Just a Small Piece of Wood and a Knife: A Conversation with Paloma Varga Weisz
Sculpture, November 16, 2020
Ana McNay

sculpture
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Waldfrau (*Woman of the Forest*), 2001. Limewood, fabric, and tree trunks, 310 x 145 x 260 cm. Photo: Stefan Hostettler

Just a Small Piece of Wood and a Knife: A Conversation with Paloma Varga Weisz

November 16, 2020 by Anna McNay

Born into an artistic family and trained in the traditional techniques of woodcarving, Paloma Varga Weisz, who lives and works in Düsseldorf, Germany, uses sculpture, watercolor, and drawing to explore a world of masquerades and disguises, revealing histories and creating narratives. After she entered the art world in the early 2000s, her career took off quickly, with numerous international exhibitions, stipends, and awards.

Varga Weisz's most recent exhibition, "Bumped Body," debuted at the Bonnefanten Museum in Maastricht, the Netherlands, before traveling to the Henry Moore Institute in Leeds, U.K., where it was reinstalled in a completely new iteration. Scheduled to be on view through January 3, 2021, the show is closed temporarily due to the Covid-19

lockdown (updates can be found at www.henry-moore.org). *Bumpman on a Tree Trunk*, however, remains outside the gallery like an omen or watchman. Varga Weisz is also preparing to install an eight-meter-tall female figure, *Foreign Body*, in Joshua Tree National Park, in the Mojave Desert, as part of High Desert Test Sites, curated by Iwona Blazwick.

Bumped Body, 2017. Silver-plated limewood, 110 x 40 x 40 cm. Photo: Stefan Hostettler VG-Bildkunst, Sammlung Droege, Düsseldorf

Anna McNay: You were classically trained at a small school in Garmisch-Partenkirchen in Bavaria and were taught traditional techniques of woodcarving, modeling, and casting, before attending art school in Düsseldorf in the 1990s. What made you want to learn the traditional techniques? And how different were the two experiences?
Paloma Varga Weisz: It was really by accident that I ended up in Garmisch-Partenkirchen. I had applied to the art academies in Düsseldorf, Stuttgart, and Frankfurt, but kept receiving rejections. A friend of mine went to the school, which was how I knew about it. Its primary purpose was to teach people to become carpenters, but there was a smaller class where you could learn woodcarving. There were only 15 students in total, five in each year, so it was extremely personal, and we had a wonderful teacher. Ending up there really was the best accident I ever had; I was surrounded by nature, learning very traditional techniques of modeling in clay, making forms in plaster, drawing, and life drawing. Student took it in turns to undress and model—this was completely normal.

After my three years at that school, I applied again for the academy in Düsseldorf and was accepted. The first thing they told me was to forget everything I'd learned because it was traditional, old-fashioned, and had nothing to do with art. For a long time, I felt very confused and insecure. I put my chisels away and became more involved in student politics. I was in Gerhard Merz's class, and he was a very conceptual artist. We were not allowed to work in the classroom. He was extremely selfish, always talking about his own work; by the end, everybody was making work that looked just like his. Today, I would see this as a form of abuse.

AMc: How did you move on from this after leaving the academy, and how has your practice developed in the intervening years? Would you describe it now as a combination of traditional techniques and more contemporary methods?
PVW: It was really at the end of my time at the academy that I rediscovered wood. I wouldn't be where I am now without that period of confusion. I had this dream of trying to say what I wanted to say in a very simple way—just having a small piece of wood and a knife is enough to bring your work to life. I had the minimalistic idea of not needing a big workshop, of being able to work anywhere, and so my first works after graduating were very small, delicate figures. One of them is in the exhibition at the Henry Moore Institute —*Deer, standing* (1993). The end of my time at the academy was my true starting point. A couple of years later, I had my first exhibition in a gallery in Düsseldorf, showcasing a group of ceramic models. I was lucky. It's hard to go from a community of students and professors into a world where you are a nobody and a beginner and to have to find an entrance into the art world. I had a lot of luck, and people introduced me to galleries. I had my first collaboration in Hamburg with a very well-known gallery. I was able to make a living. This was in the early 2000s, which, in terms of the art market, was a good period.

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Hirsch, stehend (*Deer, standing*), 1993. Polychromed limewood, 92 x 6.5 x 14 cm. Photo: Stefan Hostettler

AMc: You talk about working directly with just the knife, or the chisel, and the wood to say what you want to say. Is there an underlying message to your work, or a particular theme that engages you?
PVW: Every work has a story of its own. There is a thread running through my different materials—the drawings, single sculptures, installations, mixed-media works, film—but I think it's a story that is going to be told in different ways.

AMc: Does it develop as you go on?
PVW: Yes, I would say so. I think it gets deeper. Especially when you do a museum show, you become a choreographer for all the works from different periods of your life. In the end, they come together, and it's like a spider's web. Everything is connected. It's also interesting for artists to revisit early works. They have a fresh naiveté about them, which sometimes gets lost when you become more professional and learn "the trick." You have to be careful of this trick, otherwise your work can become boring and repetitive.

AMc: How do you manage that? Do you have a method for stopping yourself when you realize you're going down that route?
PVW: I think my daily life is very intense because I am running a family alongside my working practice. Quite often I feel as if my inner reserves are empty. But, to me, that is always a good sign, because then you can fill them up completely afresh with new ideas.

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Running out of ideas is one of the greatest fears for an artist, or for anybody in a creative business. But it's actually at that moment that you're ready to start something completely new.

Installation view of "Paloma Varga Weisz: Bumped Body," Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, U.K., 2020. Photo: Stefan Hostettler

AMc: Where do you look for inspiration?
PVW: I really don't know. The last time I was working intensely was at the beginning of lockdown, and I really enjoyed that time. I reconnected to drawing, and it just bubbled out of me. Sometimes I look in a magazine and see a face, which then develops into something, but this time, I felt extremely free not to focus on any given subject. I had just had a heavy schedule of shows and projects, and I needed to recover from having so much on my plate.

AMc: How significant a role does drawing play in your practice? Do you think of yourself as a sculptor, or do you prefer the term "artist"?
PVW: I'm definitely not a painter. Sculptors see things and think in three dimensions. They are physically more involved with the material. I don't think I'd necessarily call myself a sculptor, but, at the end of the day, I am still a very traditional sculptor. I would say my approach to sculpture comes from a different angle. I'm more like a storyteller, narrating through sculpture.

AMc: Do your drawings relate to your sculpture? Are they a means of playing with ideas?
PVW: They're definitely not sketches. They're as important as the sculptures themselves, maybe just the "easy part," because they are quicker to make and involve less organizing. I can talk to people while I'm drawing. I wouldn't say I have a daily practice of doing this or that. It comes in phases. I recently exhibited some of my drawings at Gladstone Gallery in New York, as part of the group exhibition "Drawing 2020."

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Wilde Leute (*Wild Bunch*) (detail), 1998. Ceramic, dimensions variable. Photo: Stefan Hostettler VG-Bildkunst

AMc: I was going to ask if you had a particular routine.
PVW: I wish I did, but I don't. Being a mother, family comes first. This is something that I really understood during lockdown. I would have a completely different practice, and maybe a different output, if I didn't have my family. But then I wouldn't be me. I am happy to have kids, and I am lucky to live the life of a woman artist with children—something that does not have a long history in the art world.

AMc: Your father, Feri (Ferenc) Varga, was a Hungarian painter. Was he an important influence on your decision to become an artist?
PVW: Extremely so. He influenced our family enormously and was a very special person. I learned a lot from him, and, after school, before I approached the academies, I spent a year training with him. He was my model. I was constantly making drawings of and modeling his face. It was a very intense relationship.

AMc: You are named after Picasso's daughter, because your father mixed in those circles.
PVW: He was living in the south of France, on the Côte d'Azur, after fleeing Paris when the Nazis arrived. He met all those artists—it was one big community. He was very close to Françoise Gilot, Paloma's mother. He was an even closer friend of Jean Cocteau, with whom he collaborated on a book of poetry and prints. It was a difficult time, because a lot of these people left to go to America, and my father was Jewish as well. Meeting a German woman and then moving to Germany in the late '50s, when the war was still recent history, was not easy. He kept his past secret for most of his life.

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Installation view of "Paloma Varga Weisz: Bumped Body," Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, U.K., 2020. Photo: Stefan Hostettler

AMc: Am I right that all your work is done in your studio, or do you work with fabricators and other specialists in materials?
PVW: I work alone in my studio, except for when I'm making things in bronze, when I work with a foundry. I am also connected to a workshop that specializes in ceramics. But my preference is for working in my studio and doing things by myself, or sometimes with an assistant if it's necessary.

AMc: You said earlier that your drawings aren't sketches. Do you make sketches at all, or do you just have the idea in your head and start working? And how does this develop as you progress?
PVW: I would say it's a journey, especially with the bigger installations. Most of the time, I model my idea in clay and then transform it into wood. But, other times I need help, as was the case with *Foreign Body*, which was made for High Desert Test Sites. I transformed the small sculpture into something eight meters high. It's divided into parts and will be reconstructed in situ in Joshua Tree National Park. The sculpture is of a woman, sitting on a container, with a huge branch piercing her body. The branch looks like a bone, or it could also be seen as phallic. It goes through her and is quite aggressive. She has an extremely melancholic, vulnerable pose. The container will have a pop-up food stall, selling vegetarian dishes and vegetarian burgers.

The idea is linked to California roadside architecture from the 1930s, '40s, and '50s, which featured monumental figures, like signs, that could be seen from far away. For example, you might buy your milk at a drive-in, between the legs of a cow. Some of these structures are still there, but many have been destroyed, because they were made from very simple materials. Of course, there's also an association with Hollywood stage architecture. My figure will be a very big sign in the middle of nowhere, which you will be able to see from far away.

AMc: "Bumped Body," at the Henry Moore Institute, opened just before lockdown over the winter and then had to close; it was later extended until January 2021. How did it feel to have worked so hard on the show only to have it close just days after the opening?
PVW: I was in shock. We had the opening night, and I think we were all in a bubble of happiness, and we didn't realize that everything around us was already completely different. I think I blocked reality until I flew back to Germany. It was a challenging time, and I had a really strong reaction to the closing of the show.

