

Press release

# Not Vital *Contemplating*

31 May—27 July 2024  
Opening Friday 31 May 2024, 6—8pm

Thaddaeus Ropac  
Paris Marais  
7, rue Debelleye, 75003 Paris



Not Vital, *Self-portrait*, 2023  
Oil on canvas 210 × 150 cm (82.68 × 59.06 in)

***Sometimes, late in the afternoon, the studio turns almost completely dark, which is almost perfect to paint. [...] Everything surrounding me is emptied, everything almost loses gravity, like floating or falling or daydreaming. This might be 1 of the reasons why most of the space surrounding the heads & most of the canvas is left untouched. When a head stands alone, I work better. No need to add anything. It's just more.***

— Not Vital



Not Vital, *Piz Lagrev*, 2012  
Plaster. 105 × 130 × 70 cm (41.34 × 51.18 × 27.56 in)

In this exhibition, Swiss artist Not Vital presents his new series of self-portraits, whose pared-back compositions propose a minimalistic, abstract take on the human form. These are shown alongside a selection of the artist's sculptures across mediums, including works rooted in the landscape and a life-sized rendering of Nijinsky's 'last jump', as well as collages on paper that recreate natural formations using everyday materials. Brought together in the gallery's Paris Marais space, these works form a meditation on selfhood and on our relationship with the surrounding world.

The beginning of the exhibition is flanked by sculptures that recall the landscape of the Engadin valley in Switzerland, where Vital spent his youth, and where he still lives and works for a part of the year. *Fontana* (2024), a sculpted tree cast in bronze, from the branches of which water flows, provides the ground floor of the gallery with a subtle, contemplative soundscape, and symbolises the Engadin, which has long been renowned for the healing properties of its water. The artist's sculptural practice is marked by a particularly intimate relationship with materials, including plaster, steel, marble and household items and substances. He often takes advantage of the naturally occurring visual aspects of the materials he works with to evoke elements

of the natural world. A sculpture, moulded in plaster in the form of the Swiss mountain Piz Lagrev, which looms above Vital's home, is presented atop a piece of antique wooden furniture, sourced locally and typical of the Engadin. The fine grain and chalky white colouration of the plaster evokes the layer of snow that coats the alpine landscape for a large part of the year.

This valorisation of the innate properties of material is echoed on the second floor of the exhibition with *Dali Stones*, sculptural works made from white marble, which are sliced open to reveal the hidden vein-like lines within the rock's texture following a technique traditionally used in the Yunnan province in southern China. The striations that emerge when the stone is cut along the correct axis trace out forms resembling rugged mountainous landscapes. The depth of these sculptures, some of which begin wider at one end before tapering off, recalls the deeply set windows typical of the stone facades of the Engadin valley. In some of Vital's collages on paper, he reprises the familiar mountainous and glacial scenes found throughout the rest of the exhibition using everyday household materials such as tape, toilet paper and even Toblerone chocolate to create fissured walls of ice or the striking silhouette of the mountain Piz Nair. Other collages, meanwhile, evoke



Not Vital, *Landscape*, 2023  
Marble and plaster. 60 × 135 × 30 cm (23.62 × 53.15 × 11.81 in)

portraiture, depicting skin or, in one, the lines under the artist's own eyes, through strikingly reduced pictorial means. The ephemeral material and substances affixed to the paper create delicate, fugacious impressions of people and scenes.

At the heart of the exhibition is a life-size sculpture of Russian ballet dancer Vaslav Nijinsky (1889–1950), renowned for his seemingly gravity-defying leaps. After dancing publicly for the last time in 1919, Nijinsky, struggling with schizophrenia, spent the final 30 years of his life in and out of psychiatric hospitals. In 1939, a dancer from the Paris Opéra Ballet was brought to his sanatorium in Switzerland to perform one of Nijinsky's best-known choreographies in the hope it might inspire him to dance again. On watching him, Nijinsky stood up from his chair and executed a 'last jump', which was captured by photojournalist Jean Manzon for *Life* magazine in a photograph now in the collection of the Victoria & Albert Museum, London. This moment is recreated by Vital in a sculpture that projects from the wall to portray the apparent effortless of the retired dancer's jump, casting him in eternal weightless suspension.

Vital began an intensive exploration of portraiture through painting 16 years ago, at the age of 60, after a long period

of focus on sculpture. Through a process of application and reduction, he repeatedly adds and then removes layers of oil paint until the figure seems to emerge from the material. Rendered predominantly in a minimalist palette of white, greys and black influenced by his youth spent in the Swiss Graubünden, or 'grey-lands', in these recent paintings, new colours intervene in this subtle interplay of light and dark. Always deeply influenced by his surroundings, the introduction of more vibrant tones of blue and green come together with yellows and oranges to recall Rio de Janeiro, where the artist has a studio.

