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27-03-2012

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herbert wright looks twice: plunge

Have you noticed the blue rings hooped round familiar landmarks in the capital? You haven't? Herbert Wright visits an art intervention that encompasses three of London's most majestic monuments and tells us what it's got to do with rising sea levels

An amazing artistic intervention across central London called [Plunge](#) has less than a week to go. At night, three great monuments we may have passed a thousand times without looking at twice come alive with a halo of cold, eerie blue light. The installations have been extended to 1 April. Let's hope there's another reprieve coming, for the issue that artist Michael Pinsky highlights with Plunge: rising sea-levels. Each ring is exactly 28 metres above sea level, where waters would be in 3012 at their current rate of rise.

Pinsky was "interested initially in the symbolic nature of the structures; they have no function other than to commemorate moments in history". Monument-building was at its peak during the expansion of the British Empire and the Industrial Revolution: "the very point in British history where we started to live far beyond our means", Pinsky says. The original plan was to do Nelson's Column, but Boris' people blocked that. "They don't mind having adverts like Tropicana that pay lots of money, but issues around climate change are too controversial for them."



I tracked down the magnificent monuments Plunge has mounted. First call: the Duke of York column, 42m high, designed by B. Wyatt and finished in 1834, on Carlton House Terrace above the ICA. Here is the biggest of the three Plunge rings, because this is a hefty column. It was still light when I encountered Chloe Cooper of artist collective [DARTER](#) on the steps below the monument, the ring not yet lit up. She was holding a blue hula hoop up at various angles. "I'm exploring the formal aspects of Plunge through the hoop and the body," she declared.

Later, when Plunge lights up, another blue ring lights up to the south, but vertically and of a very different scale – the London Eye. The Duke of York Plunge becomes a visual stepping-stone between it and Piccadilly Circus's overload of brush animated ads to the north. On the thick column of Aberdeenshire stone thrusting up into darkness, the halo is a bit like a condom being

rolled down a huge dick. "Someone did comment it was like a penis ring," recalls Pinsky. The next

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Plunge ring is on a far daintier monument.



Rickshaws and taxis spin around a 1989 replica of Edward Pierce's 1694 Seven Dials pillar in Covent Garden, topped by six sundials. When the sun shines, the monument's shadow makes it the seventh sundial. People sit, talk and booze beneath it, just like when it was at the ground zero of London's debauchery 300 years ago. The Plunge ring seems close enough to touch – here, 28m above sea level is nearer the ground because it's several metres uphill from Carlton House Terrace. Nearby, people on the [Fabergé Big Egg Hunt](#) were stopping to snap one of many giant eggs. On my trail, I had just one target to go.

By St Paul's Cathedral, where Occupy London's tent city has been cleared from Paternoster Square, a fine Corinthian column is topped by what looks like a golden flaming pineapple. In fact, the whole 23m-high neoclassical structure is a monument to books destroyed in the Blitz

and was built in 2000 to designs by Whitfield Partners architects. Against the backdrop of St Paul's stone solidity, the ring feels like pure energy. The security guard patrolling the square said it shone all the time, but he only works at night – what would he know?

Who knows how much the sea will rise in another millennium. Scientists can't even be sure for this century: the rise could be anywhere between 18cm and 2m. One thing's for sure: our greenhouse emissions are warming the planet and the sea is rising. If you don't buy that, you're apparently smarter than the global scientific community. If methane hydrates start bubbling deep in the warming ocean, welcome to Waterworld, but if we pull off the almost-impossible switch to renewables, or fusion energy comes on-stream, the seas may settle.



Take the Plunge, track down those rings this week, be enchanted, do something [green](#). There's no time to lose!

Words and photos: Herbert Wright

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