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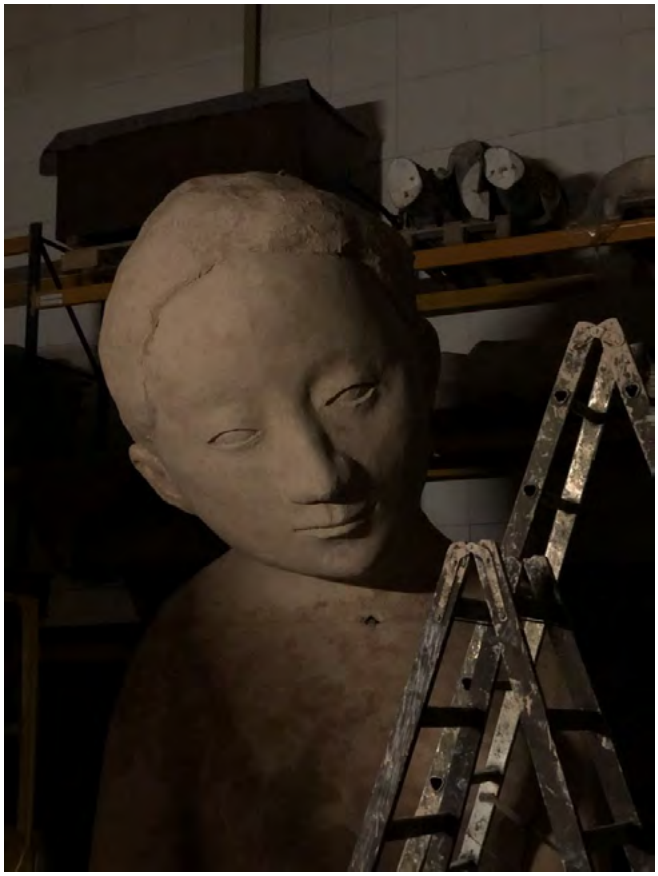

Foreign Body, 2020. View of work in progress. Photo: © Paloma Varga Weisz

AMc: *Bumpman on a Tree Trunk* (2018) remained on public display outside the museum. Do you know what the response has been to this figure? I heard that at one point someone put a mask on him.
PVW: When we chose him to go outside, we had no idea of what would happen just a few weeks later. I am very interested in images from the Middle Ages and 16th-century pamphlets depicting what, in German, you would call *Wundergeburt*. It doesn't really translate, but they are monstrous people— babies with two heads, misfits—who were seen as holy, sent from God as signs. *Bumpman* was inspired by one of these images, and so I feel that he is very connected to that history. He became a sign without being intended as such. When I made him, I wasn't interested in making a sign; I was approaching him as a sculpture with lymph nodules all over his body. But then, suddenly, there was a whole new lens through which to see him.

AMc: There's definitely a strong sense of illness about him, something to do with a virus or plague.
PVW: Yes, but I think he is also a character with whom you could make friends. He has a peaceful expression, and he gives you a feeling of happiness, like you want to hug him. I don't know—I'm not the person who should give you an interpretation, but I think he has a glimmer of hope, and I hope that he is seen as a positive sign.

AMc: How involved are you usually with the installation of an exhibition?
PVW: Extremely involved. It's very important how the works are installed, which room is the best for which work. At the Henry Moore Institute, it was quite tricky because, although it's a big institution, the space isn't easy. The exhibition was shown first at the Bonnefanten Museum in Maastricht, which is much bigger. We had to change the whole setup and bring things together that were not together before, but I really enjoyed doing

that. Having a traveling show isn't easy because you are meeting new people and a new space, but you are restricted to a given list of works. It's interesting to flip the choreography and the importance of the works about a bit.

Bumpman on a Tree Trunk, 2018. Bronze, installation view outside the Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, U.K. Photo: Stefan Hostettler, Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

AMc: You also make cabinets, filled with smaller sculptures—like *Wunderkammern*. Are their contents fixed, or do you also use the cabinets in different exhibitions with different contents?
PVW: They are fixed. I see them as a form of poetry, with the shelves as lines of writing. On each shelf, there is a sentence. It's a poetic way of installing work. I use a mix of found objects, private stuff, and small sculptures.

AMc: You've mentioned that you don't think you should be the one to interpret your works, but how important is it to you that viewers should know something about your sources of inspiration or about you as an artist?
PVW: I just had this discussion with my assistant Sophie, after filming some short interviews with Laurence Sillars, head of the Henry Moore Institute, for the website. In the final episode, we talked about some very private stuff, and I was wondering, "Do I want this? Is it necessary?" I don't know. A lot of artists have private stuff in their work and, because of that, I perhaps have my doubts as to what really is private. Makers and their story are just ingredients. The work is an independent thing, and the connection to the viewer is another independent thing, because you always bring your own story into the viewing of a work.

Paloma Varga Weisz
The Dorf, May 29, 2018
Katja Hütte

T·H·E D·O·R·F
MAGAZIN FÜR DÜSSELDORF

(https://thedorf.de)

PALOMA VARGA WEISZ

A naked man hangs from the ceiling. His long-limbed, life-sized body is the rst thing coming into view, as the heavy studio door opens. The room with high ceilings and the cathedral-like windows is located in a former factory building of the "Duewag" on the edge of the Lierenfeld industrial estate. There is a strong smell of wood in the air. The male nude's eyes are closed. He is slim, slender and made of limewood. This is the wood from which most of the sculptures of the Düsseldorfer artist Paloma Varga Weisz are made.

*** Hier geht es zu deutschen Version des Beitrags / Click here for the German version of the article(https://thedorf.de/gesichter/ein-tag-mit/ein-tag-mit-paloma-varga-weisz/) ***

The man hangs helplessly — in the ropes, so to speak, on straps. His joints are flexible, like a life-sized puppet on strings. His expression seems forlorn and he has an aura of vulnerability about him. He is literally hanging in the air. And is sentenced to immobility. This hanging man is an example of the incredible precision in the craftsmanship and artistic language of Paloma Varga Weisz.

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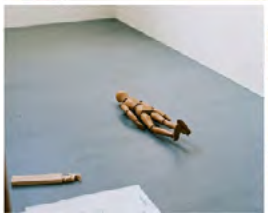
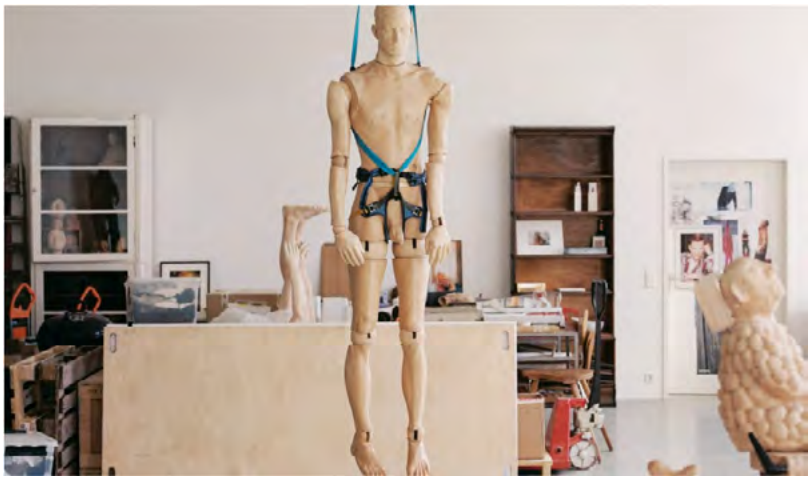
The silence in the wide, well-structured studio space has almost something sacred. Everywhere you look, other beings come to life. Contemplative, introspectively beautiful faces or busts, with open, expressionless or closed eyes, lying, almost sprawling female nudes, in showcases, on boxes or shelves.

Or, here and there, just a pair of arms or legs rise in the air. There are 37 tools lined up on the workbench — from at carving tools to ne knives. “That’s not all, by far”, says the sculptor, stroking her short brown hair and a smile flickers across her beautiful, open face. The artist first shapes her models from clay, then from clay into plaster, and finally transfers them to wood.





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A “Beulenmann” (bumpman) is secured in the vice. His body is covered with balloon-like boils. Here the excessive growth of elephantiasis, but also the bumps of the plague provided the inspiration. The “bumpman” seems to have relaxed into his fate. His right hand is placed on his left. His left leg is crossed slightly over the right. Him and his form or rather disfigured form display an inexplicable ease. Beside him on the workbench sits the “mouse-child”. A squatting mouse with the face of a human child, eyes closed. Her mother used to call her “mousechild” when she was little. A term of endearment transformed into art.

Ponti (1), the tiger-dachshund, with one green and one blue eye, and Feri (12), one of Paloma Varga Weisz’ two sons, roam through the adjacent living area. His grandfather was also called Feri. Feri Varga Weisz was Hungarian and also an artist. He was already 61 years old when Paloma was born in 1966. Her name is inspired by one of his friends in Paris during the golden era of the twenties — Pablo Picasso. If you wanted to tell Paloma Varga Weisz’ whole life story, it would ll a book. In any case, her father followed her mother from France in the fties to Neustadt at the Weinstrasse.

The fact that Paloma Varga Weisz became an artist is, in her view, a path that was already mapped out. “It’s like children of doctors often also study medicine”, she says with an earnest look on her face. The artistic work was something completely natural in her childhood. Feri Varga, the father’s artist name, spread his paintings across all walls, including those in the rooms of the three children. And they were encouraged to draw and paint, too. “We organised exhibitions and sold the works to our parents. An early preparation for the art market”, says the artist and smiles. Initially though, she wanted to be an actress. After falling asleep over studying the text “Antigone” for an entrance exam, however, she decided: That’s not for me!

