

GLADSTONE GALLERY

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Ugo Rondinone

WHITECHAPEL ART GALLERY, LONDON
MARTIN HERBERT

"Every day I set less store on intellect," writes Marcel Proust in the essay "Against Sainte-Beuve," privileging instinct and sensorial experience instead. In Ugo Rondinone's first major London show, he would seem to work in the same spirit, since the exhibition's melancholic title—"zero built a nest in my navel"—clearly speaks to gut feelings. Indeed, audiences at the Whitechapel Art Gallery initially have little else to go on, experiencing a considerable interlude of rebuffed quizzicality on first entering the galleries, followed by the realization that Rondinone's cryptic installation is aimed less at the mind than at the nervous system. The Swiss artist floods the first space with four bars of piano music—a few chords of Erik Satie-like anomic—endlessly looped. Then he ushers audiences into the disorienting Minimalist labyrinth of *ALL THOSE DOORS*, 2003, a pergola-like construction of glossy black plastic arcades and freestanding doorways. One winds through these structures toward a colossal white zero painted on a black wall at the end of the room, in the center of which is an aperture leading to a destination that could be anybody's guess.

One jumps through hoops in installations because the hoops are there, even while half-anticipating nothing in the way of an experiential payoff—rarely expecting the nothing to be the very something one is seeking. Here, from the outset, disenchantment blooms from emptiness and is evidently intended. An analogy between the exhibition and the tedium of quotidian domestic life is (literally) drawn on many of the black columns, which feature at their bases miniature sketches in white felt-tip of a beaked, anthropomorphic figure—the artist, we are told in a wall text, in the guise of a raven—ritualistically killing time with empty activity: ruminatively chewing cereal, smoking a cigarette, and staring at a mirror and a clock. Also keyed to the idea of time and anxiety are eleven oversize black polyurethane masks, based on designs by the Alaskan Yupik tribe, which merge animal and human features to generate an ambiguous malevolence. Collectively titled *MOONRISE*, 2004, each one is also subtitled with a different month. (Since there are only eleven, perhaps Rondinone decided that, under laboratory conditions, an

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inexorable series of cycles would instigate less anxiety than an incomplete rotation.) Amid the masks hang lengths of driftwood inscribed with short poetic statements that, again, often betoken an impossible wish to fuse with nature—to set aside human frailty, awareness of life's cyclical nature, and suspicions of its futility: IF I MESS UP I RUN TO THE WEST AND HIDE IN ITS SUNSET AND I WANT TO BE AIR OR WIND TO BE AT EASE IN OUTER SPACE BUT IN THE WORLD. Meanwhile, an oversize lightbulb in predominantly yellow wax, offering only a mean chimera of immense enlightenment, dangles from the ceiling, and a fake paper snowfall coughs intermittently from a vent. The atmosphere is torpid, yet consuming enough that one may not consider until afterward how loaded with art-historical references it is, from Minimalist and finish-fetish aesthetics to the psychologized wax heads and objects of Jasper Johns, turned into a concatenation of props that, in its theatrical solemnity, swings Rondinone weirdly close to Robert Gober.

Like earlier exhibitions by Rondinone—wherein his tirelessly revisited stylistic trademarks such as life-size clown sculptures, fuzzy target paintings, and sketches of rustic landscapes combine to dramatize the self's pressurized containment within multiple systemic psychological loops—this installation is to some extent a psychosphere, one that aims to mirror the collective unconscious and to present it as jostled both by irrational yearning and by a fear of life's travails adding up to zero. And pointedly, the show is acclimatizing to such fearful disarray: The various cycles (musical, domestic, annual) set in motion are, eventually, recognized as needling, but their tensions dissipate



after a point—at the moment, in fact, when one has absorbed enough of the main installation to step through the zero-shaped aperture. After which, one might say, the "nest building" begins.

Beyond the giant zero is a semi-soundproofed installation that gives the show its title: a theatrical box—black carpet, walls covered in black material, and a rectangle of fluorescent lights illuming the darkness. The space is filled with recorded sounds of a middle-aged couple crashing blindly into ontological and linguistic walls, à la Samuel Beckett: "I don't want to lose you"; "You've never had me"; "Why say anything?"; "There is nothing to say." The two people start to mishear each other; the dialogue repeats with each one taking the other's role, ad infinitum. The setting is dramatic yet what strikes one most vividly about such rote world-weariness is Rondinone's recouping of its familiarity. If Beckett's outlook was once memorably described by Georges Perec's biographer, David Bellos, as "ambient pessimism," here is pessimism writ so large, made so omnipresent, that one begins to mutate to accommodate its inescapable presence—as if one were suddenly able to breathe underwater. And that's Rondinone's strategy, it appears: In locating and arraying object correlatives for daily anxieties, and pressing us through them, he illuminates some kind of path toward acceptance.

Hanging on a cartoonishly oversize nail at the rear of this chamber is perhaps the most compelling work in this regard: a pair of clown boots, dusty and cracked from overuse. Seasoned Rondinone watchers will recall that his fiberglass clowns go barefoot, and that their other characteristics are proneness, an exposed navel (behind which, one should note, is the location of the human body's center of gravity), and a serene expression that suggests Bruce Nauman's circus performers—the undisguised reference—having made peace with the round of meaningless repetitions germane to life itself. There, perhaps, is the goal: to remove the clown boots, find gravity, blissfully slide down the wall, never pratfall again. Truth be told, I always thought Rondinone's clowns likely achieved their happiness only in death. At the Whitechapel, looping around existentialism's givens, the artist extends the tentative hope that through a concerted rapprochement with insignificance, such a sensation may be possible—however fleeting—in life. □

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Top: Ugo Rondinone, *ALL THOSE DOORS*, 2003. Installation view, Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, 2006. Bottom: Ugo Rondinone, *ALL THOSE DOORS* (detail), 2003. Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, 2006.