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Ugo Rondinone presents *nuns + monks*, a solo exhibition at Goldstone in New York

Rondinone explores history, body, and mysticism through the motif of nuns and monks

Gladstone is pleased to present an exhibition of new works by Ugo Rondinone from the artist's latest body of work, *nuns + monks*. On the occasion of the inauguration of this new series in 2020, Rondinone spoke with Mitchell Anderson for *Mousse*.

Organic Accord: Ugo Rondinone

By Mitchell Anderson

Since the early 1990s, the work of Swiss-born, New York-residing Ugo Rondinone has cultivated a sense of wonder in viewers around the globe. Expressing an enduring interest in our primal and romantic collective relationship with the natural world, his works utilize advanced technologies to reveal or replicate that which is lost or forgotten as civilization plods on. In the past this has taken the form of rainbows lighting up the night sky as electric signs, fairy-tale forests rendered in ink at epic scale, and giant stones dramatically painted and balanced to form colorful mountains and blocks of raw stone stacked to create human forms.

In the fall of 2020, Rondinone continued this last project with three simultaneous exhibitions at Esther Schipper, Berlin; Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich; and Sant'Andrea de Scaphis, Rome, debuting a new series of sculptures. In the spring of 2021, Rondinone debuts new works from this series at Gladstone Gallery in New York. I caught up with Rondinone to hear his thoughts about the place of the artist in a world increasingly unable to ignore the natural; the planning behind these major installations; and his faith in the capacity of form to convey narrative.

MITCHELL ANDERSON: Your new series *nuns + monks* (2020) debuted last September simultaneously at three galleries whose locations draw a more or less vertical line down the middle of Europe, and now makes its premiere in the United States at Gladstone Gallery. How much of this planning was logistical, and how much was simply your choice? Does this become part of the sculptures' reception and life span?

UGO RONDINONE: The concentrated symbolic energy of the new body of work goes hand in hand with its synchronous presentation. Once I lift up a new sculpture in three different places at the same time, the sculpture has a greater chance to enter people's souls. The work is open but sharp and suffused with a combination of humor and pathos. At the same time, it represents an investigation of the mutable potential of sculpture as both a physical medium and a site of rich cultural disclosure in contemporary art.

As the exhibition's title suggests, the sculptures in *nuns + monks* address varied

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iconographies associated with these most resonant of forms. Nuns and monks occupy the literal and figurative centers of human life, but they also appear in a wide range of social and narrative contexts. I wanted to reveal the multivalent potential of nuns and monks as vessel and beacon, human body and mystical source. In so doing, the work reveals a broad array of interests, notable for both historical depth and up-to-the-minute urgency. Through human history religious imagery has had immense transformational power; a familiar symbol can transform another symbol, like a stone, into something richly metaphorical.

MA: Your work is remarkable in how it operates: an exhibition of yours is almost a work unto itself. Your installations are a total aesthetic and perceptive experience, involving for instance wall paintings, lights, and works that connect to a larger narrative. Does the exhibition concept emerge from the works, or from the space? And how do you work on a series—as a totality or in pieces?

UR: The exhibitions are the products of intense focus and a constant renewal of my relationship with the materials. To this end, I organize my studio so that I can dedicate myself to only one production at a time, and it fully occupies my attention. Nonetheless, subjects and formal experiments carry over from one medium to another, and the window sculptures in *nuns + monks* provide a sense of the scope of my interests and passions between the inner self and the natural world. They also demonstrate how I give my motifs space to come into focus at their own pace. As I return to a set of motifs and symbols over the years—as is the case with the windows and stone—they reveal their emotional complexities and reverberations, gaining in mystery and becoming only more elusive as I hone them and explore their intricacies. Knowledge and familiarity are never taken for granted; rather, I keep the unknown squarely at the center of my gaze.

MA: With *Seven Magic Mountains*, installed ten miles south of Las Vegas Boulevard in 2016, I'd say you reinvented Land art for the twenty-first century. It's a great deal more accessible than Michael Heizer's relatively nearby *Double Negative* (1969), both physically and emotionally. A lot of this, I think, has to do with the colors. What are you achieving when you contradict our natural idea of what a stone mass looks like? What function do these painted surfaces achieve for you?

UR: The mountain sculptures, the stone figures, and the recent bronze sculptures *nuns + monks* evoke archaic and contemporary sources alike, concretizing cycles of time and life as physical form. I'm putting faith in stone as material—in its innate beauty and energy, its structural quality, its surface texture, and its ability to collect and condense time. The grotesque biomorphic distortion that characterizes the lifetime of a stone can become a haunting openness when transformed by color and palpable emotional charge. All three groups of works share a paradoxical mixture of vulnerability and strength, and express solidarities between human and nature.