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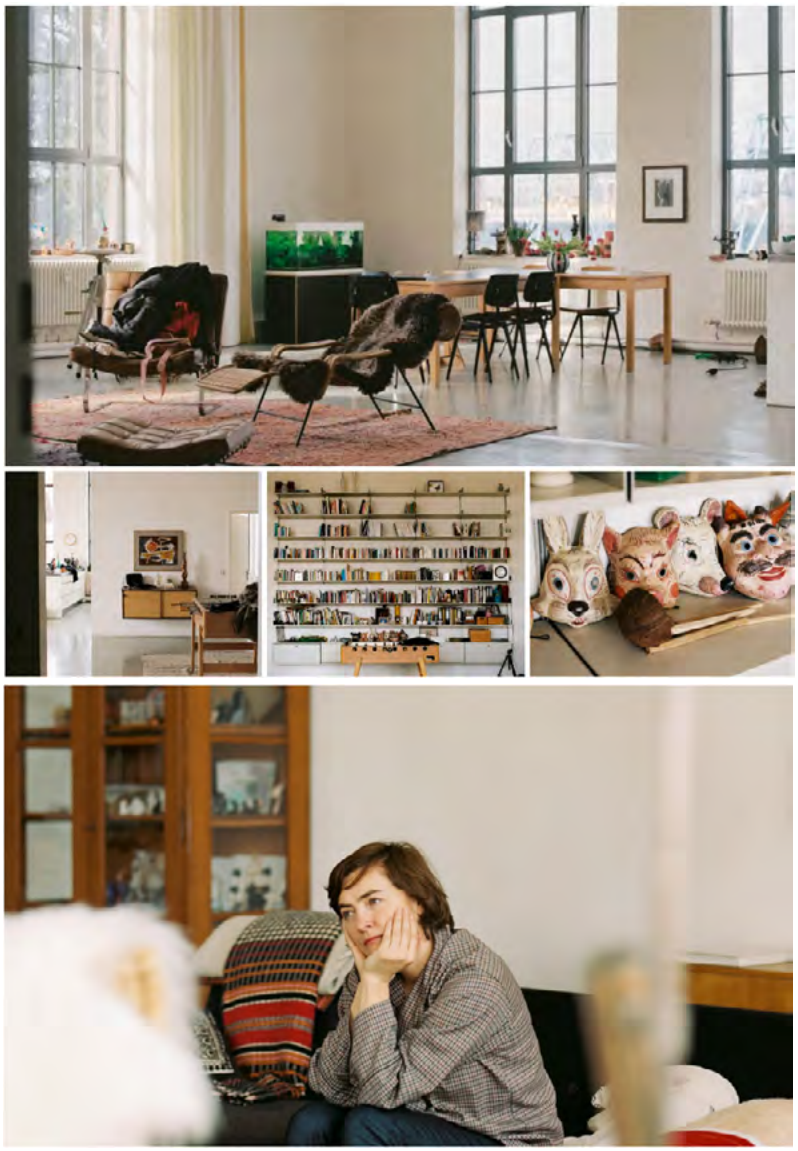
"I then became my father's apprentice", says Varga Weisz. But her portfolios were rejected by all art academies. What followed was a formative period between occupied houses and the beautiful landscape of her surroundings, with her boyfriend at the time and people of all professions: "The full hippie programme. There were no pubs. We met, made big bon res and had great parties." And then a friend raved about a school in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, a "rock solid" education for carpenters and wood sculptors — with only five admitted at a time.



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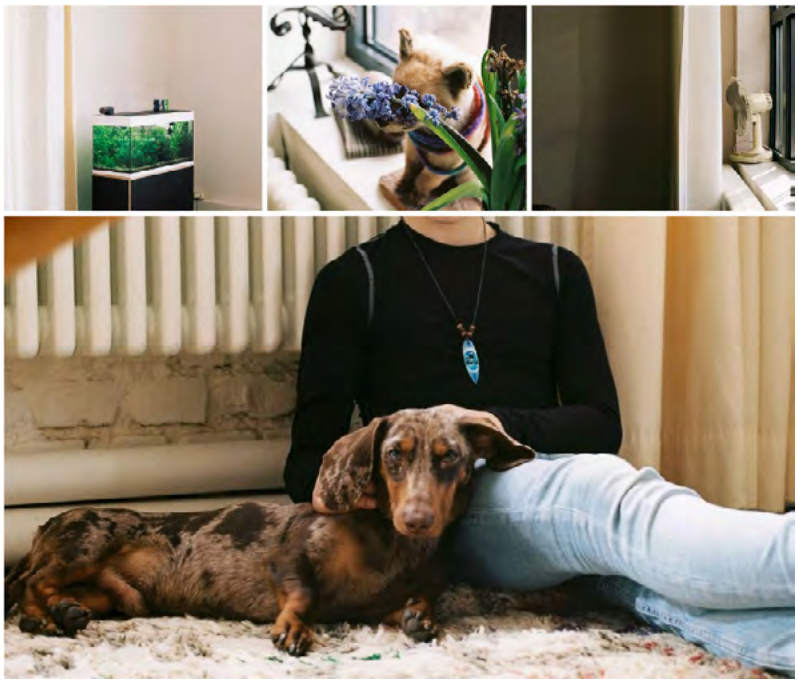

Paloma Varga Weisz passed the entrance exam immediately. The lessons included life drawing, drawing, molding, carving. “In this incredibly beautiful environment”, recalls the sculptor. “The only town on the edge of the Alps. Mountains of 3000 metre right outside the door. This time grounded me and connected me to the material.” It was a “school of seeing” for her.

When she finally came to Düsseldorf’s academy of fine arts in 1990, the professors of the orientation classes said to her: “At first, you have to forget everything!” She should free herself of woodcarving and look for her own topics. “That was confusing for years”, she says, seemingly still amazed of how she returned to woodcarving in the end.

From Tony Cragg she changed over to Gerhard Merz. At that time she carved her legendary meerkat for an end of year exhibition. Its human-like behaviour fascinated her. The same goes for her stag. She had read about the peculiar posture of the animal standing on its hind legs in the papers. On school trips with Gerhard Merz to Florence and Siena she discovered the renaissance period — especially Piero della Francesca. “I was actually more fascinated by the paintings.” But sculptures also influenced Paloma Varga Weisz. She mentions the reclining Christ of Holbein. One of her reclining female nudes is inspired by Cranach.

All these works provided a source for her own language. From then on, the artist’s aim was “to get to the present moment, to find a contemporary language” in which the medieval works echo, but which, moreover, gives way to a truly personal and original voice.

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"Carving out a career in art in Germany is not that easy", she says, looking thoughtful again. There isn't an obvious reason for it. But one thing is certain: Immediately after she finished her studies in 1998, Paloma Varga Weisz had her first solo exhibition in the now defunct Galerie Bochynek in Düsseldorf. Today she is represented by Konrad Fischer Galerie. Her art has won several awards. She has a presence on the international stage, including as a participant at the Venice Biennale and is represented in New York by Barbara Gladstone, among others. The most successful collaboration to date is with the Londoner gallerist Sadie Coles(https://www.sadiecoles.com/exhibitions/current/). The next show is scheduled for June 2018.

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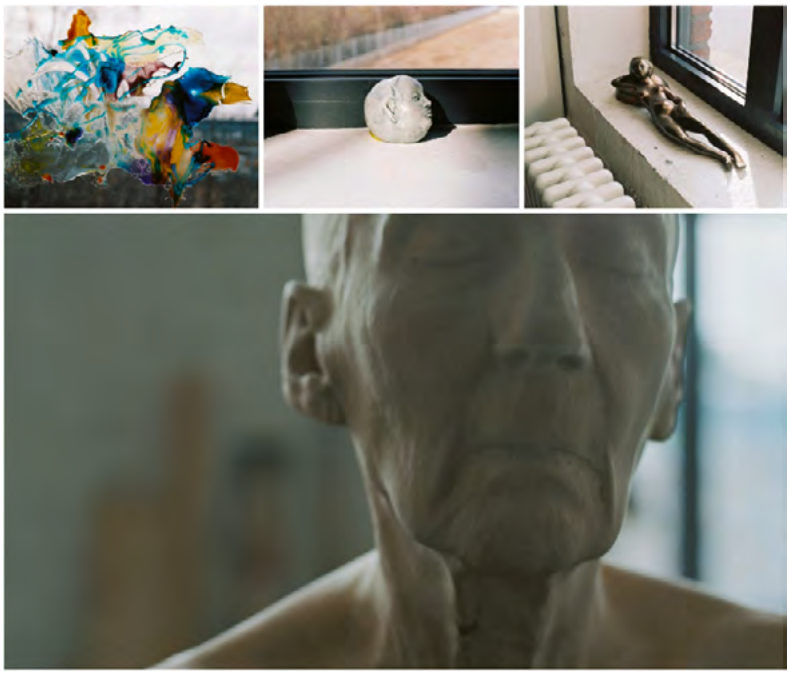

Then the artist tells a little anecdote. While still a student at Düsseldorf 's Art Academy in 1996, she participated with two small sculptures in a group exhibition in Stockholm — a co-operation between the Rhineland and the Swedish capital. Paloma Varga Weisz positioned one lying and one standing nude in a couple of available niches in Stockholm's house of culture. Then disaster struck: Just before the opening one of the two figures was stolen — the standing female nude. It caused a big upset. "After all, Queen Silvia of Sweden was conducting the opening ceremony", recalls Varga Weisz.

An ad appeared in the newspapers pleading with the thief that if he hands in the work at the reception, he would not be punished. But nothing happened. Interpol got involved and Paloma Varga Weisz found out her work was included on the list of missing works of art and was listed directly behind Vincent Van Gogh. She was intrigued by that. What she wasn't impressed by was having to stay silent about the theft during the opening in order not to disturb the proceedings. A strict protocol was followed, all around the Queen's appearance and many other official guests. "Queen Silvia was kindly chatting with me in German and I stood there in front of her with a tied tongue."

Back at home in Düsseldorf, the anger flared up again. Without further ado she wrote a letter to Queen Silvia and added a picture of the stolen sculpture. She was sorry that the Queen had unfortunately missed the wonderful work, because it had previously been stolen and she was not allowed to mention anything. However, she would give her the opportunity to see it now by providing her with picture of it.

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Today, Paloma Varga Weisz laughs about the audacity of her younger self. Shortly thereafter she received a letter from the Queen. “She apologised for her country and gave me a check for double the amount of the insurance for this work.” About two thousand Deutschmark. An insurance value Paloma Varga Weisz can only smile about today. “But the story is so beautiful, it’s almost worth that the sculpture was stolen”, says Paloma Varga Weisz, laughing. In February she was invited to a group show in Stockholm again. Nothing was stolen this time. But she discovered a perfume entitled “1996” instead (the year of the first group exhibition). An artist friend gave it to her after she told him the 1996 anecdote. The standing female nude is still missing today.

Katja Hütte(https://thedorf.de/author/td_katja/)
Sabrina Weniger
(http://sabrinaweniger.de/)© THE DORF 2018

Digitale Kunstkrant

Bonnefanten koopt sleutelwerk Paloma Varga Weisz

17 april 2018

Paloma Varga Weisz, Galgenfeld (2003-2004), opstelling in 2004 in Museum Kurhaus Kleve.

Het Bonnefantenmuseum in Maastricht heeft het monumentale kunstwerk *Galgenfeld* van Paloma Varga Weisz aangekocht. Het is een sleutelwerk binnen het oeuvre van de Duitse kunstenaar. Dit werk betekende haar internationale doorbraak.

"De installatie *Galgenfeld* vervult een onmisbare brugfunctie tussen de belangrijke deelcollecties middeleeuwse religieuze sculptuur en hedendaagse kunst van het Bonnefanten", vertelt directeur Stijn Huijts. "Paloma Varga Weisz koppelt actualiteit aan Euregionaal erfgoed en past binnen onze focus op de 'verborgen' canon. Als zodanig draagt het werk bijzonder bij aan de signalerende functie en het onderscheidend profiel van het museum."

Varga Weisz (1966) maakte voornamelijk kleinschalig houtsnijwerk tot ze in 2003 het monumentale Galgenfeld ontwikkelde dat in 2004 te zien was in haar eerste museale solo in Museum Kurhaus Kleve in Duitsland. De presentatie een jaar later in de Arsenale van de Biënnale van Venetië betekende haar internationale doorbraak. Inmiddels heeft ze verschillende internationale solo- en groepstentoonstellingen op haar naam staan.

