

Not Vital *Silence*

7 June –
3 August 2024

Artist Talk: 27 June, 6.30 pm

Silence

by Thomas Kellein

And now this colour! A deep blue. A Prussian blue. It appears like space. A little like darkness, a little like mystery. A little heaviness, too. With no true boundary. Perhaps it is a blue that speaks of confidence, that suggests a sense of security. It remains a little cool, like a coat that I could wear, but by no means have to. It is colour that remains silent, that does not cry out and fight for attention. But there are patches with a lighter colour, representing three heads – heads that have been familiar in Not Vital's painting for over ten years. They are floating, there are usually two or three of them. One is very bright, two others appear more earth-toned, executed in a mixture of browns and greens, a little umber and olive, which is created by mixing blue with yellow. Toward the top these heads taper somewhat, almost receding, like hair blowing in the wind. Round heads no longer appear, they are all ovals in various sizes. As they no longer have eyes nor a mouth, and the nose is a simple vertical line, they lack a reassuring expression. They are the active agents of the image, they are the lights and air flowing in. Accordingly, they are partly shrouded in light blue. They evoke emotion by taking shape as figures on a dark ground and producing dynamic movement in midst of calm. One of the heads is a light blue, it is the ray of light in the picture. Another has a light blue line that pierces the picture plane below.

NOT is spelled out on the canvas in the same light blue paint. The date of creation is inscribed at the bottom: "13.3.24". A pane of glass hangs in front of the painting. It is larger than the canvas, no longer functioning as a frame since it creates a deliberate spatial separation from the work. Almost every painting wants to be a body, a complex gesture, a presence with something to say. The placement of the blue paintings behind a pane of glass places them at a remove. They withdraw, they become part of a sculpture. But the heads reach out to us. Do they speak? Are they silent? Are they the artist's alter ego? Is the artist addressing us through the heads?

Not Vital loves the archaic. He discovers more and more special objects; almost from the beginning he loves to present heads like trophies on poles. There are always signs and symbols to discover in his work that both baffle and amaze. Some of these signs have to do with customs, with cultures that he seeks out and explores with curiosity. He loves the birthdays of people whose dates are manifested in the measurements of his silver cubes. These could be polished, but his view now is that they should be left to darken and develop a patina. After fifty years as a successful sculptor he is aware that it is better to make the heavy appear light. That lightness must nudge and provoke, else it remains pallid. "Fuck You" proclaims one of his bronzes; you might pick it up and

tuck it under your arm, but the words suggest you keep your distance. In Not Vital's park in Sent, one can walk into sculptures like houses. However, it is too cold to live or even stay the night there. In parallel, a camel spits water into a pool clad in chrome. Bronze Toblerone bars hang in the trees. Previous exhibitions have included sculptures with horns, eyes, ears and noses. Again and again, his works have impaled life and turned it back on itself – not only in the casts of camel's heads. They appear comical at first. The 24-part floor work Camel from Niger contains a dead camel in silver balls. At the same time these works are serious, strictly speaking almost tragic. And yet we encounter them without any additional narration. That's the way it is, they seem to say, although it may not be true at all.

In Not Vital's work the archaic appears first as a bizarre idea, but immediately afterwards you can sense so-called life stirring in it. His curiosity encompasses a great deal. He painted his first heads one day in China – because he happened to have time, he says. They started off as Chinese-style faces on a white background. For example, the Self-Portrait as a Rice Farmer. What a sense of humour! More heads then began to appear on canvas in the form of silhouettes, always frontally depicted as floating balloons on a white background, later also on black and orange. These colour surfaces were never spatial, but rather two-dimensional fields of action on an easel. The artist could look up while painting and see beyond the easel. In painting, Vital created a world that runs parallel to his sculpture and drawing.

Beings that look at us, beings that the artist often knew personally, because he had friends who modelled for him, like Antoinette or James Lord for Alberto Giacometti. Then suddenly, in Brazil – another place he regularly visited to work – the heads multiplied, and the colour of the ground became Prussian blue. These heads are no longer portraits. At best, their mood suggests self-portraits. They fill the picture like small planets, they are ghosts and shades (in a good sense). Behind a glass pane they evoke forces that communicate something and yet remain silent. They say hello in a clear, charming and also unyielding way. Do we want to escape this? The blue pictures make us happy, so the answer is clear.

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Not Vital (b. 1948, Sent) studied at the Centre universitaire expérimental de Vincennes in Paris from 1968 to 1969 before moving to New York in 1974. After having studios in numerous places, such as Rome, Agadez and Beijing, he now works mainly in Rio de Janeiro and the Engadine. His work has been the subject of numerous solo exhibitions, most recently at the Museum der Moderne Salzburg, Ateneum Art Museum in Helsinki, Yorkshire Sculpture Park in Wakefield, UK, and Bündner Kunstmuseum Chur. He has also been represented in numerous group exhibitions at institutions such as Kunstmuseum St. Gallen, Kunstmuseum Basel, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Humblbæk, Denmark, Mori Art Museum in Tokyo, Japan, Bass Museum of Art in Miami Beach, USA, Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing, China, Victoria and Albert Museum in London, UK, and Kunsthaus Zürich. His works can be found in collections worldwide including the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, USA, Kunstmuseum Bern, Kunstmuseum Luzern, Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, USA, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Museum of Modern Art in New York, USA, and Brooklyn Museum in New York, USA.