MA: But these new works are not stone, they're bronze casts that have been enlarged from smaller maquettes in your studio. Approaching these sculptures, I sense an uncanny questioning of what the material is, thanks to the perfectly painted surfaces and the coloring, which seems to alternately add to and subtract from the feeling of

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weight. When I think of this kind of material shift or revelation in art, I would normally think a generation older than you. I know you have a long history of working with bronze at all scales, but with these pieces, what feeling were you seeking, from a material point of view?

UR: The decision to cast the sculptures was a practical one, not motivated by a surreal gesture of hide and seek—like I did with the moonrise masks (2005–06), where the sculptures look like fresh clay, but are in fact bronzes covered with a mixture of pulverized clay and polyurethane. First I was looking for a stone that breaks well and can look like the folds of a nun's or monk's garment. But a good breaking stone like limestone is not ideal at the size I wished to work at, because limestone breaks in unexpected places. So I decided to 3D scan the one-foot tall limestones and enlarge it to my desired scale.

MA: This year has been about nothing if not the environment and the ways that we as humans continue either bow to it or ignore it and suffer the consequences. The pandemic, the wildfires, the continued rise of the oceans—it's becoming harder and harder for us to escape or ignore the world around us. With these sculptures, perhaps more than with the stone figures, I find myself thinking of the times when on a hike or a drive I've searched for a human form in untouched nature. How do you view the artist's relationship to the natural world, and where would you situate your work in that respect?

UR: The natural world is my first source of inspiration. It started with the large ink landscapes at the end of the 1980s. In the middle of the AIDS crisis in 1989 I turned away from grief and found in nature a spiritual road map for solace, regeneration, and inspiration. In nature one enters a space where the sacred and the profane, the mystical and the mundane, vibrate against one another. *nuns + monks* continues to address the dual reflection between the inner self and the natural world. Just as the external world one sees is inseparable from one's internal structures, *nuns + monks* allows such layers of signification to come in and out of focus, prompting the viewer to revel in the pure sensory experience of color, form, and mass while simultaneously engendering an altogether contemporary version of the sublime. Like a diarist, I record the living universe: this season, this day, this hour, this sound in the grass, this crashing wave, this sunset, this end of the day, this silence.

The original version of this article was published by *Mousse* in November 2020 and is available at <http://mousse magazine.it/ugo-rondinone-mitchell-anderson-2020/>.

Exhibition Details

the sun at 4pm

September 23 – October 29, 2016

530 West 21st Street

New York, NY 10011

About Ugo Rondinone

Ugo Rondinone (b. 1964, Brunnen, Switzerland) studied at the Universität für Angewandte Kunst in Vienna before moving to New York in 1997 where he currently

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lives and works. His work has been the subject of solo presentations at the Centre George Pompidou, Paris (2003); Whitechapel Gallery, London (2006); Art Institute of Chicago, Illinois (2013); Rockbund Art Van Beuningen, Rotterdam (2016); Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Roma, Rome (RS13); Carre D'Art, Nimes, France (2016); Berkeley Art Museum, California (2017); Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati (2017); Bass Museum of Art, Miami (2017); Belvedere, Vienna (2021); Tamayo Museum, Mexico City (RSRR); Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt (2022); Petit Palais, Paris (2022); Scuola Grande San Giovanni Evangelista di Venezia, Venice (2022); The Musée d'Art et d'Histoire, Geneva (2023); Parrish Museum, Water Mill, New York (2023); Städel Museum, Frankfurt (2023); Storm King Art Center, New Windsor, New York (2023); Museum SAN, Wonju, Korea (2024) Kunstmuseum Luzern, Switzerland (2024); Würth Museum, Kunzelsau, Germany (2024); and Aspen Art Museum, Colorado (2024).

About Gladstone Gallery

Gladstone is known for its commitment to artists whose prescient approaches and experimental practices have defined the contours of contemporary art. The gallery has long been an active partner in the cultivation of iconoclastic careers, fostering a roster of artists recognized for their ground-breaking contributions. Headquartered in New York and including outposts in both Brussels and Seoul, Gladstone's impact extends globally, enabling both the presentation of new bodies of work, and an amplification of the international reach of its artists. Alongside its work with contemporary artists, the gallery is steward to the legacies of pivotal historical artists and serves as an advocate for the enduring power of art. Gladstone is led by a team of partners who spearhead its long-term vision and program, building on the values of its founder Barbara Gladstone.

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