

IVA GUEORGUIEVA

Matthew Sontheimer

In 1981, when Iva Gueorguieva was seven years old, construction began on the 1300 Years Bulgaria monument in Sofia, Bulgaria. The structure—designed by architects Alexander Barov, Atanas Agura, and Vladimir Romenski—consisted of three angular reinforced concrete sections (essentially gradated wedges) that emerged from a pit. The entire monument was plated in polished granite tiles. Photographs of the structure principally show it viewed from two sides. One side was adorned with Valentin Starchev's figurative social realist-style bronze sculptures. The opposite face held bronze Cyrillic-lettered inscriptions related to the figurations on the reverse side. When facing either side of the monument, the three sections created what appeared to be a wide base that rose at a sloped upward angle, then the two highest sections made a parallel zig and began a thinner and truncated upward slope in the opposite direction. The lower and slightly longer of the two upper pitched sections was faced with a large bronze-cast bird's wing that symbolized, according to the book, *Forget Your Past: Communist-fro Monuments in Bulgaria*, "an expression of striving for the future." Rising to a height of almost 114 feet, the monument was hastily built in less than eight months. The bronze wing turned out to be an ironic feature; due to accelerated completion dates and bad quality control, the polished granite tiles had begun to break off by 1985. After the fall of the country's Communist regime in 1989, the monument fell into further disrepair.

Bulgaria's political collapse in 1989 also brought upheaval to Gueorguieva's family. They left Bulgaria the following year, ultimately ending up in inner-city Baltimore, where they began to rebuild their lives. Gueorguieva has described this period of her life as extremely tumultuous; the family was constantly moving. Mirroring the disruption of those years, a violent revolution mobilizes within the compositions of Gueorguieva's paintings from 2010-15, with imagery that appears to have been run through a particle accelerator. Her sculptures from 2015-16, combining broken and hard-angle cast concrete, twisted rebar, and reclaimed steel, have colorful painted and collaged disruptions, echoing the unfinished, sad demise of the monument in Sofia.

By the late 1990s, the top end of the monument was stripped of its granite facing, exposing an elbowing armature of iron beams varying in scale. Picture the vertical section of a crane, combined with a partially built gallows and a wing. In late 2001, the monument was enclosed by a security fence in preparation for a visit by Pope John Paul 11 to the city of Sofia in the following year. This barrier simply provided additional space for colorful graffiti. As years passed, the monument continued to be vandalized and looted of materials. Numerous suggestions were proposed for this now derelict structure, including that it be turned into a climbing wall. In 2014, the Sofia Municipal Council created a resolution to dismantle the monument and to move Starchev's sculpted bronze figures to a museum in Sofia. This decision was finalized in 2016.

Over a hundred Communist-era monuments, some unimaginably huge and mostly described by scale and the tonnage of material used to build them, sit vandalized and falling apart all over Bulgaria. The largest of all of these monstrous late-twentieth-century sculptures, the House-Monument of the Bulgarian Communist Party in Buzludzha, looks like a massively scaled concrete flying saucer. Large sections of Cyrillic type on the

structure have been looted, and in capital sans serif Roman block lettering, someone has painted above the entryway to the building, "FORGET YOUR PAST."

