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2014.09.23 Tue, by Sam Gaskin

Ugo Rondinone: “Breathe, Walk, Die”

[>> print](#)

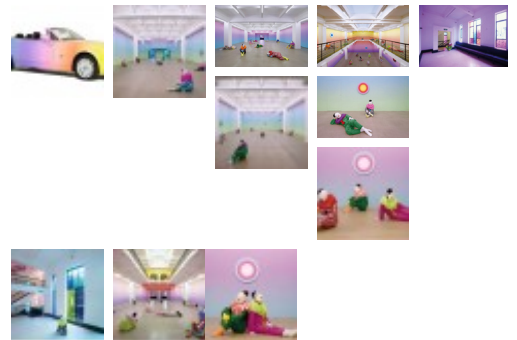
“Breathe, Walk, Die”: Ugo Rondinone solo exhibition

Rockbund Art Museum (20 Huqiu Lu, near Beijing Dong Lu, Huangpu district, Shanghai), **Sep 9, 2014–January 4, 2015**

Convention dictates that major art shows open at night. Yet aside from the lit-up “Breathe, Walk, Die” rainbow sign on the building’s exterior, Swiss artist Ugo Rondinone’s exhibition at the Rockbund Art Museum is better viewed during the day. Sunlight streams through filters applied to the historic building’s windows to color the stairwells and lift lobbies different hues. From the street, it looks as if the art deco building has been turned over to the designers behind the late Hotel G, a kitschy institution in Beijing.

With two exceptions—cornflower blue clown shoes hanging from an oversized nail and motion sensors that trigger the sound of laughter—the exhibition is composed of elements repeated over five of the museum’s six floors to create a single, vertical installation. The walls are painted floor to ceiling with colors that phase smoothly in parallel with the filters on the windows, essentially from cool to warm. It’s worth walking all the way up or down the stairs in one go to appreciate the full spectrum of tequila sunrise, Hypercolor T-shirt transitions.

Each floor also features circular canvases painted with blurred zones of concentric colors, representing blurred reality. And, of course, clowns—40 people in rainbow-colored costumes found up and down the museum. The clowns are inert, reclining as they like, doing nothing. Even the eyes of each non-performer’s mask, which are modeled on his or her own face, are fixed, preventing them from communicating any expression whatsoever.



[See all photos \(12\)](#)



Exhibition View

展览现场

Each of the clowns is named after a verb—wake, touch, shit, etc.—titles that together form a simplified lexicon of existence. Plenty of art historical references can be thrown at this show—light art, for one, or Tino Sehgal-style HR management—but the crux is an emphasis on just being. “Breathe, Walk, Die,” Rondinone says, is “just a very basic circle of life.”

The exhibition creates space somewhere between solemn and ridiculous that’s conducive to contemplation, which is perhaps the full extent of the artist’s ambition. The simplicity of the concept is perplexing, though, for audiences in a city as busy as Shanghai, where knees twitch in relentless anticipation and phone calls cannot wait until exiting the metro. During a group interview at the show’s opening, one journalist even saw malice in the clowns’ refusal to smile, though as Rondinone pointed out, the evil clown trope usually yields a manic, hysterical character, not a passive one. Heath Ledger’s “Joker” character in *The Dark Knight* laughs even as he’s being pummeled.

Clowns who don’t perform are frightening in another way. Cultural critic Sianne Ngai argues that zaniness is a uniquely capitalist comic mode—a parody of earnest but errant over-performers. Clowns, employees and entrepreneurs are easy enough to understand while we’re performing, however clumsily, but take away our job titles and who are we?

Rondinone says his clowns’ passivity is an attempt not to privilege one way of being over others: “Once you’re active you’re representing something, and once you’re representing something you’re valuing something and once you value something you exclude something.”

Outside the museum, ways of being are more narrowly valued. China, even more so than other countries, is increasingly under the well-manicured thumb of high-net-worth individuals and luxury brands, and Rondinone—like other artists—isn’t exempt from the cult of productivity or the requirement to perform. Apart from the considerable demands of producing the exhibition, he painted a Rolls Royce Phantom Drophead Coupé in the colors of a California sunset for the opening of the show.

The thing is beautiful, but it leaves you a little jarred, as if you’ve just been hit in the face with a pie. No one ever earned the 4.2 million RMB it costs to buy a Rolls Royce Phantom by simply being. Maybe Rondinone’s clowns have a sense of humor, after all?



Ugo Rondinone, "no one's voice", artificially aged clown shoes of leather, wooden nail, paint, 2006,
© studio rondinone, 2014

乌戈·罗迪纳, 《没有谁的声音》, 旧人造皮鞋、木钉、颜料, 2006, © Rondinone 工作室, 2014



Exhibition View

展览现场



Front : Ugo Rondinone, "if there were anywhere but desert. 0", Polyester resin, fiberglass, clothing, fabric, glitter, 2000, photographed by Stefan Altenburger, © studio rondinone, 2014

前景：乌戈·罗迪纳，《除了沙漠如果有任何存在的地方。0》，聚酯树脂，玻璃纤维，服装，织品，金葱粉，2000，由Stefan Altenburger拍摄，© Rondinone 工作室，2014



Exhibition View

展览现场



Ugo Rondinone painted a Rolls Royce Phantom Drophead Coupé in the colors of a California sunset for the opening of the show

乌戈·罗迪纳为开幕绘制的带有加利福尼亚落日色彩的劳斯莱斯幻影敞篷车