

Art Review: Breathe Walk Die

Sep 16th, 2014 by Frances Arnold © SmartShanghai.com

A whole lot of clowns, 40 of them to be exact, are currently occupying [Rockbund Art Museum](#). [Coulrophobes](#) – or indeed anyone whose childhood was irrevocably scarred by an untimely watching of Stephen King's [IT](#): be warned.

While these clowns may not be lurking in drains, their surreal presence is nonetheless felt on each and every floor of the six-story building. In town as part of Swiss artist Ugo Rondinone's startling *Breathe Walk Die*, they're just one component of what the show's curator Larys Frogier describes as a "dreamscape".



As frustratingly vague as Frogier's assessment may seem, it's actually pretty apt. This is not so much an exhibition as it is a massive installation of colors, clowns and objects to be viewed as a whole. That eschewing of tradition extends to the show's presentation: instead of expected signage and labels is an army of gallery assistants doling out maps detailing what's what. If you're looking for something conventional and clear, this definitely isn't it.

This is a show of extremes, combining an unnerving minimalism—there's essentially only six parts to the whole thing—with a rainbow of color. Whether you love it or hate it, it's sure to leave an impression.



On the ground floor are two works: *No One's Voice* and *Dog Days Are Over*. The former is a pair of clown shoes, the latter a sound installation. The least striking of what's on show here, head up to the second floor to experience Rondinone's technicolor "dreamscape" in all its wonderful weirdness.



Awash with color, Rondinone's rainbow spans colored filters on every window of the building. Museum director and the show's curator Frogier explains: "Ugo wanted the architecture to embrace the visitor. For him the challenge was to find a way for the building and his art to really be unified into one total immersive art statement." Interrupting visitors basking in the colorful environs, however, are those aforementioned clowns.



Said clowns aren't remotely entertaining. They're not pulling some endless handkerchief from a billowing sleeve, nor are they squirting water from an oversized corsage. No, these "human sculptures" simply recline or sleep.

For all the gaudiness of their get-ups (custom-made in New York, no less), there's no buffoonery here. The 40 actors were hired through a local agency specializing in TV and film extras. Mostly older people, for a majority of Rondinone's clowns the project marks a first foray into contemporary art museums. And what a baptism that must be: effectively blinded by tailor-made masks, they've been explicitly instructed not to interact with the photo-taking hordes, no matter how invasive their poses. Toilet, drink or cigarette breaks require the intervention of gallery assistants, carefully guiding these garish yet impassive clowns by the elbow out of public view. They're there through January, incidentally. Empathize, folks.



Hanging on the sunset-styled walls, framed by those deadpan clowns are 12 "target" paintings, clashing starkly with those spectrum-painted backdrops. They're difficult to look at, not least because of their op-art qualities, but also because of those clowns lolling right beside. Experienced all at once, though – the clowns, the colors, the paintings, that is – things become more of a surreal trance. And that, possibly, is what Rondinone wants to achieve here.

Frogier, again: "I think you have to approach it as a dreamscape, a gift... In previous months and years Ugo's been focusing on a series of sculptures in black and brown. Here he wanted to come back to color. He wanted excessive color, like a dream... It's not about reality; it's about artificiality, what happens in your mind. People should feel immersed in this installation but also take out their own dreams."



I know, I know. It all smacks of artspeak claptrap, but I'm with Frogier here. Any reservations about contemporary art; or assumptions as to the nature of exhibitions; or even museums in

general all have to be left firmly at the door. If it's a casual afternoon affair you're after, slowly taking in a Shanghai show, then don't go. *Breathe Walk Die* is an unapologetic, multisensory encounter, and for my money, one well worth experiencing.