Het Bonnefantenmusum kon het kunstwerk aankopen met de steun van het Mondriaan Fonds. In het najaar van 2019 wijdt het museum een grote tentoonstelling aan Paloma Varga Weisz.

Rostos e máscaras
E Magazine, 2017
Celso Martins

Culturas

Exposições

Rostos e máscaras

Uma escultora alemã cujo trabalho, predominantemente em madeira, alia rumores do passado a uma teatralidade contemporânea

TEXTO **CELSO MARTINS**

★★★★

PALOMA VARGA WEISZ

Galeria Pedro Cera, Lisboa, até 6 de janeiro

A madeira não é exatamente o material mais recorrente na escultura contemporânea, mas a artista alemã Paloma Varga Weisz (Neustadt an der Weinstrasse, 1966) usa-a de um modo peculiar, capaz simultaneamente de incorporar imagens muito diversas mas de um modo distintivo.
E é disso mesmo que se trata: de imagens. A sua escultura filia-se não exatamente na escultura clássica antiga mas na antiga e popular tradição de as esculturas transportarem imagens, de serem 'imaginária'.
A isso não será alheio um pormenor da formação dela que determinou algumas condições do percurso posterior. Antes de ingressar na Escola de Artes de Dusseldorf — onde foi aluna de Tony Cragg e Gerhard Merz —, Paloma aprendeu a esculpir em madeira e esse processo povoa ainda hoje o seu trabalho.
Com um já longo percurso internacional e obras em coleções como a do MOMA, apresenta agora na galeria Pedro Cera, em Lisboa, um conjunto de esculturas e desenhos que pode ser visto como uma miniantologia do trabalho desenvolvido nos últimos anos. Algumas obras são particularmente significativas. Em "Bumped body" (2017), um rosto particularmente parecido com o da artista encima um corpo grávido reduzido a um tronco pintado a negro como se de um luto se tratasse. "Bumpman" (2016) mostra uma estranha figura masculina sentada, com o corpo coberto de empolamentos. "Phylida — cabinet 6" desenvolve-se no interior de uma espécie de moldura: na parte superior mostra-se o torso de uma mulher idosa e na inferior um par de braços numa descontinuidade de planos rara numa peça tridimensional. Já "Still life", deste ano, a peça mais teatral da exposição, é uma escultura-instalação onde se vê um corpo de criança adormecido debaixo de um aparatoso laboratório químico com instrumentos de vidro.
Nestas obras a docilidade da madeira ao molde colabora quer na verosimilhança quer na intromissão do elemento maravilhoso. Ao mesmo tempo, Weisz desconfigura a unidade dos corpos, transforma-os em corpos-ecrã ou corpos-experiência, como se a relação que temos com eles oscilasse sempre entre o contacto com a sua fisiologia e a distância de uma imagem que, não fosse tangível, e podia ser um *still* de uma narrativa fílmica mais alargada.
Simultaneamente, a escultura oscila entre dois polos que não costumam cruzar-se na prática desta disciplina artística: o rumor biográfico e a efabulação fantástica que contorna a literalidade das circunstâncias e amplifica e universaliza a experiência pessoal. Paloma estabelece este programa num diálogo múltiplo com a história da escultura (e não só a europeia) e da pintura, citando códigos representacionais (como na *pietà* simiesca de "Nosemonkey", 2017) ao mesmo tempo que os deforma em favor da imagem que pretende criar. Nas aguarelas assistimos a uma convocação de personagens cuja espessura volátil e espectral se resolve mais rapidamente, ainda que com a mesma desarmante economia de corpos, referências e contextos.
No trabalho de Weisz, silêncio, sono, doença, morte despontam numa contraditória mistura de fantasia, inocência e teatralidade, que contorna qualquer morbidez potencial e lhe sustenta o mistério. ●

Em primeiro plano, "Nosemonkey", 2017, escultura de Paloma Varga Weisz na Galeria Pedro Cera, em Lisboa

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Paloma Varga Weisz “Root of a Dream” at Castello di Rivoli
Mousse Magazine, December 13, 2015
Vincenzo Latronico

MOUSSE

Paloma Varga Weisz “Root of a Dream” at Castello di Rivoli
December 13~2015

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The works of Paloma Varga Weisz are primarily human figures carved out of wood or drawn on paper with pencil and watercolor. Any attempt to describe them summons up terms like “grotesque” or “uncanny”.

A woman with two faces, her disjointed figure hanging from a lush piece of fabric, as if caught in mid-air as she fell. A man with a huge, erect cock where his nose should be. A teenage caryatid holding up a capital with her graceful body, which is covered in hair. A shy little man sitting naked on his perch, with dozens of iridescent nodules sprouting from his skin.

A man with a goatee, a vagina, and three small breasts. These are some of the works on view in the first museum show in Italy by Varga Weisz, a German artist approaching 50: “Root of a Dream”, curated by Marianna Vecellio, at Castello di Rivoli. The descriptions given above are tech- nically accurate, yet essentially false. Varga Weisz’s sculptures and drawings do not convey a sense of grotesquerie, but rather a feeling of peace, all the more inexplicable as it seems to contradict the disturbing situation from which it springs. This conflict of inter- pretation is what gives Varga Weisz’s work its core appeal—what it has to say to the viewer.

Jennifer Higgie wrote in *frieze* that the ideal setting for Varga Weisz’s work would not be a white cube, but a haunted house. At the Castello di Rivoli, that’s what it has found. In ten rooms of the castle normally used to show the collection, an extraordinarily sensitive and intelligent curatorial scheme allows each piece to reveal its full ambiguity, through a careful use of natural light and a skillfully woven dialogue with the thematic frescoes in the rooms.

These ambiguities start with the materials. The pregnant man *Bumped Body* (2007) is covered in gleaming enamel that perfectly mimics a polished copper surface; the lumpy man, *Beulenman* (2003) is treated with a series of paints which are then abraded, to look just like polychrome ceramic. The most recent work in the show—*Lying Man* (2014)—shows a dismembered corpse with African features, stretched out like a drowned migrant; the black of the scorched wood underscores this interpretation. But the carving on his face and hands reveals the layer of light wood below; the pigmentation of his skin suddenly takes on the appearance of blackface.

Upon closer observation, even the subjects of the sculptures seem to be in inner contrast with their outer condi- tion; serene when they ought to be desperate, timid when one would expect arrogance. The patriarch with the huge phallus on his face, *Ohne Titel – A Glorious Man* (2008–15) is a little old man, sitting at a table with the awkwardness of a schoolboy; the symbol of overbearing virility makes him feel embarrassed and deformed. The hairy caryatid *Waldfrau* (2001) has the distant smile of a little girl despite a body she can’t seem to identify with; a similar expression—serious, but not gloomy, just absorbed—can be found on the shiny pregnant man. The man whose skin is covered with tuberous growths (sitting small and alone in the middle of a light blue chamber called “the veil room”, due to the frescoed piece of tulle that hangs gauzily from the ceiling) is not crushed or disgusted by his condition, but as bashful as a young girl.

One is strongly tempted to associate Varga Weisz’s work in sculpture with a certain vein in the oeuvre of Thomas Schütte. There are the same dark moods, the same realistic yet deformed bodies. Here too, we find human beings who look like victims of some trauma. But Schütte’s figures have afflicted or bewildered or terrible expressions, and to look at them we must grapple with repulsion; their faces show the suffer- ing they have undergone. Varga Weisz’s faces are just the opposite. Though dealing with equally traumatic situations, they express not desperation but a mild serenity, a sort of peace. This disorients viewers, then bewitches them. Rather than repulsion, one feels fascination and calm.

So it is not to Schütte’s desperate faces that these sculptures should be compared, but to Francis Bacon’s obtuse, alienated ones. A famous essay by John Berger saw the essence of Bacon’s art as describing a world where the worst has already happened: a world where all effort is useless. Bacon’s distorted faces are bordering on inhuman, and do not reflect the pain of trauma, but the desperate realization that it has already come about, and there is nothing that can be done. Paloma Varga Weisz’s characters also inhabit a world where something trau- matic has taken place without giving them any choice in the matter; but this does not mean they have no power. Their effort—plainly visible—is to understand, accept, move on: it is this inner strength that allows them to find peace despite their deformity, their double heads and excrescences. While according to Berger, Bacon showed what it meant to succumb to alienation, Varga Weisz shows what it means to remain human, in spite of it all.

Vincenzo Latronico

at Castello di Rivoli
until 10 January 2016

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Around Town: Turin
Frieze, December 4, 2015
Amy Sherlock

frieze

Around Town: Turin

Paloma Varga Weisz, 'Root of a Dream', installation view, Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, 2016.
© Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Rivoli, Turin; photograph: Stefan Hostettler, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

The walls and frescoed ceilings of the former apartments of the Dukes of Savoy in Castello di Rivoli have many stories to tell. On the site of an ancient medieval fortress, on a hill just outside of Turin, the castle was expanded in a late-baroque flourish in the early 18th century by Victor Amadeus II of Savoy, King of Sardinia. For a sorry couple of years at the end of his life, Victor Amadeus was held prisoner there – with his morgantic wife, a former mistress – by his own son. A number of these rooms currently house Paloma

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Varga Weisz's 'Root of a Dream', one of a number of exhibitions that opened to coincide with Artissima art fair in November, and in which history and storytelling commingle, as in the Italian word for both: *storia*.

Varga Weisz's first institutional solo exhibition in Italy has been thoughtfully and sparely installed by the artist and curator Marianna Vecellio. Stepping into every room feels as though you are intruding upon the characters of the artist's dark, fairytale bestiary worked in carved wood and ceramic, so at home do they seem among the Castello's ghosts of dynastic drama, love and betrayal. And home – particularly in relation to Freud's concept of the uncanny, or unhomely – is key here. The show opens with *Magazin* (Warehouse, 2012), which looks like an ominously over-sized and unadorned, grey-painted cuckoo clock, whose side panels extend to cover the length of the wall as well as a dusty open-sided dolls' house, with yellowing, stained lace curtains (*House*, [37.71], 2012). Screening in the same room on a small monitor is what looks like a home video from the 1980s (*Two Artists*, 1986): a touching piece in which a young, beautiful Varga Weisz and her father, the artist Feri Varga, dance together and pose for the camera in grimacing carnival masks.

Paloma Varga Weisz, *Untitled (A Glorious Man)*, 2008/15, installation view, Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, 2016. © Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Rivoli, Turin; photograph: Stefan Hostettler, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

Around Town: Turin
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The exhibition's circular, Hansel-and-Gretel-like logic of fathers and woodcutters and getting lost in enchanted forests concludes with *Untitled (A Glorious Man)* (2008/15), a pale wax figure with an enormous, penis-shaped proboscis that nearly touches the table in front of him. Father or figment, he is a reminder of the sexual connotations of the word 'root' and the Oedipal desires that surface in dreams.

