matter created parallels with other pieces within the *Architecture of London* exhibition. A whole section was dedicated to rebuilding London after WWII. *Last Stand* is a contemporary representation of a building site; the difference between these periods is that after the war rebuilding was

driven by idealism and optimism and now the so-called 'regeneration' is financially motivated.

Many of the works in the exhibition were of the back streets and often overlooked corners of London. For this reason, *Last Stand* was accompanied by photographic work from Yass's series *Damage* (2003, 2005). In this series the images are of neglected everyday places such as drains and the banks of canals, taken on large format transparency photographic film and then left in the place where they were taken, to be retrieved later. The transparencies became scratched and muddied, or layers of emulsion peeled off to reveal unexpected bright colours. The juxtaposition of *Damage* with *Last Stand* emphasises how the present fixation on regeneration can overlook how history is embedded in the fabric of the urban environment, which is fast disappearing in the name of the new.

KEY TEXTS

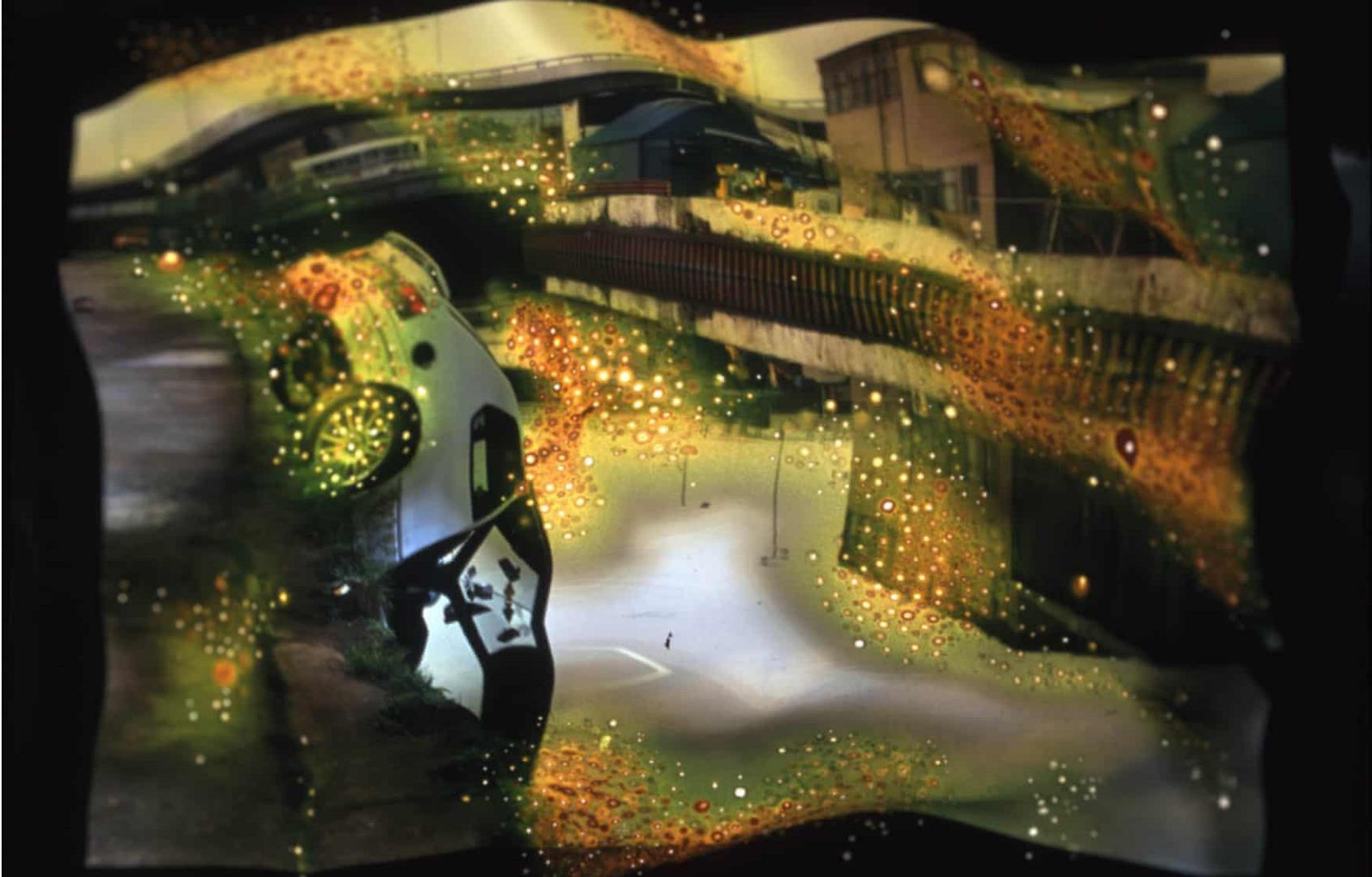
Deriu, D. (2016) 'Don't look down!': A short history of rooftopping photography', *Journal of Architecture*. Volume 21: Issue 7, pp 1033-1061

Deriu, D. and Kane, J. (2018) 'Towards a vertigology of contemporary cities', *Emotion, Space and Society*. Volume 28, pp 79-83

Graham, S. (2018) *Vertical: The City from Satellites to Bunkers* (London: Verso)

Minton, A. (2012 [2009]) *Ground Control: Fear and happiness in the twenty-first-century city*. London: Penguin

Minton, A. (2017) *Big Capital: Who Is London For?* London: Penguin.