Vital paints his own likeness as floating orbs of colour, the shapes of which recall those found in his renowned stainless steel *HEAD* sculptures, which, almost featureless, concentrate faces down to their simplest possible state of existence. In the paintings on view, the gentle outline of a tuft of hair on top of his head doubles as the lick of a candle flame against the impenetrable grounds. In his conception of these seemingly uninhabited backgrounds is a crossing of references: the velvety layering of Mark Rothko's *Untitled (White, Blacks, Grays on Maroon)* (1963; collection of the Kunsthaus Zürich), and the ineffable, sorrowful beauty of Diego Velázquez's *The Crucified Christ* (c. 1632; collection of the Museo del Prado, Madrid)

emerging, glowing from a sombre ground. Vital compares the experience of looking at his paintings to trying to see in the dark. As art historian Susanna Pettersson writes: 'First, we encounter just the darkness, and then, after all the senses are already alerted to their maximum capacity, we begin to see something.'

The artist explains: 'The void or the unpainted areas on my canvases are by no means empty. They only represent a certain uncertainty.' This sense of uncertainty is compounded by the fact that Vital depicts himself twice or more in many of the self-portraits on view. By carving his first name, Not, into the paint, he plays on its double meaning: both himself, and a negation. These multiplications and negations of the artist's selfhood leave the visitor to contemplate where he is really located in the self-portraits. He adds to this effect by covering each painting with glass, like Francis Bacon before him, without which he considers them 'naked'. Vital considers himself a sculptor even when painting, and this glass, which reflects the surrounding environment, gives each painting a sculptural sense of three-dimensionality. Visitors to the exhibition see their own faces mirrored back at them, obscuring the image from certain angles, encouraging them to physically negotiate the act of looking and to reconsider the place of the self within its surroundings. As Vital explained to Hans



Not Vital, *3 Self-portraits*, 2023  
Oil on canvas. 210 x 150 cm (82,68 x 59,06 in)

Ulrich Obrist: 'It attracts, but also it inflects and reflects. It keeps you away, gives you the right distance to look at a painting.'

Nijinsky wrote in his diary in early 1919 that 'Switzerland is sick because it is full of mountains': a comment that elucidates the sculpture as a connecting thread between Vital's landscapes and his self-portraits. By bringing highly introspective self-portraits into dialogue with sculptures and collages that evoke, in three dimensions, the unforgiving Alpine climate and the pristine calm of a settled blanket of snow, Vital invites the viewer into a contemplation on the fine line between torment and beauty and on the profound connection between how we relate to our environment and our inner selves.



Not Vital, *Piz*, 2020  
Tape and pencil on paper. 43,2 x 35,6 cm (17,01 x 14,02 in)



Not Vital

### About the artist

Born in 1948 in Sent, Switzerland, Vital lives and works between his hometown and Rio de Janeiro. He grew up among the mountains and forests in the Engadin valley near the border of Switzerland, Austria and Italy, but has spent much of his time travelling and living in places including China, Niger, Italy, Indonesia and the USA. He studied visual arts at the Université Expérimentale de Vincennes, Paris from 1968–71 and moved to New York in 1974, where he began his artistic career. In 2003, Vital established a foundation in Ardez, a small historic village in the Engadin, with the aim of preserving the cultural assets of the valley and creating a local sculpture park. Over the course of his career, he has realised many buildings for contemplation all over the world, including the *NotOna Tunnel* (2009) on NotOna Island in Patagonia, Chile, and his *Houses to Watch the Sunset*, one of which he has created on every continent.

Vital's work has been featured in numerous international exhibitions, including the 49th Venice Biennale (2001), curated by Harald Szeemann, and the 17th International Architecture Biennale, Venice (2021). He is one of the few artists to have exhibited his work in both the Art and the Architecture Biennale. Major solo exhibitions were held at Kunsthalle Bielefeld, Germany (2005); the Arts Club of Chicago (2006); UCCA Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing (2011); and the Museo d'arte Mendrisio, Switzerland (2014–15). In 2013, the large-scale installation *700 Snowballs* was on view on the island of San Giorgio Maggiore in Venice. His first major UK exhibition and his largest museum project to date was held at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park in 2016, followed by his first institutional project in Austria at the Museum der Moderne, Salzburg in 2020–21.

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