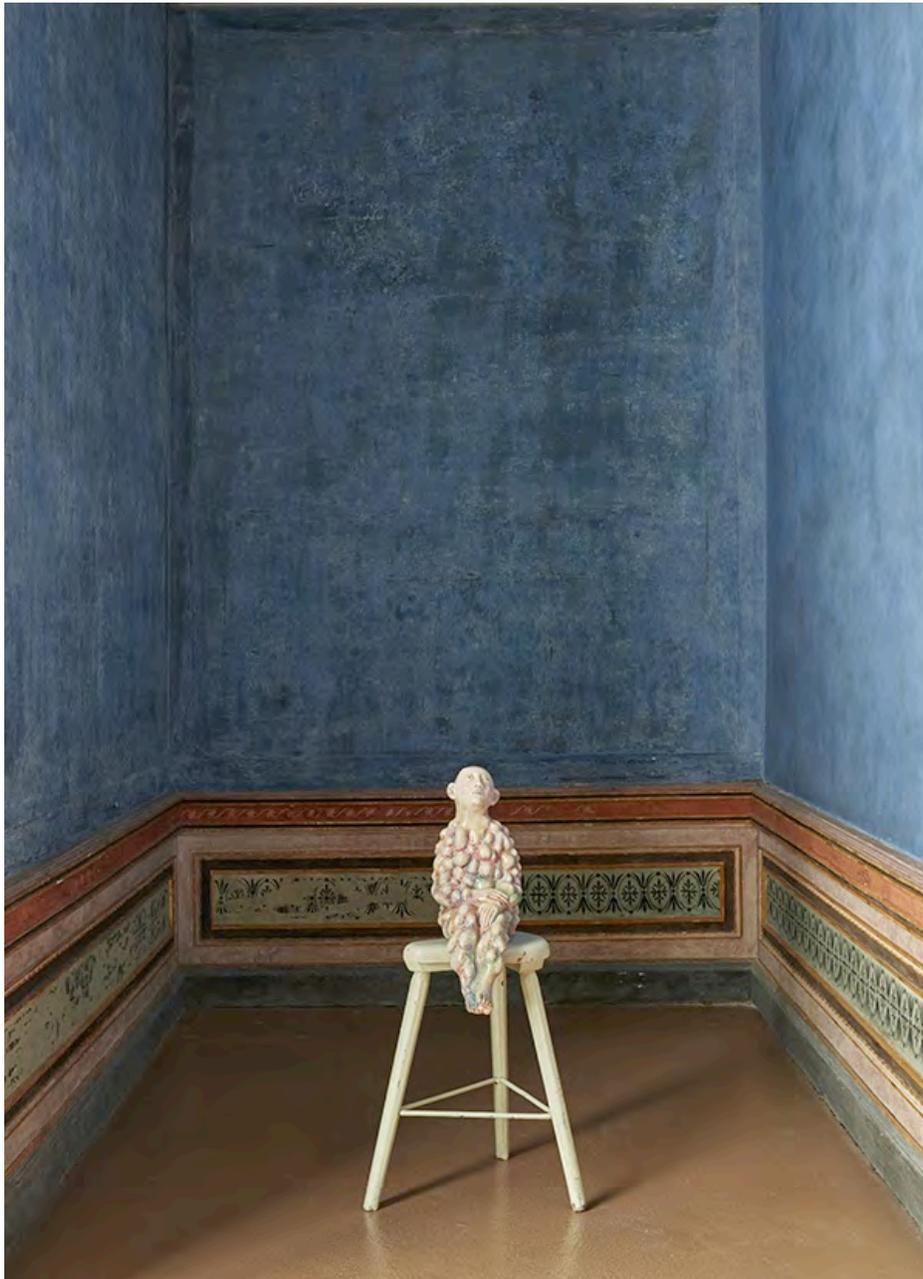


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Vincenzo Latronico, "Paloma Varga Weisz 'Root of a Dream' at Castello di Rivoli,"
Mousse Magazine, December, 2015

MOUSSE

Paloma Varga Weisz "Root of a Dream" at Castello di Rivoli
December 13~2015



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The works of Paloma Varga Weisz are primarily human figures carved out of wood or drawn on paper with pencil and watercolor. Any attempt to describe them summons up terms like “grotesque” or “uncanny”.