Damage (burn, car, 1), 2005



Aims and Questions

Research aims:

To build upon a body of work contemplating public spaces and the urban environment, and particularly its upward, vertical development.

To explore contemporary political and socio-economic issues and their impact on architecture through the medium of the short film.

Research questions:

Which filmic techniques can be used to consider the landscape of London and protest its privatisation?

How can a short film challenge trends in development which negatively impact upon communities?

Is such a protest ultimately futile?

Research Methods and Process

In *Last Stand* Yass built upon her method of using the very power structures that she critiques as her support, as the crane building the tower she was standing on also suspended the camera. This is a development from her previous research projects such as *Aeolian Piano* in which a grand piano was suspended from a crane over the BBC TV Centre, where more than 60 abandoned grand pianos were found as it was redeveloped into private apartments. In *Lock*, the camera was on a boat crossing the Three Gorges Dam in China, and in *Lighthouse* it was on a helicopter, boat and underwater motor bike. Likewise, for *Wall*, a film tracking the Israeli separation wall, the camera was placed on a vehicle driving along the wall's access road.

The first shot in *Last Stand* shows the tower, its form resembling Modernist sculpture. The language of late Modernism came largely from material units of production, and the concrete tower returns it there, but now with a dystopian view of the future. This simple form of Modernism echoes the asceticism of Saint Symeon the Stylite, the medieval saint who lived perched on a pillar in the desert for 37 years. With its slow upward and downward pans and circling camera movement, *Last Stand* uses the language of Modernism to create a dystopian vision of contemporary London. The construction tower that Yass stands on is reminiscent of Modernist sculpture, but it will soon be hidden behind layers of concrete and glass luxury flats.

The only sound in the film is of seagulls from the nearby Thames wheeling above the construction site, not in the image but present through their cries. Their flight does not obey gravity or the rules of building construction, so they represent a kind of mockery. Yass experienced their voices as cacophonous laughter, ambiguous about whether they are laughing at Yass's failed protest or at the tragedy of this misused site dominated by political agendas.

Yass uses scale to political effect. At one point the crane swings round to show her facing the US Embassy, shielded like a fortress behind its facade. She is taking a stand against the Trump-led regime, however, in the image she remains a tiny figure up on the concrete tower, and like all last stands, this one is bound to fail. The use of 16mm film is similarly used to heighten a sense of lost agency and a lost history that is being covered over. Film is becoming obsolete so it carries a sense of loss, and its subtle tones that reach into the distance heighten the romance of open space, sky and river.

At the Guildhall Gallery, *Last Stand* was shown on a monitor, standing on a plinth modelled on the construction tower in the film. The plinth and monitor were positioned under the largest history painting in the UK, John Singleton Copley's *Defeat of the Floating Batteries at Gibraltar* (1791) which depicts a British victory as the Spanish enemy take their last stand.



Last Stand film still



Last Stand film still

Research Insights and Contribution

Last Stand was Yass's first performance work, having worked solely behind the camera in her previous films. Working with her own body broadened the references in her work, drawing upon a range of contexts from dance practice in the 1970s to current performative practice, placing this in a new historical and contemporary context.

Yass's small body was both supported by and set against the massive structures of the construction site, indicating that we are all implicated in the city that we live in. The traditionally masculine power structures of the city survive with a female body amongst them. By using the tower to support her body and the crane to support the camera, Yass both used them and recognised her dependency on them. The towers and cranes point directly upwards probing the sky before taking it over with real estate. The sky takes up half the screen, with its

picturesque blue suggesting the dramatic irony that it will soon disappear behind the same buildings that used its views as their sales pitch.

Last Stand builds upon works such as Bruce Nauman's *Bound to Fail* (1967). It questions the efficacy of political action in the face of indifference from institutional power, for instance in the 1980s miners' strikes, CND marches or HS2 protests. However, these protests do impact on the public sensibility and perhaps mark a boundary, constraining the limits of government power. Some protests, for instance those at Greenham Common, do have a real impact. And even failed protests raise the question of the value of failure. *Last Stand* suggests that there is a value in standing up for beliefs and dreams and the failure of the protest itself suggests that moral and ethical values are not about simple measures of failure or success.

Research Contribution and Recognition

Dissemination:

Last Stand was first shown at *Architecture of London*, Guildhall Art Gallery, London, 31 May – 1 December 2019. The total number of admissions to the exhibition was 7,775.

Follow-on-activities:

Last Stand will be shown at the underground gallery of Westminster University Ambika P3 as part of Yass's solo exhibition in 2021 (originally planned for 2020 but postponed due to COVID-19). The exhibition will feature as one of the London Festival of Architecture 2021 highlights.

