

«You Can Make Your Own Island»: An Interview With Ugo Rondinone

Brianne Walsh, October 28, 2013



Ugo Rondinone is a bit obsessive-compulsive. On the surface, his works appear care-free—naïve, even. In fact, they are the result of a meticulous logic that exists solely in the artist's mind. "At the beginning of the year I know that I have a certain number of exhibitions, so I create for myself a dualism in my head," he explains, sitting in a small office off the main entrance to the 15,500-square-foot church in Harlem that he is currently renovating (bought in 2011 for a reputed \$2.8 million). "If I do something big, I must do something small. If I do something in black and white, the next thing must be in color." New Yorkers may already know Rondinone for two prominent installations: "Human Nature," 2013, the group of monumental stone figures unveiled this past spring in Rockefeller Center (they resemble rudimentary robots hewn from the rocks of Stonehenge), and his exuberant, rainbow-colored word installation, *Hell, Yes!*, 2001, which graced the façade of the New Museum until 2010. Parisians know him for "Sunrise East," 2009, a group of 12 colossal bronze heads that were mounted in the Tuileries Garden. In the rarefied realm of the art world, he is known for his mandala paintings, his sleeping clowns, his sound installations, his bite-size sculptures—Rondinone told me that people sometimes mistake his solo gallery shows for group exhibitions. This year his schedule has forced him into overdrive: In October alone, Rondinone has shows running in locations as far-flung as the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas; the M-Museum in Leuven, Belgium; and the Sommer Contemporary Art gallery in Tel Aviv. By the end of 2013, he will have created work for 13 solo exhibitions, 3 art fairs (Frieze London, Art Basel, Art Basel Hong Kong), and the upcoming Biennale of Sydney.

What characterizes Rondinone's work is how uncharacteristic it looks from exhibition to exhibition. For the Nasher, he designed a vibrantly colored dock that will extend into Fish Trap Lake, the former site of a utopian community founded by French, Swiss, and Belgian settlers in the 1850s. At the Sommer, he presents "Primal," an exhibition of 59 tiny horse sculptures (roughly 11 inches long) that are arrayed on the floor like a miniature toy army; they are part of a menagerie that also includes "primitive" (birds) and "primordial" (fish). The M-Museum show, "thank you silence," consists of, among other works, hyperrealistic wax sculptures of reclining nude human figures, clocks made from stained glass, and 300 children's drawings of the sun, commissioned by the artist.

Still, every piece is part of a continuous, lifelong series that Rondinone dates back to 1989, when he was in art school at the Hochschule für Angewandte Kunst, in Vienna. After growing up in a working-class family in Switzerland—his parents were originally from Matera, an ancient town in Italy where the residents lived in cave dwellings for more than 9,000 years—he moved to Zurich in 1983 to become the assistant to Hermann Nitsch, who was represented by the gallery where Rondinone's then-girlfriend was working. (Rondinone, the partner of artist and poet John Giorno for more than 20 years, got a twinkle in his eye when I asked when he came out of the closet and said that he was never in it.) In 1986 he enrolled at the Hochschule in Vienna, where the coffeehouse culture, a remnant of the World War II era, was still thriving. "When you ordered a coffee, a glass of water would always accompany it. The waiter would come back and bring you two glasses of water just to keep you there," he says. In the Viennese coffeehouses, he learned to take his time—slowness as an ethos would become a major theme in his work. For his first solo exhibition, at Vienna's Galerie Pinx in 1989, he created a series of large-scale landscapes rendered in black ink that resemble both scholar paintings from the Song Dynasty in China and woodcut etchings that you might find in a German book of fairy tales. "Landscapes are at the root of my work," he says. "The whole of romantic imagery is in these landscapes. They portray a nostalgic view of time past."

When he refers to romantic imagery, he means specifically that used by German Romanticists in the 18th and 19th centuries. Notable for depicting scenes that were both beautiful and generic—sunsets, embracing lovers, dramatic vistas—artists in the movement, such as Caspar David Friedrich, were concerned with the strong emotions evoked by untamed nature and the solitary spirit of the artistic genius. "German Romanticism was the first movement to incorporate feelings and dreams and all the irrationality within the working process," Rondinone explains. They did so to elevate the mind from the crowded confines of the increasingly urbanized (and rationalized) world that emerged during the Industrial Revolution.

Rondinone hopes to do something similar with his imagery. As examples he cites specific symbols, such as the mirrors used in pieces like *Clockwork for Oracles*, a candy-colored installation at the ICA Boston in 2008; the constellations in his ongoing "Star" painting series; and the clowns that have appeared in many of his installations and videos, all of which he says are derived from the European movement. The visual language is simple enough that even a philistine would respond to it—with love, happiness, sadness, or perhaps, depending on how you feel about clowns, fear. "My work is always very basic and almost childlike," he says. "It's something people can really rely on."