Bernd Ribbeck, *Untitled*, 2015, acrylics ballpoint pen on mdf, 28 × 40 cm. Courtesy Norma Mangione Gallery, Turin; photograph: Sebastiano Pellion di Persano

The labyrinths of the unconscious recur at Galleria Norma Mangione in the small-scale works on board by Bernd Ribbeck. Though directly referencing the impossible, M.C.-Escher-like levels of the game app *Monument Valley* (2014), his stylized, axonometric architectures also recall the oneiric, endless spaces of Giorgio de Chirico, Alberto Savinio and later surrealists. Created by building layers of acrylic paint and dense drifts of biro lines, these works constantly play a trick of flatness and depth, reminding us that things are never quite as they first appear.

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Darren Bader, *Proposta per le 9 Sinfonie (Proposal for Nine Symphonies)*, 2015, installation view at Piazza Carignano 2

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In the centre of town, in an elegantly crumbling second-floor apartment overlooking the Palazzo Carignano – dating from the same period as the Castello, and commandeered as a temporary outpost of Galleria Franco Noero for the duration of Artissima – Darren Bader conjured the sounds of all nine of Beethoven's symphonies, recorded by different orchestras and each playing in a different room. *Proposta per le 9 Sinfonie* (Proposal for Nine Symphonies, 2015) is billed as a project proposal, which Bader is searching for someone to finance. The realized version would involve nine orchestras playing live in nine different rooms. As so often with Bader, with such an Quixotic undertaking you sense he's deadpanning – not that this detracted from the unadulterated pleasure of standing in the sun-bathed Piazza Carignano (built, incidentally, for Emmanuel Philibert of Savoy, older second cousin of Victor Amadeus, who was both deaf and mute) listening to Beethoven, brilliant in nine ways simultaneously.

Paul Etienne Lincoln, *The Glover's Repository*, installation view, 2007-2015, mixed media, 200 × 370 × 50 cm. Courtesy Guido Costa Projects, Turin

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At Guido Costa Projects, Paul Etienne Lincoln's *The Glover's Repository* (2007–15) is a large, illuminated vitrine filled with 24 slowly rotating gloves. These represent historical figures famous for a great deception, either as perpetrators or victims. Through a wondrous clockwork mechanism, continually tweaked by the artist in his role as mad inventor on opening night, each glove rotates one full circle for every year of the characters life (like the orbiting planets in an orrery).

In English idiom, hands are typically proof of authenticity, as in 'to see first hand', while the glove implies duplicity: the corrupt overtones of being 'hand in glove with' someone, and 'the velvet glove that conceals the iron fist'.

The tales of each character are detailed on information cards that line the walls: Gabriele D'Annunzio, Mata Hari, General Tom Thumb, La Castaglione. (The latter pleaded the case for Italian unity, orchestrated in Turin, to her lover Napoleon III.) These include a preponderance of *belle époque* courtesans and *demi-mondains*, reflecting, to be sure, a burlesque, almost steampunk sensibility that inflects Lincoln's *oeuvre* although, less generously, affirming an age-old stereotype of the *femme fatale* and female betrayal through seduction.

Ed Ruscha, 'Mix Master', 2015, Installation view Pinacoteca Giovanni e Marella Agnelli, Turin. Pictured: collections from Museo Franchetti del Collegio San Giuseppe, Turin, Museo della Frutta "Francesco Garnier Valletti", Turin and Accademia di Agricoltura, Turin. Courtesy Pinacoteca Giovanni e Marella Agnelli, Turin.

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In a venue built for Piedmontese industrial royalty, the Pinacoteca Giovanni e Marella Agnelli – a futuristic Renzo-Piano-designed glass box on top of the family's former Fiat factory in Lingotto – hosts a magical *Wunderkammer*-like presentation. Working with curator Paolo Colombo, Ed Ruscha – an artist whose career is tinged with the smell of gasoline – has explored some of Turin's more esoteric institutions, including the Fruit Museum, the Museum of Criminal Anthropology and the Agriculture Academy; in 'Mixmaster' their finds are displayed alongside a select survey of Ruscha's own work, much of it from his personal collection. Grouping the pieces under straightforward headings such as 'Cars', 'Anatomy' and 'Cinema', the show finds unexpected resonances between such curious pairings as a preserved dissected hand from the mid-19th century and Ruscha's photograph *Self-Portrait of my Forearm* (2014), and the contour portraits that the artist has been making since the 1970s and early shadow-theatre puppets from the National Cinema Museum.

Carlo Mollino, *Leo Gasperl skiing downhill*, black and white print on photographic paper. Courtesy Politecnico di Torino, Archivi della Biblioteca Centrale di Architettura 'Roberto Gabetti', fondo Carlo Mollino

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Writing critically of the artist-curated show format in an article earlier this year, Claire Bishop dismissed it as producing 'an ambience that you just kind of *feel* rather than understand'; here, looking from Ruscha's painted *Skier* (1987) to archival photographs of (sometime-ski instructor) Carlo Mollino (and friends) on the slopes and beyond to the snow-tipped Alps, it seemed to me that feeling is its own way of understanding.

Paloma Varga Weisz
Artforum, November 2015
Marco Tagliafierro

ARTFORUM

Paloma Varga Weisz

CASTELLO DI RIVOLI MUSEO D'ARTE CONTEMPORANEA
Piazza Mafalda di Savoia
October 27–January 10

View of "Paloma Varga Weisz," 2015–16.

What if memory were not a trustworthy and responsible means for gauging a life? And what if the simple reason for this was that memory does not give priority to the truth? Is memory actually more pragmatic, devious, and cunning? Not in a hostile or malicious manner—on the contrary, it might act to satisfy our needs. This exhibition by the German artist Paloma Varga Weisz poses such substantial questions. It is a show of anthropomorphic sculptures endowed with mysterious protuberances, which appear as ideal extrusions of our sensory systems. The sculptures seem to be the result of a syncretic action between the kinds of sculpture that one still sees in European alpine regions and early examples of three-dimensional art, particularly the Venus of Willendorf. Many of the gouaches also on view here establish a discourse with the sculptures, while the film *Deux Artists*, 1986, by Varga Weisz, Bernd Stoll, and Feri Varga, documents a surreal dialogue between two protagonists: the artist and her father.

There is something about this show that pushes memory into the void of oblivion, distorting it into something unrecognizable. The installation gallantly misinterprets it, but then clearly restores it. Memory an idea also supported by the exhibition's title, "Root of a Dream," which is taken from a poem by Paul Celan and here refers to Varga Weisz's investigation into the relationship between recollection and the return of the repressed.

Translated from Italian by Marguerite Shore.

— Marco Tagliafierro

My Influences
Frieze, May 2014

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PALOMA VARGA WEISZ

My Influences

From her father's illustrations of Jean Cocteau's poetry to Lucas Cranach, Giorgio de Chirico and Gerhard Merz, the German artist discusses the evolution of her pictorial language and *Jennifer Higgie* responds to her 'heart-breaking hallucinations'

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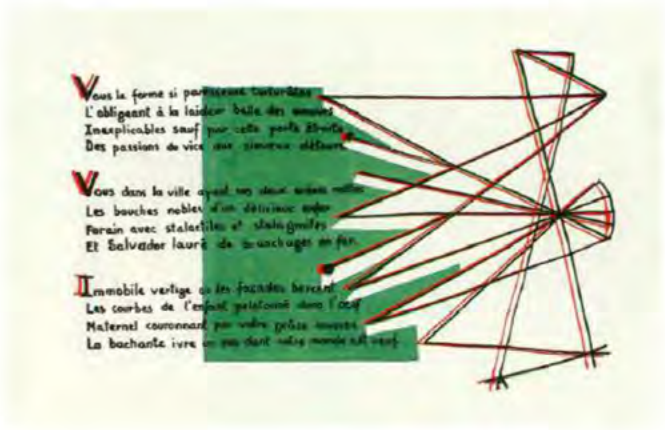

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Paloma Varga Weisz, *Krummer Hund* (Crooked Dog, detail), 2013, limewood, paint, cabinet, 200 × 79 × 42 cm

1
Feri Varga, *Hommage à Jean Cocteau (Cagnes)*, (Homage to Jean Cocteau, Cagnes) 1956, oil on canvas, 88 × 116 cm

2
Feri Varga, *Hommage à Gaudí* (Homage to Gaudí), illustration for Jean Cocteau's book *Hommages*, 1955

3
Lucas Cranach the Elder
Venus, 1532, tempera and oil on beechwood, 37 × 25 cm

PALOMA VARGA WEISZ

The first art that moved me was that of my father, Feri Varga. He was a Hungarian artist, born in 1906, who moved to Germany to be with my mother in the late 1950s. He lived most of his life in France. Our house was filled with his work; there were large abstract paintings in my bedroom that I used to look at, searching in them for the face of a cat or a dog. My father did not feel comfortable with his bourgeois existence and he used to tell us stories about how he had lived in the South of France and knew Jean Cocteau, Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso. Cocteau asked him to illustrate 20 of his unpublished poems, 'Hommages', in 1955. My father encouraged us to put on our own exhibitions, which we did when I was three and four years old and then asked our parents to buy our work, so quite naturally, from a young age, I assumed that being an artist was my profession. For a while at school, though, I thought I would like to become an actor and so I joined the theatre group in order to prepare for the drama academy. However, the first role I had was in Jean Anouilh's *Antigone* (1944) and I got so bored learning lines that I fell asleep; I realized then that acting was not the profession for me. So, I decided to become an artist. But when I wasn't accepted into the art academy, I went to a small school near the Alps, in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, and trained as a wood carver; we were only 15 students. After a while, I realized that I could express everything I wanted to say, wherever in the world, with a small piece of wood and my tools. I learned a certain language as a starting point. But when I went to art school in Dusseldorf in the 1990s, I was told to reject my training as a wood carver. It was depressing: at that time it was all about political correctness and, whilst in this state of confusion and groundlessness, I became strongly involved in student politics.

It was one of my professors, Gerhard Merz, who, despite being a radical conceptual artist, encouraged us to understand the past, and it was through him that I found my way back to wood carving and art history. I became interested in religious paintings, in their atmosphere and expression, the temperature of their colours and their melancholy; I wanted to distil their atmosphere and get rid of the emotional baggage.

It is hard to single out one artist who I admire, as I adore so many artists from so many centuries. However, I have always liked how Piero della Francesca simplified faces: *The Nativity* (1470–75) is a good example of this. Especially when I was studying, I felt very close to Lucas Cranach's paintings: I loved his naked bodies, which look like small wooden sculptures. The colour he used reminds me of limewood. Hans Holbein the Younger has also been an influence, especially his painting *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1521); it is so easy to imagine it in a niche in a wall. I also like how Giorgio de Chirico connected elements from reality with an

'A lot of artists have a very clear vision about what a sculpture should look like, and they go to a workshop and have someone else make it for them. I could never do that.'

