

UGO RONDINONE. LIFE TIME

JUNE 24–SEPTEMBER 18, 2022

BOOKLET TEXTS OF THE EXHIBITION

The exhibition „LIFE TIME“ by Ugo Rondinone extends across three parts of the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt building. The area housing the interior gallery spaces is divided into five segments. This is where the main part of the exhibition is located. From there, the path leads to the Rotunda, where three works are shown. The first and at the same time the last part of the exhibition is located on the roof of the Rotunda.

star

The paintings that form the *star* series are black paintings with both small and large white dots as well as wisps of smudging, often having the appearance of fog of varying densities. While they realistically reproduce the night sky, they are in fact an illusion created with sand and stones—a material diametrically opposed to the self-luminous stars. These paintings—unlike a photograph—exhibit the gesture of the demiurge, the creator, whose power is to operate between reality and fiction. Looking at the stars is an escape, but it is also an exercise in humility. Rondinone’s execution of these star images emphasizes the act of perceiving a random constellation in the sky from a certain observation point, which—in earlier times and without technical aids—allowed for an approximate and yet sometimes life-saving orientation in time and space. Each of the constellations is dated and titled with the day of its observation.

clown

After Ugo Rondinone first used the motif of the clown—with living persons in a multi-channel video (dog days are over, 1996)—he made a series of life-size sculptures in 2002, which are reminiscent of clown figures mainly due to their face paint. Rondinone’s clowns wear Pierrot masks, referring historically to Pierrot’s romantic phase in the commedia dell’arte, where he is regarded as sad, melancholic, and indolent. The clowns in Rondinone’s work display passive attitudes that can be read as rejection or disinterest, as shyness, loneliness, or aversion to the world. Passivity in these works evokes a state of introspection, autonomy, and idleness. Each of the eight clowns represents a day of the week, carrying the respective weekday in their title, except for one whose addition to the title is the number zero. The overarching title, *if there were anywhere but desert*, refers to a volume of poetry by Egyptian writer Edmond Jabès, who became known during his French exile in the 1960s for a form of poetry in which individual poems coalesce into a coherent text that remains fragmentary, lacking a clear and unambiguous plot. Jabès referred to this form of literature as “*récit éclaté*” (exploded narrative).

mask

The Yupik are members of an indigenous population who primarily live in southwestern Alaska. Their spiritual way of life is influenced by the phases of the moon and characterized by the veneration of cultic mask objects. When Rondinone made the cast rubber masks that form the *moonrise* series, he was living in Paris, where he had found wooden examples similar to the Yupik masks at an antique market. In his novel *Princess Brambilla*, published in 1820, E.T.A. Hoffmann introduced an encounter between everyday life/ reality and imagination through the doubling of the protagonists, whose copies corresponded to masked figures of the commedia dell’arte. The contrasts suggested by masks—between identity and role or between self-portrayal and dissimulation—form a far-reaching, Western motif that extends into questions of being and authenticity. The face and facial features depicted on them communicate interiority, mediating between the inner and outer world, between an I and a You. Rondinone worked with his hands on

the models for the rubber casts of the masks, as well as for the later large masks cast in aluminum, so that within the act of making, an inner and emotional state becomes visible on the objective, outer surface.

door

The black door, which belongs to a series of works that correspond to the twenty-six letters of the Latin alphabet, hints at a metaphorical meaning. Doors mark thresholds and transitions between inside and outside, both in terms of spatial and mental movements. Rondinone's doors seal any connection to the outside world, instead operating within us. Their rectangular shape, which protrudes from the wall, recalls modern monochrome paintings. Whatever might be behind it remains hidden by the apparently monochromatic surface: visible is only the shape of a door, which may be open, ajar, or firmly closed. Questions regarding belonging, space, nature, inside and outside, fantasy, longing, and togetherness are evoked. The titles, such as *all absolute abyss* and *next new night*, employ alliteration to mark the work's place within the alphabet, while also forming aphorisms, consolidations of an imaginary event. The title of the door exhibited is *zero zany zone*. Its narrow, square peephole is blocked with a grille, and a large, heavy padlock secures a wide bar.

nude

The figures in this series are casts of nude dancers. Gaps and openings, for instance between the shoulder and the arm, are caused by movements during the drying process. The body molds were filled with a mixture of paraffin wax and earth pigments, which were obtained from all continents via an Internet exchange platform. The shades of color and fragmentary bodies are reminiscent of the manikins used for drawing exercises. Peaceful and introverted, sitting freely on the floor or leaning against the wall, the figures recall the passivity of Rondinone's clowns and form a strong contrast to the athletic, flexible bodies of the dancers that they were molded from. The change of skin tone on each figure, the absence of head hair, and finally the titles consisting only of the letter x (from a single x to xxxxxxxxxxxxxx) endow the figures with an anonymous identity.

