

MONUMENT TO THE VANQUISHED PEASANT



EXHIBITION BY LEAH GORDON

HERBERT ART GALLERY & MUSEUM, COVENTRY

Opens 3rd October as part of Coventry Biennial 2025

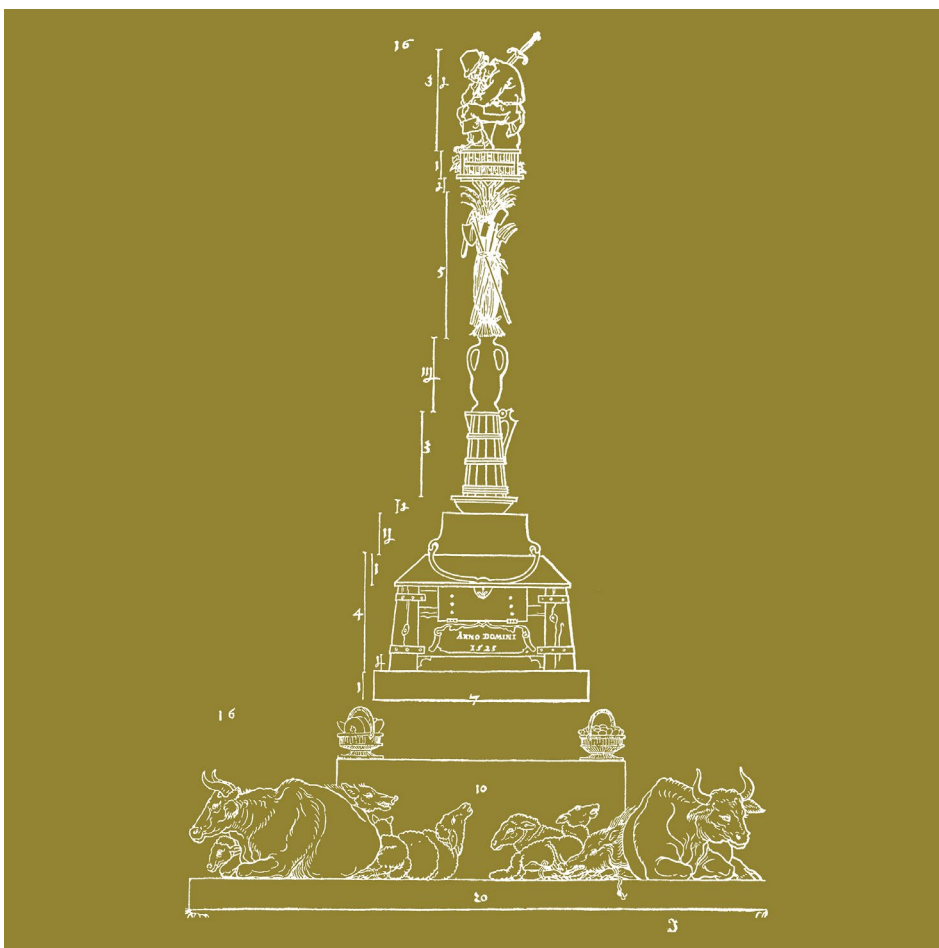
Commissioned by Meadow Arts

A new major exhibition by artist and curator, Leah Gordon, *Monument to the Vanquished Peasant*, explores the devastating impact of land enclosures on people and land across England through photography, montage and constructed images. Commissioned and produced by Meadow Arts and presented at the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum as part of Coventry Biennial 2025, this expansive project offers a radical reimagining of English history and society.

The Enclosure Acts marked a turning point in English society. Over centuries, the process of enclosure meant that the rural peasants lost their common rights of use over the land, and resources that had previously been shared and stewarded collectively now became the exclusive property of the landowner. This process often led to mass displacement and increased poverty, as well as the erosion of community ties and sustainable environmental practices.

Gordon believes that it is impossible to understand the structure of contemporary society without understanding the history of enclosure. Her exhibition reframes this history, not as a distant legal process, but as an enduring, embodied experience with urgent relevance today when questions about the nature of capitalism, as well as issues of ownership and access to the land and its use and abuse have come back to haunt current politics and the wider culture.

The exhibition takes its name from a 1525 sketch by Albrecht Dürer, who imagined a memorial, (which was never realised), to the brutal suppression of the German peasant revolts: a column topped by a stabbed peasant. Gordon revives and reinterprets that idea on English soil – honouring those displaced by centuries of land enclosures and reawakening public awareness of the struggle for land rights.



Gordon has been working, alongside a number of collaborators including Marg Duston and Annabel Edwards, for over five years. She has travelled across the UK, photographing, researching, and meeting with individuals and communities still connected to fragments of common land or the legacies of enclosure. Her work is informed by a long personal history of activism, storytelling, and socially engaged practice.

THE EXHIBITION

Monument to the Vanquished Peasant is presented in four interwoven chapters:

PART I | THE COMMONERS

In Shropshire, Gordon sought out surviving pockets of common land and the people who still hold common rights. Their portraits—shot on black-and-white medium-format film and hand-tinted by artist Marg Duston—appear alongside texts by Annabel Edwards, capturing local myths and personal memories of connections to the land.



