

A colonial ship made of invasive reeds is burned at City Hall, as art and protest

By **Cate McQuaid** Updated September 13, 2025, 3:22 p.m.



A crowd watches Adela Goldbard's pyrotechnic performance "Invadieron por mar, respondemos con fuego. Un presagio." at City Hall Plaza in Boston, MA on Friday, September 12, 2025. Andrew Burke-Stevenson for The Boston Globe ANDREW BURKE-STEVENSON FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Showers of sparks and billowing smoke overtook City Hall Plaza Friday night. They weren't an emergency. They were a [Boston Public Art Triennial](#) performance.

Artist [Adela Goldbard](#) orchestrated a dazzling fireworks display meant to raise questions about power and culminated in the fiery destruction of a quarter-scale

replica of the type of 17th-century sailing ship that brought European colonists to the Americas.

The performance, “[‘Invadieron por mar, respondemos con fuego. Un presagio.’](#) (‘They invaded by sea, we responded with fire. An omen.’),” which played out to the propulsive beats of Brazilian drummer [Marcus Santos](#), dramatized a first encounter between colonists and Indigenous people. It took place right in front of the municipal seat of power on what was once [Native land](#).

“I believe we live in a moment of fear. Not only here in the US, but in every part of the world,” said Goldbard. “People are scared to go to public spaces.”

But “the public space belongs to the people,” she added, “and we need to take it back and to use it as a mode of expression, as a mode of protest.”



Pyrotechnics go off at Adela Goldbard’s performance “Invadieron por mar, respondemos con fuego. Un presagio.” at City Hall Plaza in Boston, MA on Friday, September 12, 2025. Andrew Burke-Stevenson for The Boston Globe ANDREW BURKE-STEVENSON FOR THE B

The 32-foot-long ship was installed on City Hall Plaza on August 30, 350 years to the day after Massachusetts officials proclaimed Native populations would be confined to five villages, called [praying towns](#).

Audience members sat in a ring far from the ship, which was woven from reeds, to witness a spectacle that unfolded in three sections: The boat's approach, a battle, and the ship's fiery end. Goldbard worked closely with the Boston Fire Department to ensure safety. The performance played out over roughly a half hour and ended in a dance party.

"In all of my work, celebration is a way of protest," said Goldbard, who is based in Providence and Mexico City.

Karin Goodfellow, the City of Boston's Director of Transformative Art and Monuments, oversees the city's [Un-monument | Re-monument | De-Monument](#) initiative promoting dialogue about the nature and role of public monuments. She helped bring Goldbard's project to City Hall Plaza.

These days, "a lot of us are asking questions about history and the meaning of public art. What stories are we telling? What is a monument?" Goodfellow said. "I think this artwork is going to allow us to gather and experience wondering about what else could be."



Kristin Leader dances to a live Brazilian drumming performance at Adela Goldbard's pyrotechnic art piece "Invadieron por mar, respondemos con fuego. Un presagio." at City Hall Plaza in Boston, MA on Friday, September 12, 2025. Andrew Burke-Stevenson for The Boston Globe ANDREW BURKE-STEVENSON FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Burning a replica of a colonial ship could be seen as the antithesis of a stolid bronze statue of a founding father, but it makes its own mark.

"Destruction through fire is not any kind of destruction," Goldbard said. "it's a way of preserving and memory-making that can be more meaningful than an actual monument."

Both the means of destruction and the ship's material – a non-native [phragmite](#) – represent invasion. The reeds, Goldbard said, symbolize how "it's possible to overturn invasion by using this as a constructive material."

In the 16th century, "pyrotechnics were introduced into the Americas by the Spaniards as a mode of sensorial oppression to indigenous populations," said Goldbard, who has written about the [history of Mexican fireworks](#) and taken part in artist collectives in

[Tultepec](#), the self-proclaimed “pyrotechnical capital” of Mexico.



Adela Goldbard speaks about her pyrotechnic performance “Invadieron por mar, respondemos con fuego. Un presagio.” at City Hall Plaza in Boston, MA on Friday, September 12, 2025. Andrew Burke-Stevenson for The Boston Globe ANDREW BURKE-STEVENSON FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Catholic clergy “would put together very large and spectacular performances outside of the churches,” featuring indigenous performers, she explained. “They use fireworks and fire to symbolize punishment and hell.”

Over time, Indigenous groups incorporated fireworks in their own traditions.

“Now you see communities in Mexico that use pyrotechnics in a political manner,” she said. They burn political figures they oppose in effigy.

“The main meaning of these traditions is that whatever you represent in effigy in some way symbolically and allegorically represents evil or the traitor,” Goldbard added.

“When you burn it, it’s a cathartic, communal event.”

The artist's aim, she said, was to impact the senses.

"I'm really committed to bringing spectacle in public space to people so that when they go back home, they might reflect on what this means for them," she said.

As the event wound down, one woman in the crowd said to her companion, "It's interesting how fun it was to watch something burn."



A quarter-scale replica of a 17th-century European colonial ship constructed from invasive reeds burns at Adela Goldbard's pyrotechnic performance "Invadieron por mar, respondemos con fuego. Un presagio." at City Hall Plaza in Boston, MA on Friday, September 12, 2025. Andrew Burke-Stevenson for The Boston Globe ANDREW BURKE-STEVENSON FOR THE B

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