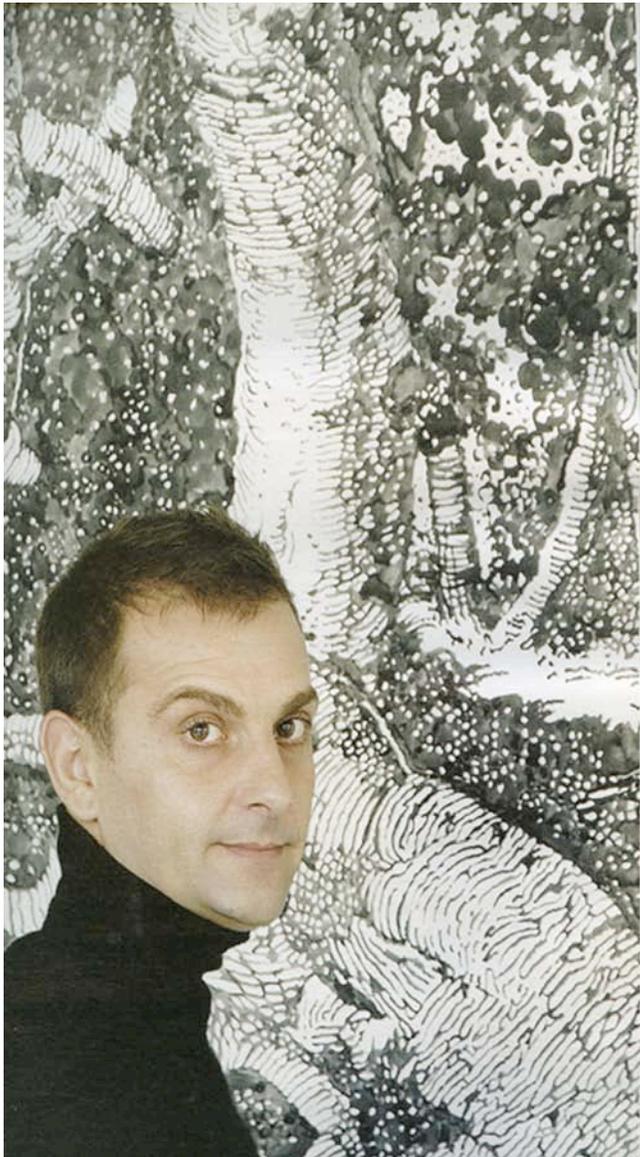


GLADSTONE GALLERY

Yablonsky, Linda, "Made Totally by Art: Ugo Rondinone", *Art + Auction*, October 2004, pp. 44-46 + 48



Ugo Rondinone, left, in front of one of his landscapes inspired by 19th-century examples, is obsessed with history and passing time. Here, Long-Nights, Short Days, resin casts of centuries-old olive trees, 2004

inthestudio

Enigmatic and dizzyingly eclectic, his work reflects a life "made totally by art" By Linda Yablonsky Portrait by Philippe Chancel

UGO RONDINONE

"If I could, I would stay in bed all day long," says the 40-year-old, Swiss-born artist as a privileged blacker, take note of his rather breathless exhibition schedule. In the past year, he has been the focus of museum shows in Australia, Austria and France, and is presently featured in the 54th Carnegie International, opening this month in Pittsburgh. Rondinone also contributed work to the Lucerne and Biennale exhibitions in Tbilisi, the Netherlands, which closes on October 17, and has a major solo show opening late next year at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London.

Shortly after our meeting on a breezy July afternoon, he will travel 3,000 miles to a temporary work space in Zurich to put the finishing touches on new sculptures for his show at the Matthew Marks Gallery in New York, on view through October 20, and an upcoming show at the Galleria Bionco in Santharà in Naples, Italy, opening in late November. The man never stops moving—small wonder he longs for a nap.

The peripatetic Rondinone, it turns out, hasn't had a proper studio in 12 years. He prefers to work in the field, walking through the Venetian woods with a sketchbook, taking to the streets of Paris with a video camera, making casts of 300-year-old olive trees at Matera, the ancient southern Italian town where his parents once lived, and where, coincidentally, Mel Gibson shot his film *The Passion of the Christ*.

"I call these the landscapes," he says, referring to his well-known series of big, air-gelatic sand-scapes in India ink, which are enlargements of modest watercolors he draws on paper. "It was an important decision to get out of the studio and spend the day going into nature and making those drawings."

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in the studio

It was a decision to do my work as a lifestyle, and so it all built up from this." Since then, his art practice has been dedicated to maintaining a life under complete creative control.

