

OCULA CONVERSATION

Ugo Rondinone

ARTIST, NEW YORK

"This was the first time I brought back the whole spectrum of color and made it scream as loud as possible."



Swiss-born artist Ugo Rondinone entered Shanghai's Rockbund Art Museum (RAM) like a human prism, shattering the usual museum wall white into the full spectrum of visible color. His solo exhibition, *Breathe, Walk, Die*, includes concentric circles of blurred colors, plastic filters placed over the museum's windows to colorize the light coming in, and floor to ceiling sprayed-on "horizon paintings" that warm from almost ultraviolet to near infrared as visitors ascend the museum's six floors. Forty clowns dressed in spectacularly outlandish combinations of colors and textures, lie down, sit, and sometimes sleep inside the museum, defying the usual obligation to perform. It's a wonderful, wonderfully simple show, but one that Rondinone nevertheless casts some light on.

SELECTED IMAGES



Ugo Rondinone
Breathe, Walk, Die
Installation view, Rockbund Art Museum
Image courtesy Rockbund Art Museum



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While there are a few more independent works—the light up rainbow sign with the exhibition’s title, a pair of clown shoes hanging on a nail, and a proximity-activated laugh track—for the most part this feels like one huge installation. Why did you take this approach?

This exhibition was very much inspired by this beautiful building and its verticality. I didn’t want to have works on each floor; I wanted people to come in and experience the building as a wholeness.

Many of your works in past years have used a much more muted color palette. Why the return to brightness?

The exhibition is layered in groups: it starts with the rainbow sign, then the colored filters, the horizon paintings which define the space, the mandalas, and the sleeping clowns. Each of these layers I used before. Now was the occasion to bring all those groups together in a colorful symphony. Since 2006 my work was mainly guided by natural materials. This was the first time I brought back the whole spectrum of color and made it scream as loud as possible.

Where did you get your inspiration for the clown costumes?

If you look up “clown costume” on Google, you can see a huge, huge palette of colors. That was the inspiration for the clown costumes. I made them myself but they were inspired by Google search.

You’ve used clowns in your work before. Can you tell us about their evolution?

This is the third incarnation of the clowns. The first time they were filmed. It was a film work where they were motionless and you could just hear their breathing. The second incarnation was sculptures of clowns and I did seven sculptures naming them after the days of the week. This is the third incarnation and they’re called Vocabulary of Solitude. Each has a present tense title—from sleep to wake to rise, to walk to piss to shit, like a person who lives 24 hours in one house, or in himself.

The exhibition seems to emphasise simply ‘being’ instead of being busy, or being productive. Is your invention of clowns who don’t entertain in some way a critique of capitalism?

They are just being. I want to keep it as open as possible. This is also what I told them to do. They have just to be, and not to interact. Just be by themselves. It’s introspection.

The paintings suggest minimalism, and the clowns are somewhat reminiscent of Tino Sehgal’s performance pieces. Can you comment on the exhibition’s inspiration?

The one logic in the work is the passivity, something you don’t have to fulfill. It’s about isolation and tranquility and dreaminess. All the symbols I use come from the Romantic movement, from the rainbow, from the mask, from the solitary figure to the tree, to the rain painting, snow painting and so on. The Romantic movement was the first movement to include irrationality, and dreams, that’s why it’s important. My profession is not to be logical.

Were you concerned that this might be a difficult exhibition for audiences?

I always say that you don't have to understand an artwork. You have just to feel it. In my work I use very basic raw symbols, something that everybody can relate to, from a child to an old person, from the East to the West.

You arranged for a Rolls Royce Phantom Drophead Coupé to be painted in the same smooth rainbow colors as the exhibition for the show's sponsor. How important is corporate sponsorship to contemporary exhibition making?

Money is a tool that can be used to make things possible. All artists use money to realise their art. Ideally there is a meaningful connection between a sponsor and the sponsored that transcends the financing.—[O]

Breathe, Walk, Die is at the Rockbund Art Museum, 20 Huqiu Lu, near Beijing Dong Lu, Huangpu district, from September 9, 2014 – January 4, 2015.

NB: This conversation was drawn from two interviews, one at the Rockbund Art Museum and one completed over email. The interviews have been edited for sense and concision.