PALOMA VARGA WEISZ

imaginary world, and the atmosphere in his empty cities. I feel very close to Louise Bourgeois and I am inspired by how her life developed. The fact that she created art when she was very old made me realize there was no rush; there is still plenty of time to discover things. I met her at one of her Sunday Tea Salons in 2002 in New York. It was quite a bizarre experience. We were asked to bring something, and so I took her a little wooden figure I had made, wrapped up in a kitchen towel.

The human body has always fascinated me. Very often I begin with my own body or the bodies of people I am very close to. My body is just one example of a life; it could be everybody or anybody. It is very important for me to develop a piece of work completely by myself. A lot of artists have a very clear vision about what a sculpture should look like, and they go to a workshop and have someone else make it for them. I could never do that, because creating a sculpture is like a journey that can take me to surprising places; I can swerve and end up in a totally different world. If I gave my sculptures to other hands to make, I would miss all that.

The different elements of my work create a kind of mental vertigo; I think about all the things I see, while I move on to making new ones. My cabinets are like a poem of space or like words in a sentence; the sculptures are placed on the shelves to create a particular rhythm. The different spaces between the shelves play a role as well. It is the rhythm between order and disorder, like you have in a wardrobe, trying to keep things together, but the doors are open. In my desire to hold onto things in a world that constantly drains itself by people passing away, I collect objects and, although they come without their own memories or records, I transform them in wood.

There are the things that fall into my hands, and the ones that I search for and find: traditional handmade objects, handcrafts, also things from other cultures. A sculpture starts very playfully and then, while I'm playing, it becomes more and more serious.

Carving is very hard: it's like peeling a wooden apple and you cannot correct mishaps. It demands both great physical and imaginative effort and concentration.

My work is neither mystical nor is it influenced by fairytales. I'm not religious; I am open to various possibilities and do not want to be told how to look at, or understand, the world.

Paloma Varga Weisz lives and works in Dusseldorf, Germany. Earlier this year, she had a solo show at Sadie Coles HQ, London, UK; in 2013 she had solo shows at Kabinett für aktuelle Kunst, Bremerhaven, Germany; Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin, Ireland; and CAPRI, Dusseldorf. Her work will be included in 'The Human Factor', Hayward Gallery, London, which runs from 17 June – 7 September this year.

JENNIFER HIGGIE

The natural home of Paloma Varga Weisz's sculptures is not a gallery; it's a haunted house. The white cube is too neat, too linear, for these heart-breaking hallucinations; what they require is an architecture of nook, cranny and moat, chimney stack and dusty corridor; unexplained cries flavoured with the odd rumour, say, of a fleeing wolf. For Varga Weisz's is an art of benign, bewildered ghosts of indeterminate age and century who crowd together, united, I imagine, in their longing for a *mittel*-European hut, preferably deep in a forest. However, despite evoking a distant past even when it's brand new, her work is not nostalgic: it's more complicated than that. The artist trained as a traditional wood carver for three years in Germany before studying at the

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1
Paloma Varga Weisz
Mountaineer, 2014, limewood,
71 × 28 × 27 cm

2
Louise Bourgeois
photographed by Brassaï at the
Académie de la Grande-Chaumière,
Paris, 1937

3
Giorgio de Chirico
The Enigma of a Day, 1914,
oil on canvas, 1.8 × 1.3 m

4
Hans Holbein the Younger
The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb, 1521, tempera on panel,
31 × 200 cm

Dusseldorf Academy in the early 1990s, which was, at the time, deeply immersed in theory; she felt pressured to reject her technical skills and grapple with ideas instead of tools. These opposing forces are evident in what she has made over the past 20 years or so: pitting the visual against the conceptual has lent her work a mood of rich temporal and spatial instability. Looking at her recent show at Sadie Coles in London, I wrote in my notebook: 'Is the present a dream of the past or a hangover from the future?' That's what her work does to you. The conflict (if that's the right word for something so troubled, so mysterious, so weirdly joyful) she expresses is both personal and social; she takes a conventional type – a mother, say – and confuses it. Her approach is not unlike Stanley Kubrick's in *2001 A Space Odyssey* (1968) when, without explanation, he places an astronaut in a baroque bedroom.

Varga Weisz's vocabulary – which is informed as much by medieval carvings, German renaissance painting and feminism as it is by unfinished amateur woodwork and moulds sourced from eBay – is one that 20 years ago might have been described as post-modern. In her case, though, it's too strategic and too self-conscious a term; I suspect Varga Weisz is an artist for whom nothing could be more tedious than having to explain something that she has, in her own very particular way, made perfectly clear. Though an echo of religious iconography hums beneath these secular surfaces, feeling – divorced from the shackles of religious certitude – reigns, assured of the rightness of its own idiosyncratic fact. Moving between blunt symbolism and raw emotion, she returns again and again to certain motifs in her sculptures, works on paper and ceramics: disembodied hands tenderly holding a dreamy severed head; skin transformed by bulbous scales; enormous figures nursing tiny ones; multiple faces and eyes, often inhabiting a single body (like a kind of medieval cubism, as if two eyes and one head are not enough to take in the complexities of the world); sleeping babies emerging unheeded from a dreaming woman's cranium; human/animal hybrids (there are no hierarchies between species in Varga Weisz's world).

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My Influences
Frieze, May 2014

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Paloma Varga Weisz | Spirits of my Flesh | Chapter Gallery | Cardiff
Aesthetica Magazine, December 15, 2011
Luke Healey

Thursday, 15 December 2011

Paloma Varga Weisz / Spirits of my Flesh / Chapter Gallery / Cardiff

Paloma Varga Weisz | Spirits of my Flesh | Chapter Gallery | Cardiff
Aesthetica Magazine, December 15, 2011
Luke Healey

Text by Luke Healey

Taking its place in Chapter's 2011 roll call directly after *Resident* (30/10/11 – 06/11/11), WITH Collective's über-conceptual Autumn show, Paloma Varga Weisz's solo outing at the Cardiff gallery is a difficult one to approach. The former exhibition had seen the café extended into the gallery space, but with the latter the habitual reverent hush has returned. Now, nine ceramic objects and one somewhat anomalous watercolour sit (or perch) in vast pools of white space, each one looking heavy, mute and sullen. In a text accompanying the artist's 2007 show at Vienna's Kunsthalle, Angela Stief wrote of Varga Weisz's work, that "it requires the classical, pre-modern conditions of observation and feeling, of contemplation of the opening up of the works of art and an atmosphere of stillness". Her advice is appropriate, and there seem to be few alternatives in confronting this artist's output. But what are we to expect from opening ourselves up in this way?

A great deal of affect, for sure. The surfaces of Varga Weisz's ceramics seem to smoulder with angst. This is as much an observation of the artist's rough approach to moulding and glazing her clay as it is a figurative assessment: with the exception of *Volcano* (2011), Varga Weisz's subjects are all human, and the haunting effect of such an evocation of roughshod, damaged flesh cannot be easily ignored. A degree of cathexis may well have intruded here – while attempting to find a way into these sculptures I was simultaneously negotiating an agonising toothache. But the effect of Varga Weisz's work seems equally dependent upon canonical iconographies of suffering: *Kneeling* (2011) carries the melancholy charge of monumental dedications to the war-widowed, a trope which itself casts its memory back to medieval depictions of the bereaved Virgin Mary. The palimpsest of history and its representations seems to speak through the soot-black glaze that covers this figure's face, from which her eyes, nose and mouth are eerily picked out in white.

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It is significant that this figure is positioned in such a way that we are forced to look down on it. Throughout this show, the craning of the viewer's neck is repeatedly milked for emotive effect. The contemporary comes flooding in to Varga Weisz's otherwise stolidly traditional practice with this gambit, for it implies an engagement with works as conceived from the vantage point of a curator. What looks at first glance like a series of passive, autonomous, craft objects opens out onto a more experiential plane: hung high up on the back wall of the main space, the platinum-coated *Father, Young* (2011) reads like a frustrated, childish interpretation of parental megalomania; while the air around *Mother* (2011) crackles with a charge of profound alienation, the sort that can only be experienced while looking down upon the person that gave one life as she lies, prostrate, vulnerable, and surrounded by childish wallpaper patterns. Walking round *Spirits of my Flesh* is like being sucked into the artist's own psycho-biographical vortex, and it is to Varga Weisz's credit that she has worked this degree of affect from a subtle tweaking of the white cube's normative display model.

It is also to the artist's credit that this psycho-biographical vortex never becomes banal, a common pitfall after more than a century of psychoanalysis. Even with knowledge of Freud's theorisation of the Elektra Complex and its attendant anxieties in mind, the disembodied-head-in-a-pail that is simply titled *Father* (2010) is still a powerfully strange object to confront. This may or may not have everything to do with a suggestion that, once again, the traditionalist Varga Weisz is subtly opening the floodgates to contemporary discourses: looking down into this work lucidly evokes the famous scene from the 1995 thriller *Seven*, directed by David Fincher, in which a box revealed through reactions and dialogue to contain a severed head triggers the film's denouement.

If there seems to be an imperative in this review to glean aspects from *Spirits of my Flesh* that situate Varga Weisz's work within identifiably contemporary concerns, then that should point to what is so prickly about viewing the works on show here. It is easy, and somewhat entertaining, to pull apart Varga Weisz's traditionally executed works for their art-historical associations – here a Fontana or a Giacometti; there a Rodin and a Grünewald. This somewhat melancholy exercise in referential relativism – one inevitably turns here to the artist's compatriot, Gerhard Richter – is what might seem to be the determining factor in Varga Weisz's formal preoccupations, but only at first glance. Neither can her historical reiterations be tied down to the mere spectacular appeal of anachronism. Rather, the historically rich but contemporarily devalued materials from which the artist creates her sculptures suggest an exercise in trans-generational contact that is entirely in tandem with her choice in subject matter.

This affective dialogue with previous – but not lost – generations seems emblematic of a movement within the art world as a whole, into which might also fit Dominik Lang's installation for the Czech and Slovak Pavilion at this year's Venice Biennale, where the artist displayed sculptures realised by his father in Eastern Europe's heyday of Modernism; and Becky Beasley's 2009 work *Brocken*, a hinged wooden sculpture whose dimensions are based upon the arm span of her own father. These artists may in fact be illustrating a prediction made by Benjamin Buchloh in 1998, that an era in which all forms of material practice have been more or less equally devalued might prompt among artists, "a more conciliatory approach to the continuing viability of the genres", and "more moderate claims concerning the social consequences of artistic strategies at large". It is the jarring tension between the hospitability of Varga Weisz's works to both the recent and the distant past, and the disorienting personal affect that pours out of it, that makes spending time with this artist such a vital proposition.