Rondinone speaks English with some hesitation, and it is not always easy to grasp his line of thought. The same can be said of his very eclectic body of work, which incorporates sculpture, painting, drawing, photography, video and even public signage. He frequently combines multiple mediums in evocative, large-scale installations, whose parts connect philosophically and emotionally more than they do through purely formal means.

"I use all media as a tool," Rondinone says. "Every medium has a history." For him, to be an artist is to address the legacy of each medium in ways that simultaneously subvert and extol tradition—particularly, in his case, the tradition of 19th-century Romanticism and its yearning for an impossible ideal. That impulse, combined with his attachment to the absurdist dramas of Samuel Beckett, gives Rondinone's work an existentialist and rather melancholy tone.

This is certainly true of the circular dialogues that occasionally emanate from objects and walls in his installations. These intimate-sounding communications between a man and woman loop and go nowhere. "That is about the limits of language," Rondinone says. "We have to talk, because that is the only way we can communicate, but language cannot resolve what you really want to say."

The son of Italian parents, Rondinone grew up in Brunnen, in the German-speaking part of Switzerland, not far from Lucerne. As a teenager, he was profoundly influenced by J.K. Huysmans's 19th-century novel *Against Nature*, whose decadent antihero, des Esseintes, isolates himself in his chateau to construct a hedonistic world that is pure artifice.

The spirit of des Esseintes runs through Rondinone's work. For his 1999 series of fetish photographs, collectively titled "Moonlighting," the artist donned a skintight rubber suit and assumed a host of submissive positions. The project can be seen as something of a metaphor for des Esseintes's suffocating aestheticism. "That was about isolating yourself in your own skin," says Rondinone.

Like Huysmans's novel, Rondinone's art is imbued with a powerful sense of anomie. One has only to look at the group of seven polyester- and-cotton figures dressed as melancholic clowns that Rondinone made in 2000. Portly, enervated, possibly overmedicated fops in extravagant thrift shop rags, clown noses and painted faces, they embody the exhaustion of a life dependent on appearances. They exhibit the slightly debauched air of a Blanche Dubois and the slothful disposition of an Oblomov, the sedentary title character of Ivan Goncharov's 1858 novel.

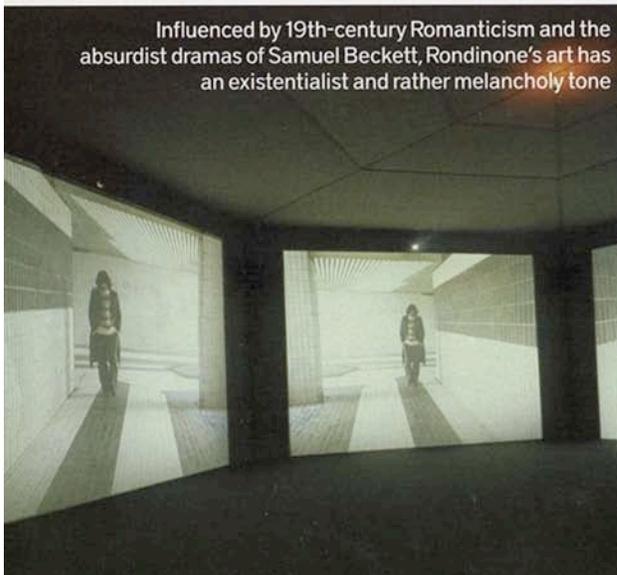
Rondinone has invented his own fictional character, a gay man whose daily activities he documents in a "diary" he keeps each year. This alter ego appears in "I Don't Live Here Anymore," a series of photographs made from 1995 to 2001, in which Rondinone digitally superimposed his own heavily made-up face on the bodies of female fashion models.

Laura Hoptman, curator of the Carnegie International, compares Rondinone to Oscar Wilde. "What Ugo has done is to take the blatantly artificial and made it more real than real," she says. "He's not appropriating clichés but embracing them, because he recognizes there is truth in them. His work is about experience, not reality. It is about a life that has been made totally by art."

His contribution to the Carnegie International is a new version of his six-channel video *Roundelay*. Projected inside a monumental, burlap-covered room and set to a soundtrack by composer Philip Glass, the video follows a man and a woman on separate paths through the streets of Paris, where they appear to pursue each other endlessly but never meet.

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Rondinone often deals with identity and isolation. In his 2003 six-channel video *Roundelay*, below, a man and woman seem to pursue each other endlessly but never meet. Right: A 1995 photograph from "I Don't Live Here Anymore," in which he superimposed his own face on the bodies of fashion models



Influenced by 19th-century Romanticism and the absurdist dramas of Samuel Beckett, Rondinone's art has an existentialist and rather melancholy tone



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