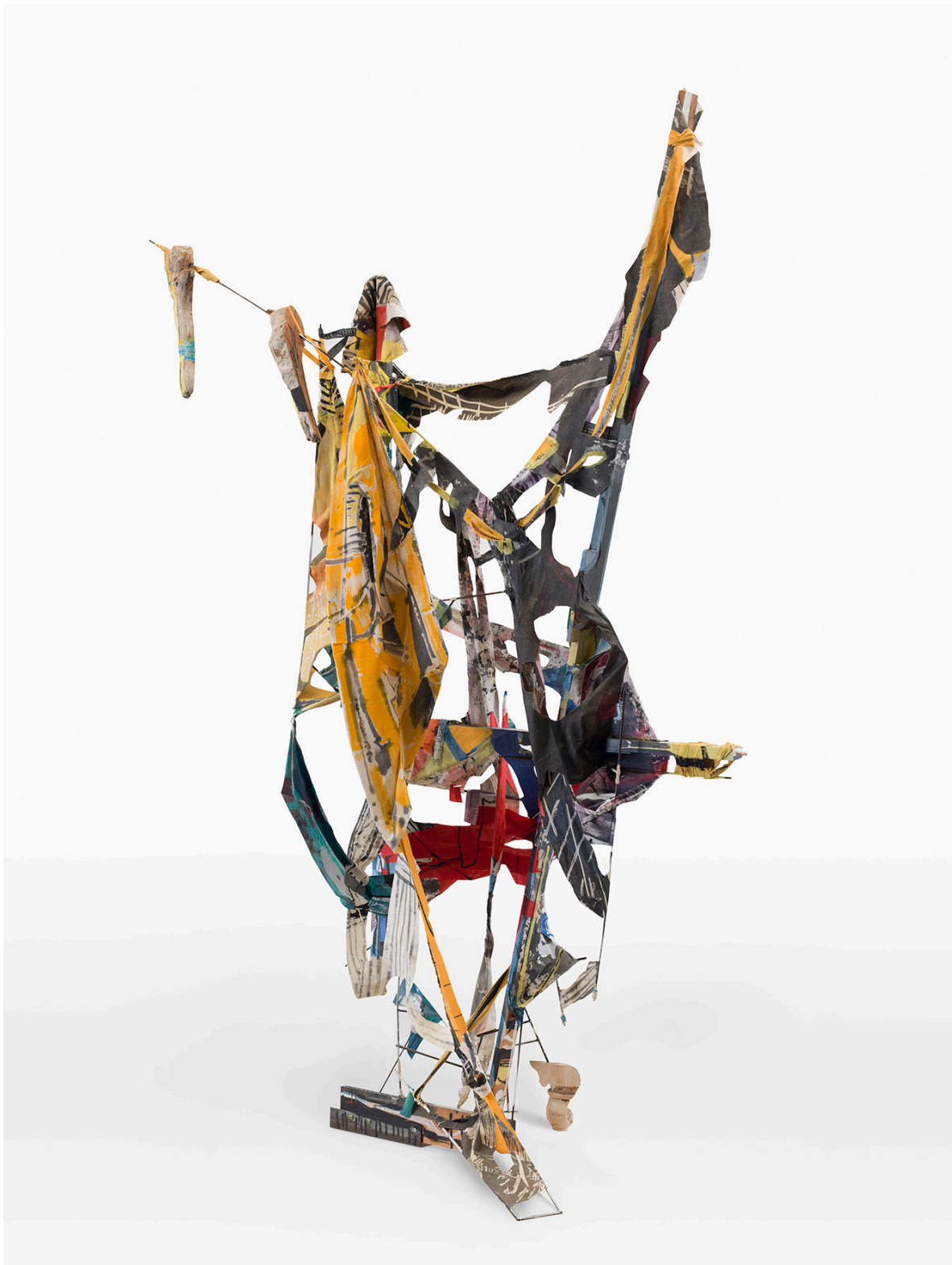
These structures embody modern versions of the mythological Bulgarian giants known as ispolini. Said to be nearly 10 feet tall, they came in various guises, some with huge heads, others with three heads and a single eye the size of an egg, some with only a single leg. They ate raw meat, fought dragons, and had voices so strong they could communicate with each other even when standing on faraway mountaintops. Powerful as they were, they could be felled by blackberry bushes, which they would trip over when walking. Crashing to the ground, they would get caught in the bushes' thorns and perish.

Gueorguieva's work maps and climbs the various aesthetic memories of the artistic pitches and peaks of the ill-fated 1300 Years Bulgaria monument. Ispolin giants cull through her subconscious, collecting visual fossils from the past. She seems to visit with George Herriman in his Coconino County desert to talk about various ways to create a wonderfully descriptive black line in a drawing; to travel to Terminal Iron Works to discuss form, painting, sculpture, and the Hudson River landscape with David Smith; and to stand with Pablo Picasso in his apartment in occupied Paris when a Gestapo officer bursts in, points to a photo of Picasso's painting *Guernica*, and asks the artist, "Did you do that?" and Picasso replies, "No, you did."

Talisman Debris: Drift is Gueorguieva's reflective Ispolin giant. This sculpture and the seven paintings in conversation with it mark a unique shift in the evolution of her work. The once violent upheaval that activated her earlier compositions has been filtered into a more open improvisational pictorial strategy that allows the viewer space for greater contemplation of Gueorguieva's sense of form.

Releasing the weighty materials of her previous sculptures, she has created a billowing structure that, though riddled with holes and slits, gives one the sense that it can still take flight. Moving around this work's relatively thin frame, one sees that it miraculously reveals an astonishing number of volumetric gestures, continually reeducating the viewer by providing new ways to perceive Gueorguieva's vision

Matthew Sontheimer received a BFA from Stephen F. Austin State University, in Nacogdoches, Texas, and a MFA from Montana State University, in Bozeman, Montana. He is currently an associate professor of painting and drawing in the School of Art, Art History & Design at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. His work is included in the permanent collections of The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the New Orleans Museum of Art, and the Whitney Museum of American Art, in New York.



TALISMAN DEBRIS: DRIFT, 2018
Steel, Wood, Fabric on clayboard
107" H X 56" W X 13" D