Paloma Varga Weisz
Art Review, March 2009
Morgan Falconer

Paloma Varga Weisz Gladstone Gallery, New York
9 December – 17 January

The voice of officialdom at Gladstone Gallery tells us that, for her latest show, Paloma Varga Weisz is returning to a milieu that she first explored at the Kunsthalle Wien last year: the American Gilded Age. That would likely explain the head of a period *Con Man* (all but one picture is from 2008) emerging out of the shadows of a blue-grey watercolour; also *Grumbler*, a fashionable deb with complicated hair and rouged cheeks; and *The Governess*, a dame with a pinched nose. For sure, all might have been drawn from the brass-tacks fiction of Theodore Dreiser, yet there's a lot more in this show which seems to derive from myth – and myth of a curiously globalised variety.

It is as if the German-born artist had taken her country's Romantic idea of the *volksgeist*, the national folk spirit, and imagined what it might look like if all the world's cultures were contributing to the same pot. Hence we encounter Eastern flavour in two conical, figurative sculptures woven from wicker like pristine wastepaper baskets and crowned with limewood heads that bear Asian features. They stand facing each other like communicating spirits. Elsewhere there are a series of wall-mounted busts made of carved limewood plated in copper: among them is *Hatman*, who resembles a sad leprechaun; *Wigman*, whose headpiece is lined with bulbous protrusions; and *Hoodman*, whose Asian-looking limewood head peeks from his copper hood like a religious acolyte wearing robes for a flaming initiation.

Far from confining herself to a theme and a period, Varga Weisz is letting herself roam where her spirit takes her. Why be constricted when wandering yields results of such uncalculated ease? Indeed, there's so much ease in her work that it seems otiose to make hard critical judgements on her. That might explain why surprisingly little has been written about her since she began to exhibit with regularity a decade ago. But then she's also troublesome. Her characterful watercolours may at times be reminiscent of Egon Schiele and Marlene Dumas, but they lack the same charge. Her work only gets really interesting when it expands in scale. Hence *The Cabinet* is the finest work in the show: a large oval wood barrel lying lengthways, it confronts us with a base that bears a pale stain, as if something has passed through it; walk around to the other side and we find the barrel is empty and a black dress is suspended from a coat hanger inside, with limewood arms and legs dangling, as if the headless woman had hung herself. There's high sculptural ambition in this, as well as shades psychoanalysis and gender politics; serious red meat that doesn't display itself so often in the artist's watercolours. The woven basket figures are also brilliant inventions – sculptural one-offs and evocative images. Officialdom can say what it wants, but Varga Weisz is yet to tame her considerable talent and make it do just one thing. *Morgan Falconer*

Basket Man, 2008, lime wood, varnish, wicker, 220 x 110 x 110 cm. © the artist. Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York

3D Futurity
Vogue Italia, January 2009
Mariuccia Casadio

3D Futurity

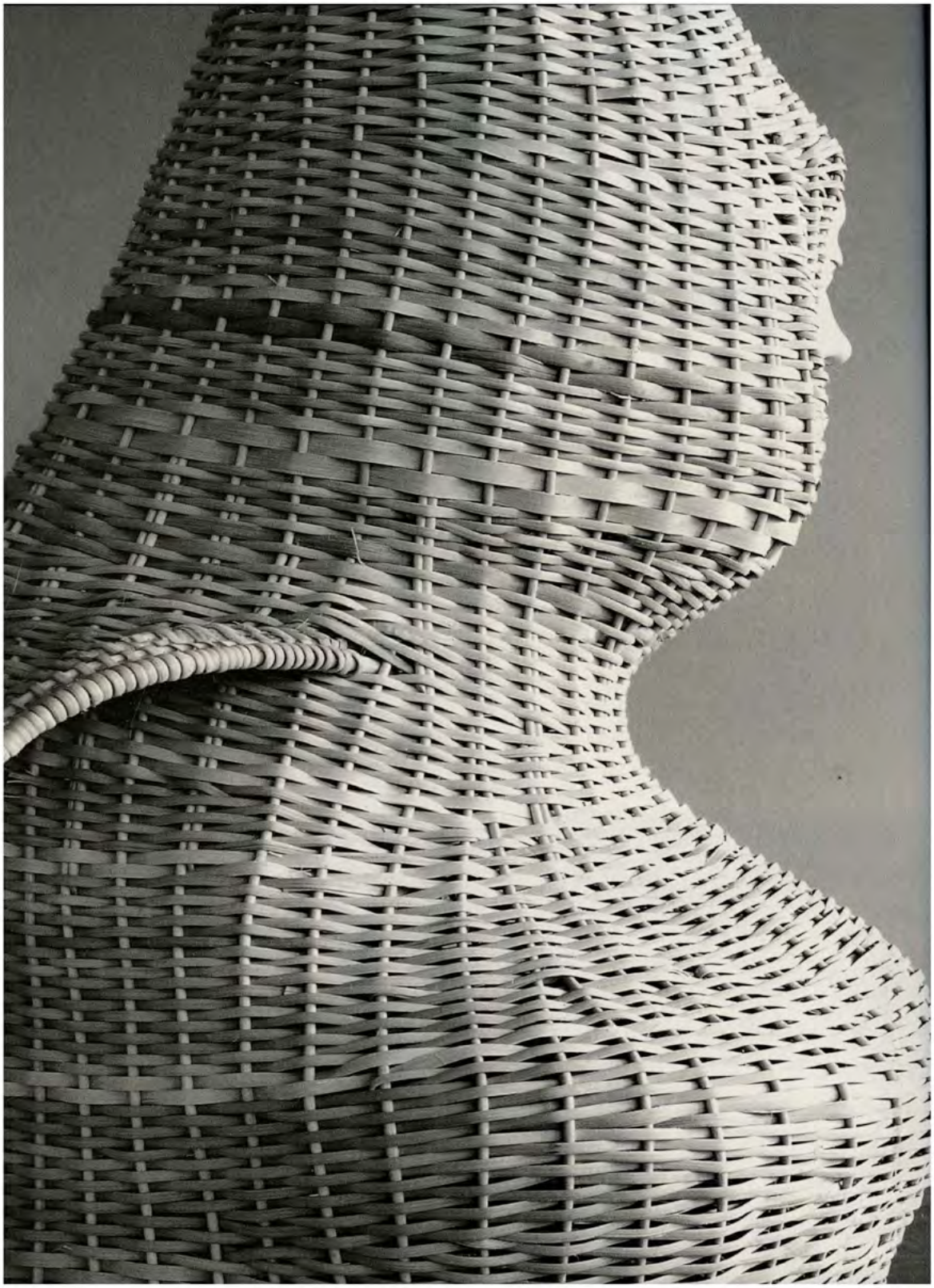
by Mariuccia Casadio

Le opere di artisti come Thomas Houseago, Paloma Varga Weisz o Cathy Wilkes riportano in auge la scultura. Tra tecniche della tradizione e ready-made. Plastiche figure e personaggi di fiabe. Storia e autobiografia

È un corpo che anima le cose, che fuoriesce da un disegno, che assume inaspettate, fantasiose prerogative, forme, consistenze, che dà palpabile spessore a un sogno. Imprigionato nella scocca di un manichino, assottigliato e ritagliato nello spazio come un paravento, immobile, innaturale come un oggetto, sbuca a pezzi da cesti o scatole, attribuisce un volto e dei contorni umani all'esistente e argomenta molte opere di oggi. Attestando un diffuso ritorno al tridimensionale, un nuovo protagonismo della scultura, che costituisce il trait d'union delle migliori mostre inaugurate a cavallo tra la fine del 2008 e l'inizio del nuovo anno. Per esempio, la prima personale dell'inglese Thomas Houseago negli Usa, allestita a Los Angeles nella nuova enorme sede di David Kordansky a Culver City e aperta fino al 31 di questo mese; oppure il nuovo one-person show della tedesca Paloma Varga Weisz da Barbara Gladstone a New York fino al 17; o, infine, l'installazione dell'irlandese Cathy Wilkes nel contesto del Turner prize 2008, alla Tate gallery di Londra fino al 18, esemplificano una tendenza artistica in atto. Un orientamento della ricerca che può privilegiare tanto il recupero e la ricontestualizzazione di forme trovate, di oggetti preesistenti, quanto il misurarsi con la materia, plasmarla, forgiarla, imprimerla. E affrontarla con vari strumenti, per dare corpo all'opera, darle scala concreta nello spazio, renderla tramite di virtuosismi formali e statement simbolici diversi, evocazioni e sensazioni, totem antropomorfo non privo di rimandi alla cultura e alla storia dell'arte, alla sfera personale e collettiva. Le gigantesche figure e maschere di Thomas Houseago, che come Damien Hirst è originario di Leeds ed è stato studente della St. Martin school of art di Londra nei primi anni Novanta, parlano di esuberante, conflittuale confronto con i rigorosi stilizzati canoni del Modernismo. Sagome ricercate in punta di matita, intagliate nel legno, tenute insieme e riempite con palettate di scagliola, le sculture di Houseago, che oggi vive e lavora a Los Angeles, sono corpi con parti peculiarmente prive di spessore, che ci appaiono enormi, possenti e al tempo stesso inconsistenti, esili come dei gusci. «Per me, scultura è perdita di controllo», spiega l'artista. «Ogni volta che rompo la barriera della rappresentazione, sento di essere vivo. È un momento incontrollabile in cui o l'opera va nella direzione sbagliata oppure diventa più bella di quanto io stesso sperassi. È quello che definisco "Frankenstein moment". Vedere la propria immaginazione incarnarsi in qualcosa di fisico è inquietante». Tra "primitivismo" novecentesco alla Brancusi e grottesco gigantismo architettonico alla Brasilia, le sue opere sono "Frankestein" generati da un classico approccio a tela e gesso, legno o bronzo, da una pratica scultorea tradizionale. Non di meno, le figure a tre dimensioni di Paloma Varga Weisz si confrontano con la storia, catturando quella che lei definisce «l'immagine così come si forma nella mente». Sembrano uscite da un sogno che ibrida epoche, stili, referenti culturali; una fantasiosa affabulazione che coinvolge storia e folklore, antico e moderno, prodotti dei media e cultura dell'arte. Tedesca di Düsseldorf, Varga Weisz si spinge oltre i confini del conosciuto, creando busti su mensole o piedistalli e figure intere con arie familiari e al tempo stesso aliene, sembianze umane e animali. Frutto di una ricognizione nella Gilded Age – periodo della storia americana nel quale lo stravagante lifestyle di un'ingorda società dominante contrastava con la miseria dei poveri, che con il loro lavoro artigianale favorirono il boom dell'industria –, la sua nuova mostra a New York ha i riflessi opulenti e metallici dei barili per olio o petrolio, e le calde, domestiche sfumature della paglia. E include personaggi informati da comuni tecniche e materiali, correnti oggetti e prodotti d'uso, romanticamente evocativi di una specificità e abilità artigianale che sopravvive nello spazio della memoria e sembra proiettarsi nel futuro. «Il mio lavoro è fatto di cose qualsiasi che sistemo in un modo affascinante per farle sopravvivere nel mondo dell'arte», spiega invece Cathy Wilkes, irlandese originaria di Belfast, che attualmente risiede a Glasgow. Con squallidi manichini di corpi femminili che interagiscono con merci cheap da supermercato e tele dipinte, brani di scrittura e mobili da bar o da self-service, le sue installazioni creano inevitabile disagio. È come se Wilkes ponesse chi osserva di fronte a frammenti di un'esperienza che riguarda la sua stessa vita, rendendo l'opera una tridimensionale palpabile condivisione di fatti personali, fin troppo intimi, misteriosi, inquietanti e scomodi, almeno quanto impliciti e non detti. Create con oggetti trovati e materiali raccolti in luoghi diversi, le sue sono situazioni che, per quanto astratte, riescono invariabilmente a conservare emozionanti implicazioni. M.C.