landscape

Since 2013, Rondinone has developed site-specific sculptures made from soil, which transfer 1960s Land Art into the museum interior and amalgamate it with Minimal Art. The outside environment is brought inside and its reality is fictionalized. Rondinone's work is about dissolving the distinction between art and reality by making reality appear fluid and hybrid. With these earth objects, he could almost be said to breathe life into their bloodless forms. The monumental curved wall—a piece of natural soil that vertically tilts—suggests associations with Richard Serra's similarly monumental sculptures, but replaces their steely, forbidding materiality with the absorbent and affecting qualities of soil. The height, which gently rises toward the center of the soil sculpture, mirrors the characteristic architecture of the gable roof of the Schirn's exhibition space.

your age and my age and the age of the moon

Behind the glass on the opposite wall of the Rotunda walkway there are thousands of shining moons, painted on black paper by children who were invited by the artist to contribute to this exhibition. *your age and my age and the age of the moon* is the title of the work, spanning a huge bridge between us and the billions-year-old universe. Children's first attempts at painting typically depict the outside world—a house, a tree, the sun, a rainbow—and thus can be found to resonate with Rondinone's work. The moon's capacity to be a site of projection of one's reveries has long played a major role in art. This is especially true of German Romanticism, a significant movement for Rondinone, when people fled the confines of the city into nature and turned their gaze toward the night sky. One of the most famous paintings from that period is *Two Men Contemplating the Moon* (1819/20) by Caspar David Friedrich.

bright shiny morning

A milky-white brick wall is painted on the glass structure of the Rotunda, shielding the interior from the exterior. Only the thin cracks between the bricks allow a view through the glass. One particular motif that appears throughout Rondinone's work is the suspension and transformation of the boundary between interior and exterior, between art and non-art, between a real landscape and a painted one. This seemingly trivial distinction brings to light a deeper and, above all, more vulnerable layer, such as when the physical boundary between one body and other bodies is crossed, or when nature is seen as independent from humans. The title *bright shiny morning* resurrects these boundaries that have been forgotten during the night with the hope of no longer being able to see them in the bright backlight.

clock

An artificial, colorful atmosphere of light results from three round stained glass windows; it connects the earthy brown still life curved standing landscape with entry door with the outside, lending it the texture of a landscape painting, while also imbuing it with an interior significance through its atmosphere of sacred silence akin to that of a church. Rondinone's stained glass windows, which resemble church windows, are windows in time. They predominantly consist of three concentric circles, with the outer one divided into twelve equal sections and the middle circle labelled with twelve Roman numerals from one to twelve. A clock, a dial without hands, timelessness. Its temporality is expressed by the number at the top, which changes from one clockface to the next. In fact, another, much slower time is measured: namely the movement of light—the movement of the Earth around the sun—which falls through the colorful glass onto the artificial landscape, transforming it over the course of a day.

diary

The *diary* series gathers hundreds of drawings, each titled after a particular day between 2005 and 2015. The vast majority reproduce studies of windows that have the appearance of sketchy notes captured during excursions through cities and villages. The agglomeration ranges from simple rectangles to detailed, architectural renderings, sometimes embedded in urban and rural landscapes that suggest the artist's presence in an actual place. A smaller quantity of these are devoted to still lifes—depictions of vessels on a table, a chair, a table with pen and paper, and the like. The drawings evince intimacy and privacy, since the process of their production, more than most other artistic activities, takes place in isolation and as if in a closed, motionless space. The physical objects that hold the drawings appear like windows or a wall on which the inner and the outer world flow into one another.

poem on wall

The poems written directly on the walls of the exhibition space, formally related to graffiti and murals, constitute a concrete commingling of inner and outer worlds. The intimacy of the act of writing and the written word combines with the act of their reading. The size of the poems, each no longer than eighteen words, requires physical proximity, so that their perception becomes an intimate encounter between the artist and each individual viewer. In these works, Rondinone expresses through poetic language that which characterizes his entire oeuvre—namely an ambiguity of form, an oscillation between inside and outside, which is borne neither by intent nor purpose, but solely by the effect of an atmosphere on the possibilities of thought and perception.

cloud

Rondinone's first generation of stone sculptures can be read in the tradition of classical modernism. They are abstract, curved forms similar to the works of Henry Moore or Auguste Rodin. The plinths are made of concrete and stamped with the grain of wooden planks. The idea for the sculptures derives from Chinese scholar's rocks, also known by the Chinese term „Gongshi“.

It refers to an art whose creator is nature itself, with water and wind shaping the stones over long periods of time; in the artist's studio, these stones are completed in a considerably shorter period of time. Rondinone's limitation of the series to twenty copies is reflected in the title, which likewise consists of twenty words. In each piece, one word in the title is highlighted in capital letters, which determines that sculpture's position within the group. Associating the forms with clouds resembles a secularization of the spiritual idea of scholar stones, allowing for a further connection between inside and outside, between permanence and transience.