As part of the postponed London Festival of Architecture events there will be a symposium where the films in the exhibition and the related theme of vertigo and verticality in Yass's work will be discussed.

Influence of research:

REVIEWS AND PRESS

For *Aesthetica* magazine, Elizabeth Scott, Head of Guildhall Galleries, City of London Corporation, wrote that '*Last Stand*, 2019 by Catherine Yass is another highlight – I travel through Nine Elms (the subject of the film) every day and have seen the major redevelopment of the area over several years. This is what is now coming to define London, although I think (and hope) it will be short-lived.'

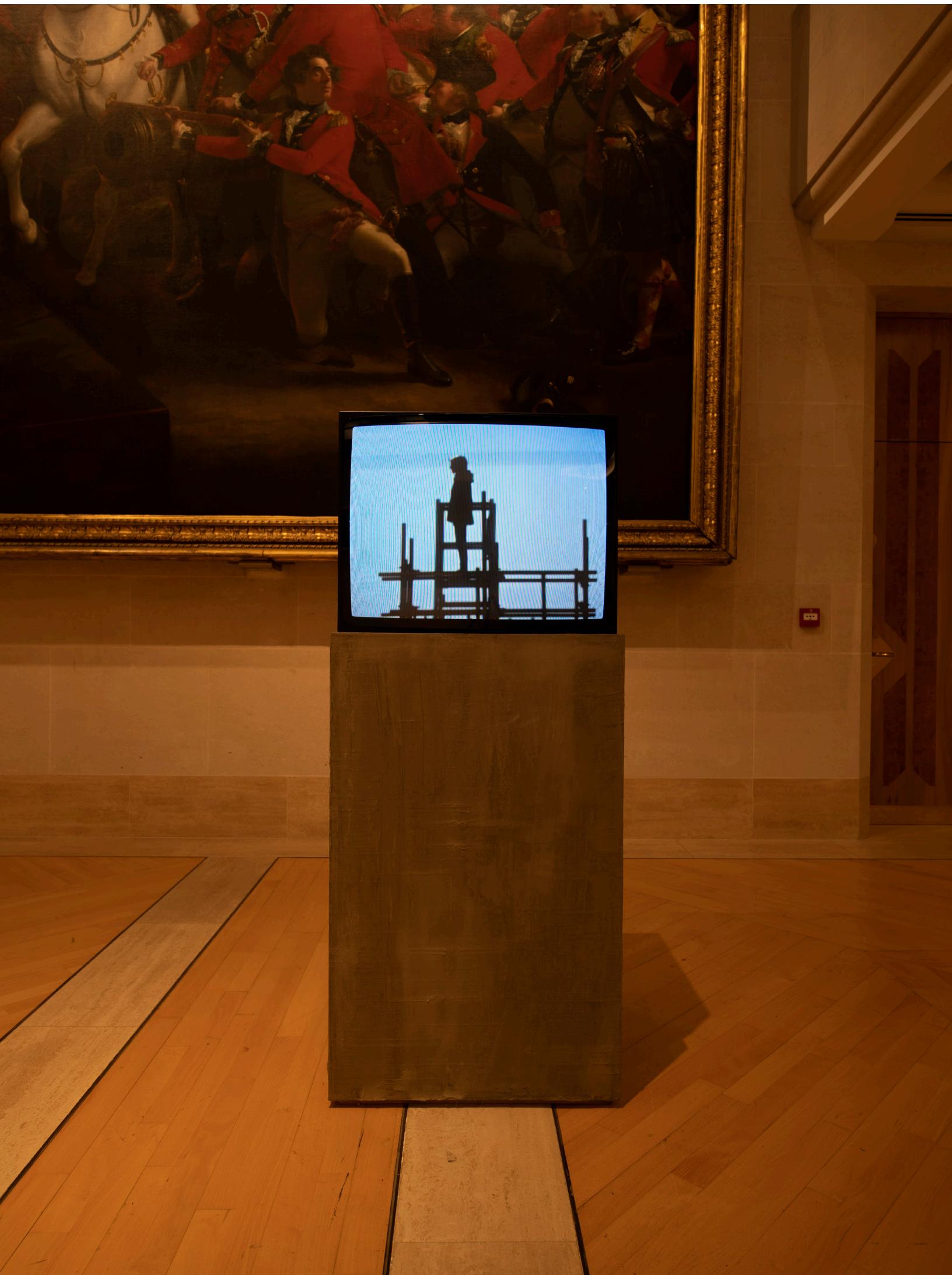
<https://aestheticamagazine.com/a-changing-city/>

A review of the exhibition in RIBA Journal states that 'Some of the most powerful pieces are the more recent. Catherine Yass's *Last Stand* is a film of a figure standing silent and still on top of a concrete core surveying the regeneration of Nine Elms – as the camera pans around we see the American Embassy in the background. It is, we learn, a 'last stand against the privatisation of the sky'.'

<https://www.ribaj.com/culture/architecture-of-london-artists-bridge-fire-review-pamela-buxton>



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