Nella pagina accanto. Thomas Houseago, "Joanne", 2005; courtesy David Kordansky, Los Angeles. Nelle pagine seguenti. Cathy Wilkes, "Non verbal", 2005; courtesy The modern institute, Glasgow. Paloma Varga Weisz, "Basket Woman and Basket Man", 2008; © the artist; courtesy Gladstone gallery, N.Y.

3D Futurity
Vogue Italia, January 2009
Mariuccia Casadio



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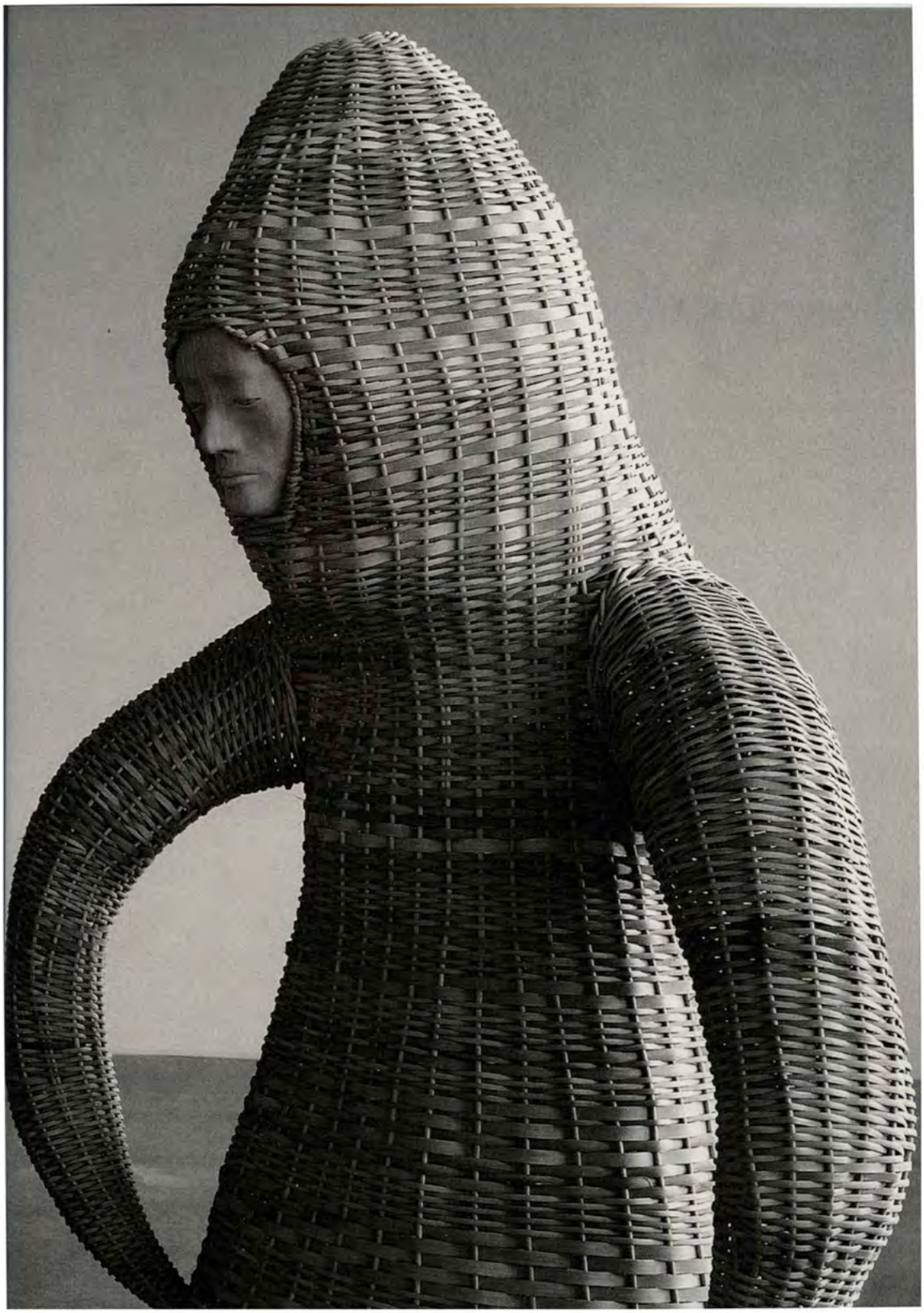

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Yes, She Can
The New York Times, May 10, 2009

Op-Art

SHARY BOYLE, RUTH GWILY, NATHALIE LÉTÉ,
COLLIER SCHORR, KARA WALKER and PALOMA VARGA WEISZ

Yes, She Can

To celebrate Mother's Day, the Op-Ed editors asked six female artists for portraits of their mothers. These artists were also asked to describe one thing their mothers can do — that they themselves can't.

RUTH GWILY: *My mother can solve crossword puzzles, especially the "cryptic" ones.*

SHARY BOYLE: *My mother can turn the other cheek.*

PALOMA VARGA WEISZ: *She always has an answer for everything — even when you haven't asked.*

COLLIER SCHORR: *My mother is the only person I know who looked like Ali MacGraw and didn't even notice.*

KARA WALKER: *My mom can name every actor in every movie ever made, or at least she will try.*

NATHALIE LÉTÉ: *My mother can swim in the sea despite the ice-cold water.*

PALOMA VARGA WEISZ, "PILLOWS ON MY MOTHER'S HEAD," COURTESY GLADSTONE GALLERY, 2008; COLLIER SCHORR, "GIRLFRIEND," COURTESY 303 GALLERY, 2007; ALL OTHERS, COURTESY THE ARTISTS, 2009

Paloma Varga Weisz
The Brooklyn Rail, October 2005
Stephanie Buhmann

Paloma Varga Weisz

by Stephanie Buhmann

Chor
Gladstone Gallery

In a stunning New York debut, featuring several wooden sculptures and a series of watercolors, German artist Paloma Varga Weisz shines, raising the suspicion that she might be one of the most promising young talents around.

Paloma Varga Weisz, â€œCHOR,â€? installation view. Photo: David Regen. Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York.

Born in 1966 in Neustadt an der Weinstrasse, Germany, Varga Weisz studied at the Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf and was formally trained as a wood carver, an education that leaves her impressively at ease with her chosen medium. Deeply rooted in the arts and crafts of the Middle Ages, Varga Weisz's limewood sculptures embrace the overtly spiritual undertones inherent in their traditional style and subject matter. Entitled *Chor* (*Choir*), which since the eighth century has been the architectural term for the highly decorated area in Christian churches at the end of the nave, just before the chancel, the exhibition does not avoid naming its main source of inspiration. In fact, when traveling the landscapes of soft and beautified contours that map the features of Varga Weisz's figures, one is reminded of the monochrome work by master sculptor Tilman Riemenschneider (circa 1460–1531), Gothic friezes at the Rheims Cathedral, or the physical perfection embraced by Flemish painters, such as Rogier van der Weyden (1399–1464).

Paloma Varga Weisz
The Brooklyn Rail, October 2005
Stephanie Buhmann

However, the strong sense of untouchable purity that determines Varga Weisz's work is not exclusively indebted to a Western heritage, but also draws from a Far Eastern vocabulary reflected in Buddhist and Hindu sculpture: physical flawlessness is almost always employed to represent spiritual importance. Despite their connection to the past, the fantastical community defining Varga Weisz's playful imagination is as colorful as contemporary life. Mythic creatures, part-man part-dog, children with exotic animal skins, medieval noble women, and monks, are brought together within the gallery walls, which they in turn transform into a post-modern version of a magical forest, worthy of a Brothers Grimm tale. Extracted from any narrative, each figure hides in its anonymity, and like relics, they become mysterious reflections of the unknown.

In the main gallery space, a disjointed female figure is suspended from the ceiling, hanging upside down. Draped in a gray blanket, which falls into lavish theatrical folds, only her face, arms and feet remain uncovered. Her eyes are closed, arms outstretched. The ambiguity of the posture, which could be interpreted as peaceful trance or rigor mortis, is quite unsettling. What are we witnessing—a moment of bliss or the aftermath of a crime? The answers withheld, the work's mysterious aura deepens, pointing to the close affiliation between horror and grace, tragedy and bliss.

The back gallery reveals an installation made of four stylized church benches and eight busts, serving as framing posts. Perpendicular to the sitter, each figure opens itself to close inspection and intimate dialogue. They come in unusual pairs, "Hundeportrait and Doppelkopffrau" ("Dog Portrait and Double-headed Woman") or "Pelzmützenmann und Mönch" ("Fur Hat Man and Monk"), uniting what under normal circumstances would seem worlds apart. The overall color scheme, dominated by the blue of the furniture and the sand color of the limewood, provides the installation with a tranquility that appears to be both soothing and austere. The message might be that though peace can be found here, any additional presence would disturb the well-balanced relationships between the elements. In other words, to stay would mean to intrude.

Paloma Varga Weisz
The Brooklyn Rail, October 2005
Stephanie Buhmann

Grouped together in a small room, Varga Weisz's watercolors surprise with their independent and equally accomplished handling of the figure. Whereas each step towards the completion of the sculptures requires absolute discipline, these works on paper reveal an immediacy and freedom of the artist's hand that is astonishing. With a few brushstrokes, Varga Weisz evokes the most prominent facial features, capturing eyes and expressive mouths within the void of the paper. Almost ghostlike in their delicate appearance, the portraits seem to foreshadow the manifold stories still untold by Paloma Varga Weisz.