doorway

The *doorway* series goes back to the first exhibitions of Rondinone. They are spatial elements brought in on-site that stand between two worlds like a waterway lock separating them from each other. Basically, it is a piece of wall with a walk-through doorway behind which the exhibition ends. The vertically aligned wall boards in far away trains passing by are white, analogous to the wall color of the exhibition space, while the corridor behind the passage to the exit is covered with black fabric. Even the sounds of the far away trains passing by cannot be heard here; the outside world seems to be submerged in darkness. Other variations of these works have taken the form of wall pieces standing freely in the room, connecting two parts of the exhibition. Romanticism's strong influence on Rondinone, particularly the paintings of Casper David Friedrich, is much more evident in his early works, such as in this piece's citation of the movement, where the mysterious fragments of buildings and cemeteries standing freely in the landscape seem to organize the otherwise indistinguishable foreground and background.

it's late and the wind carries a faint sound as it moves through the trees. it could be anything. The jingling of little bells perhaps, or the tiny flickering out of tiny lives. i stroll down the side walk and close my eyes and open them and wait for my mind to go perfectly blank. like a room no one has ever entered, a room without doors or windows. a place where nothing happens.

The installation is initially unified by a blue light that illuminates the entire space in a melancholic way, as well as by the slowed down, looped music of the Fishbone song *Everyday Sunshine*, its rhythm synchronizing the movements of the actors. Their actions are simple everyday ones that last no more than ten seconds. The screens alternate, so that at first one sees a woman acting, followed by one man. Here are two examples: a man is standing at the window, looking out, moving a curtain back and forth with one hand. A woman opens the door into a dark room, allowing light to fall in from the outside, and then goes into the room and closes the door, leaving the room dark. Whatever it is that the man sees through the window or that the woman sees in the dark room remains hidden from the viewer. A perception staged almost in opposition to the suspense, where all possible junctures are conceivable and which opens up the space (where nothing happens) towards every imaginable direction.

snow

White paper confetti falls silently from the ceiling onto the floor. The object with the title *thank you silence*, consisting of a wooden cube and a metal grid, continuously sends paper snow trickling down, which is then refilled back into the snow machine at night. A cycle whereby yesterday's past becomes today's present, accumulating the traces on the floor of the exhibition into a text that has "exploded" into confetti (as in the fragmentary narrative of Jabès's *récit éclaté*).

still.life.

Finally, the sun and snow are joined by fruits placed in neat rows on the floor—five reddish-yellow apples and five green pears. The bronze sculptures in the *still.life.* series lead a paradoxical existence; they belong to the outside world, are natural things, and weigh only a few grams. Though literally "still life," what they nevertheless depict represents a frozen phase in the life cycle

of a thing, serving to emphasize its end and its decay. In this way, it can express the contradictory disposition inherent in Rondinone's work in an exemplary way; indeed, it allows his art to be situated in the still life in the first place.

sun

The exhibition, which begins in darkness, ends in the brilliant yellow light that emanates from several round paintings on the wall. Also known as "mandalas" or "target paintings," the images, which Rondinone began painting in 1992, are made by applying spray paint in concentric circles on round canvases. Their visual effect resembles studies by Wojciech Fangor, a Polish painter and graphic artist born in 1922 who was interested in the experimental perception of space. One of the leading representatives of Op Art, Fangor created paintings consisting of colored circles and waves. With pulsating, vibrating contours, they create within the eye an impression of movement. A similar effect occurs in Rondinone's paintings. Though the bright colors illuminate the entire room and radiate outward, their effect is quite the opposite, absorbing perception and drawing it inward.

tree

Inside the Rotunda, a leafless tree rises more than six meters into the air. The white enameled aluminum sculpture, called *flower moon*, was cast from a 2000-year-old olive tree in the Basilicata region of southern Italy. The life span of trees easily exceeds that of humans and other living beings. Trees don't move around, yet they can communicate with each other over long distances. And they communicate with people, above all, through sensations and feelings, an aspect that proved essential to artistic romanticism and its reinterpretation of the landscape. "Insofar as I give a higher meaning to what is commonplace, and a mysterious appearance to what is ordinary, the dignity of the unknown to what is known, a semblance of infinity to what is finite, I romanticize it." With texts like this one by Novalis in tow, Rondinone spent a considerable amount of time in nature to overcome an experience of personal grief. His first landscape drawings and works as a young artist date from this time, and he continues to revisit them today in different mediums and variations—a fact that allows the term "postromanticism" to hold his work together like a bracket.

rainbow

A rainbow of large illuminated letters radiates from the Schirn's roof, announcing the title of the exhibition. *life time*, a work made for this exhibition, explores the question of the function and purpose of a public work of art, which Rondinone feels must be met with the widest possible sense of outreach and public accessibility. Like many of his works, this one is about universal phenomena, things that are everywhere—at once trivial and philosophical, distant and emotional. The writer Dominic Eichler describes Rondinone's works as "urbane architectural tiaras for the enlightened or at least curious populace, shameless pop homosexual propaganda," underscoring the transformational and transgressive power of Rondinone's art. The artist does not conceive of (temporary) life as a struggle against (infinite) time. Rather, such a conflict is suspended, and Rondinone's practice savors the respite found in the magic of the rainbow, illuminating the fragility of these two adversaries. The poetic semantics of Rondinone's series of rainbows move in the realm of aphorisms and short meaningful sayings; they delimit emotional, inner states and condense a moment into a timeless truth.