

NOT VITAL

SCULPTURES, DIAO SU

PARIS DEBELLEYME

09 Friday - 15 Saturday



Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac is pleased to announce a solo exhibition of works by Swiss artist, Not Vital, whom we have represented for the past 20 years. Through the years Vital continues to surprise his audience. This element of surprise is manifested in the exploration of different materials, people and places. Vital's curiosity for the world can be observed in particular periods throughout his career: he has spent time with third-generation Venetian glass blowers in Murano, Tuareg silversmith tribesmen in Niger, papermakers in Bhutan.

In Vital's current exhibition of new work we can see the influence of China, and specifically, Beijing. Since 2008 Vital has spent five months per year working in his studio in the Caochangdi district of Beijing. Here, he discovered exceptionally skilled and creative stainless steel craftsmen - Tongue is made in a foundry on the outskirts of Beijing. The stainless steel is crafted by hand, rather than cast. The complicated, arduous and lengthy process is an important part of the work, resulting in a smoothly polished surface that is highly reflective.

The theme of the tongue has been present in Vital's work since 1985 when he was in Lucca working with Carrara marble with local craftsmen. In Lucca Vital bought a few cow tongues at the butcher's and cast them in bronze. The form - raw, elegant, erotic - pleased him while the transformation from daily commodity to high art object is equally significant. Vital has since simplified and enlarged the tongue to various heights, using different materials (white marble, black marble, plaster, silver and stainless steel). The tongue as a form becomes iconic in Vital's work, yet the meaning remains ambiguous. Beautiful, yet brutal with its implication of slaughter, each Tongue has an individual presence. The stainless steel Tongue moves away from its initial form and meaning, coming closer to a totemic, architectural structure.

Although Vital spends much time in Beijing, his Swiss roots prevail at certain creative moments. Piz Nair (Romantsch for 'Black Mountain') consists of a mountain-shape carved into a block of Chinese coal. Piz Nair is one of the most famous mountains in the Engadine, the area that Vital is from. It is thought-provoking that the scale of a huge mountain is reduced to a relatively small sculpture, whereas the scale of the Tongue is vastly increased. The tension of scale, and the presentation of a somewhat topsy-turvy world, focuses the audience's attention on material and form. Coal is unconventional as a material for sculpture, but takes on a political significance in the context of daily life in Beijing - where coal is burnt across the city to provide fuel, often in dangerous and hazardous conditions. Lastly, the sculpting of a mountain - solid and strong - in a material that is brittle and fragile, is in keeping with Vital's tendency towards the bizarre or surreal.

Another sculpture on the brink of the bizarre is Untitled, a work in plaster and plastic sheeting. The plaster piece is an organic, slightly bulbous shape. Sensual yet alien, it is poised as if about to fall off the pedestal, suggesting a moment frozen in time. It is covered in semi-opaque plastic sheeting, adding a shroud of mystery. The plaster piece could take on a quasi-human presence, the form recalling a reclining nude, with the sheeting as a veil. Alternatively, the sculpture could have a totally abstract significance. This openness of meaning is strongly rooted in Vital's art-making.

The variation of materials continues through the exhibition with 385. In the typically globalised nature of Vital's oeuvre, he found Camay soap - a traditional British product - manufactured in Korea. Back in his Beijing studio, Vital used the soap to create a tall form with many points. This work is called 385, after the number of sharp points that make up the surface. The strong, powdery smell is impossible to miss, yet difficult to place, and the seductive, purple-pink waxy surface somewhat unsettling.

The works in this show are varied in material and content, yet are held together by a strong sense of the artist's vision, striving to find ever-new ways of expression and form-making. Working with different craftsmen and the influences of high and low culture in Beijing, Vital has created a sophisticated and captivating body of work with cerebral concerns and physical integrity.

Not Vital was born in 1948 in Sent (Switzerland), studied in Paris and moved to New York in 1974. Today he lives between New York, Graubünden in Switzerland and Beijing in China. His artistic career started in the early 1970s and he turned to sculpture in the early 1980s.