

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Bram E. Gieben, "Ugo Rondinone @ Common Guild, Until 19 November," *TheSkinny.co.uk*, November 5, 2012.

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**REVIEW BY BRAM E. GIEBEN.
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The first few sculptures in Swiss-born, New York-based artist Ugo Rondinone's debut Scottish exhibition, *primitive* – hand-made birds cast in bronze, between six and eight inches in height – are placed on the floor, making the viewer actively engage with the works and the gallery space by kneeling or crouching to take in their fine detail. Their feathers bear the artist's thumb and fingerprints, carefully moulded by Rondinone to express archetypal forms. Like carrion birds, the taller sculptures exude a deathly menace in their stillness. The smaller birds resemble inquisitive starlings; one tiny bird, called 'the flora,' crouches with head upturned, asking a mute question of a larger bird named 'the earth.'

The birds crowd the staircase, suddenly at eye level, confronting visitors with their hollow, eyeless sockets. They become threatening, perhaps attempting to convey some dire ecological warning. Large mirrors reflect and double the space, affording the vista of an entire room carpeted with the creatures. The effect is undeniably Hitchcockian – turning from the mirror, there is a flicker of motion, but the birds remain inert. Their capacity for flight is imminent, implied, but never represented. Like Polly Morgan's macabre taxidermy sculptures, these are creatures out of time – beyond or beneath the skin of reality.

Unafraid to experiment with myriad different forms and techniques, Rondinone's exuberant, rainbow-coloured neon signs adorn the streets of New York's fashionable Lower East Side, their messages life-affirming. The outsize character heads created for the *Moonrise* sequence of sculptures were comic-book caricatures; goon-faces, smiles edged with sharp teeth, adding a dash of menace to their kawaii-cuteness. In *primitive*, Rondinone creates a stripped-back effect – the bird sculptures are all similar, but no two are identical. Their repetition and placement create a sense of the unheimlich, as though one is trespassing on a frozen moment of time, embodied by Rondinone's exquisite hour and minute-less stained glass clocks which resemble watchful eyes. Catching the birds in their attitudes of rest, exploration and watchfulness, they provide the only splash of colour.

Rondinone has whitewashed the windows of The Common Guild, creating a blank space. He uses the shape of the Victorian tenement to stunning effect, placing his sculptures in every nook and cranny to dominate and fill the rooms with their silent presence. A beautiful, unsettling exhibition, this is Rondinone at his most subtle and understated.