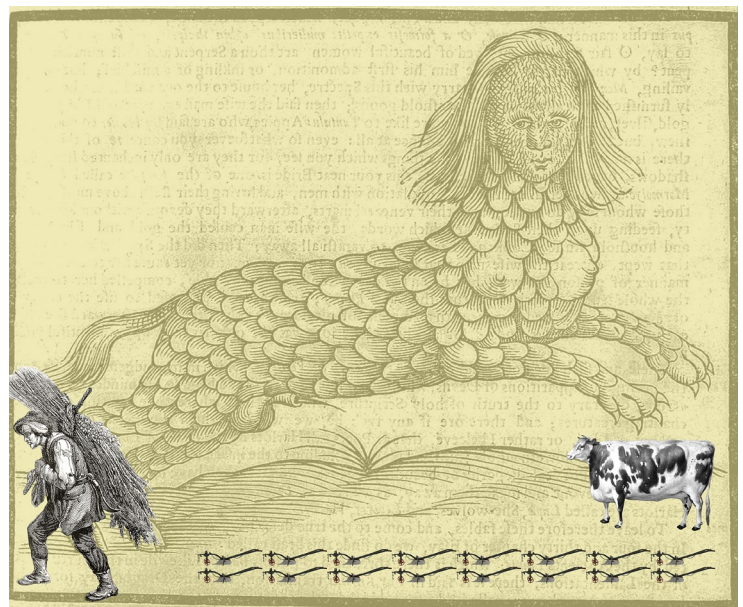
**Henry Hand,
Henley Common**
Rights: Grazing sheep and cattle



**John Heighway,
Clee Liberty**
Rights: Grazing sheep, cattle and horses

PART II | RURAL REBELS

This section looks at the histories of resistance. Stylised photomontages and large-scale portraits of British folk traditions reveal how protest and folk traditions merge, maintaining memory and resistance across generations.



PART III | VAGABONDS

The third and forth sections address the long-term consequences of enclosure: rural exodus and modern migration. In *vagabonds* Gordon's portraits of New Age travellers and road activists explore contemporary grassroots resistance to the loss of land rights.



Newly produced work includes images of abandoned caravans in the rural West Midlands and the Welsh borders, constructed portraits inspired by 18th-century street illustrations by John Thomas Smith in *Vagabondiana*. Each work holds traces of individual stories, collective resistance, and quiet refusal to be erased.



PART IV | ALLOTMENTS

The forth section explores hopeful methods of repairing our relationship with the land through portraits of local Coventry allotment holders, reflecting on contemporary land use and the new traditions emerging from today's struggles.



STEPHEN ELLCOCK FILM

The artworks are further contextualised by a special film presentation of images selected by the celebrated author and image collector Stephen Ellcock.



Herne's Oak from *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, ca. 1857, George Cruikshank, courtesy of the Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Fund.

'This project is the culmination of ideas that have preoccupied me for almost 40 years. It is on a trajectory from the folk punk band that I wrote lyrics and sang for in the mid-eighties; to my film on the Haitian peasant and the US destruction of their indigenous pigs; to my long regard for and image-making of British folk traditions; to my film, book and exhibitions on Haitian carnival; a journey informed throughout by my enduring inspiration and respect for 'histories from below', and an absolute expression of my class politics.'

Leah Gordon, artist

'MTTVP is an urgent, multi-layered response to a pivotal yet often overlooked chapter in British history and the fractures opened in these distant times have come back to haunt the current political, environmental and cultural debate. Meadow Arts is proud to have supported Leah Gordon in developing this work over many years. For this last phase of the project, we decided to temporarily leave our rural hinterlands, following in the footsteps of the displaced peasant who sought a new life in the industrial Midlands. But for us, the move was most fortunate as we have found the best partners possible in the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum and Coventry Biennial.'

Anne de Charmant, Curator and Artistic Director, Meadow Arts

'We're pleased to be continuing our long-standing partnership with Coventry Biennial and to welcome Meadow Arts to the city. Leah Gordon's exhibition brings a compelling lens to the legacy of land enclosure, connecting national histories with local experiences. Featuring Coventry's own allotment holders, the work resonates deeply with our communities and the ways people continue to claim space, grow, and belong.'

Marguerite Nugent, Cultural Director of CV Life

NOTES TO EDITORS

Leah Gordon BLOG

Leah Gordon (born Ellesmere Port, UK) is an artist, curator, and writer. Her work explores the intersectional histories of the Caribbean plantation system, the Enclosure Acts, and the creation of the British working-class. Her work amplifies 'histories from below' and recognises the role of carnival, folk traditions and grassroots religions in both performing and sustaining radical histories.

Gordon's film and photographic work has been exhibited internationally including the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney; the Dak'art Biennale and the National Portrait Gallery, UK. She is the co-director of the Ghetto Biennale in Port-au-Prince, Haiti; was co-curator of 'Kafou: Haiti, History & Art' at Nottingham Contemporary, UK; and 'PÔTO-PRENS: The Urban Artists of Port-au-Prince' at Pioneer Works, NYC. Her book KANAVAL was published in 2021 and her award-winning feature documentary Kanaval: A People's History of Haiti, was screened in cinemas and on BBC 4's Arena.

In 2022, Gordon exhibited in and curated at documenta fifteen, Kassel and had a solo show at MOCA North Miami. In 2023 Gordon's works were acquired by the Kadist Collection and the Royal Museums Greenwich, and in 2024 she had works in group shows at Museum Van Loon in Amsterdam, UMOCA, Salt Lake City and Musée du quai Branly, Paris.

Artist Talk and Exhibition Celebration

Friday 24 October, 5:30 – 9 pm

Herbert Art Gallery & Museum | Free

The launch event includes:

- An tour of the exhibition with artists and curators
- A panel talk (17:30 – 18:15) and Q&A with the artists
- Music and drinks

Exhibition Credits

Commissioned and curated by Meadow Arts

The Commoners was commissioned and supported by Meadow Arts and GRAIN Projects. Rural Rebels and Urban Vagabonds were commissioned by Meadow Arts.

Exhibition design by Leah Gordon

Presented in partnership with Coventry Biennial and Herbert Art Gallery & Museum

www.leahgordon.co.uk

www.coventrybiennial.com

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