

## ALMINE RECH GALLERY

Chicago Tribune, 'Seemingly an Outsider, Vital Transcends Borders', by Alan Artner, 16 March 2006

Not Vital, the Swiss-born sculptor and installation artist who is having his first exhibition in an American museum at the Arts Club of Chicago, has for 30 years been a prototype for the artist-as-nomad, a category of artmaker that has gained much attention since the beginning of the new millennium.

He lives for part of each year in Switzerland, Niger, Italy and New York. And some of each place finds its way into his work, causing it to look strange and unclassifiable whenever it is shown somewhere other than the locale that inspired it. This has proven to be a most successful strategy, as Vital seems the perpetual outsider, always in between cultures, an image not easily sustained over decades.

The works on view present an artist apparently in touch with animals, mountains and deserts who transmits such interests through series of abstract geometric forms as well as odd representations, often melancholy but also coyly funny.

His 16 silver spheres of "Camel," deployed on the floor, and four silver boxes of "Bremer Stadtmusikanten," stacked on a pedestal, have the geometry and reserve of Minimal sculpture from the 1970s. Yet they also are contemporary in their direction of viewers away from the seen to that which is only declared and stays invisible: the spheres' "sun-dried" camel parts and the boxes' remains of donkey, dog, cat and rooster, said to be inside.

Those who relish the practice of declaring but not revealing presumably take Vital's elegant, streamlined forms as reliquaries and, as such, vessels of feeling. That, in turn, brings them closer to his "50 Snowballs," a group of Murano glass spheres that appear to have ice at their centers, suggesting he is a poet preserving the transitory. His "Snowball Wall," however, seemingly vestiges of a (plaster) snowball fight, declares him only a clever jokester.

Both personae appear concurrently throughout the exhibition. Support for the poet comes from "3000 Tears," a massive marble slab pocked with drops, and "Sled," a marble piece designed to ensure poignant immobility. Evidence for the comedian issues from "Nietzsches Schnauz," a gigantic reproduction of the philosopher's mustache in

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aluminum, an untitled bronze cast of antlers with words intended to repel the viewer, and several fey, minimal drawings.

Also included in the show is a bronze that offers the hindquarters of a lithe animal atop the same body parts inverted as in a pool reflection. It is as puzzling as another surreal piece that has a black piano bench with white casts of human heads for three of its four legs.

Of a different order is a 30-minute film (by a trio of filmmakers, not the artist) that explores Vital's homes in Agadez, Niger, and his birthplace, Sent, Switzerland. Here his forte is seen to be monumental outdoor sculpture linked to the landscape and customs of the people. That work really steals the show, even when seen in reproduction. It is the work that most fleshes out an image of the artist as gifted nomadic adventurer.

- Alan Artner