A woman with two faces, her disjointed figure hanging from a lush piece of fabric, as if caught in mid-air as she fell. A man with a huge, erect cock where his nose should be. A teenage caryatid holding up a capital with her graceful body, which is covered in hair. A shy little man sitting naked on his perch, with dozens of iridescent nodules sprouting from his skin.

A man with a goatee, a vagina, and three small breasts. These are some of the works on view in the first museum show in Italy by Varga Weisz, a German artist approaching 50: “Root of a Dream”, curated by Marianna Vecellio, at Castello di Rivoli. The descriptions given above are technically accurate, yet essentially false. Varga Weisz’s sculptures and drawings do not convey a sense of grotesquerie, but rather a feeling of peace, all the more inexplicable as it seems to contradict the disturbing situation from which it springs. This conflict of interpretation is what gives Varga Weisz’s work its core appeal—what it has to say to the viewer.

Jennifer Higgie wrote in *frieze* that the ideal setting for Varga Weisz’s work would not be a white cube, but a haunted house. At the Castello di Rivoli, that’s what it has found. In ten rooms of the castle normally used to show the collection, an extraordinarily sensitive and intelligent curatorial scheme allows each piece to reveal its full ambiguity, through a careful use of natural light and a skillfully woven dialogue with the thematic frescoes in the rooms.

These ambiguities start with the materials. The pregnant man *Bumped Body* (2007) is covered in gleaming enamel that perfectly mimics a polished copper surface; the lumpy man, *Beulenman* (2003) is treated with a series of paints which are then abraded, to look just like polychrome ceramic. The most recent work in the show—*Lying Man* (2014)—shows a dismembered corpse with African features, stretched out like a drowned migrant; the black of the scorched wood underscores this interpretation. But the carving on his face and hands reveals the layer of light wood below; the pigmentation of his skin suddenly takes on the appearance of blackface.

Upon closer observation, even the subjects of the sculptures seem to be in inner contrast with their outer condition; serene when they ought to be desperate, timid when one would expect arrogance. The patriarch with the huge phallus on his face, *Ohne Titel – A Glorious Man* (2008–15) is a little old man, sitting at a table with the awkwardness of a schoolboy; the symbol of overbearing virility makes him feel embarrassed and deformed. The hairy caryatid *Waldfrau* (2001) has the distant smile of a little girl despite a body she can’t seem to identify with; a similar expression—serious, but not gloomy, just absorbed—can be found on the shiny pregnant man. The man whose skin is covered with tuberos growths (sitting small and alone in the middle of a light blue chamber called “the veil room”, due to the frescoed piece of tulle that hangs gauzily from the ceiling) is not crushed or disgusted by his condition, but as bashful as a young girl.

One is strongly tempted to associate Varga Weisz’s work in sculpture with a certain vein in the oeuvre of Thomas Schütte. There are the same dark moods, the same realistic yet deformed bodies. Here too, we find human beings who look like victims of some trauma. But Schütte’s figures have afflicted or bewildered or terrible expressions, and to look at them we must grapple with repulsion; their faces show the suffering they have undergone. Varga Weisz’s faces are just the opposite. Though dealing with equally traumatic situations, they express not desperation but a mild serenity, a sort of peace. This disorients viewers, then bewitches them. Rather than repulsion, one feels fascination and calm.

So it is not to Schütte’s desperate faces that these sculptures should be compared, but to Francis Bacon’s obtuse, alienated ones. A famous essay by John Berger saw the essence of Bacon’s art as describing a world where the worst has already happened: a world where all effort is useless. Bacon’s distorted faces are bordering on inhuman, and do not reflect the pain of trauma, but the desperate realization that it has already come about, and there is nothing that can be done. Paloma Varga Weisz’s characters also inhabit a world where something traumatic has taken place without giving them any choice in the matter; but this does not mean they have no power. Their effort—plainly visible—is to understand, accept, move on: it is this inner strength that allows them to find peace despite their deformity, their double heads and excrescences. While according to Berger, Bacon showed what it meant to succumb to alienation, Varga Weisz shows what it means to remain human, in spite of it all.

Vincenzo Latronico

at Castello di Rivoli
until 10 January 2016

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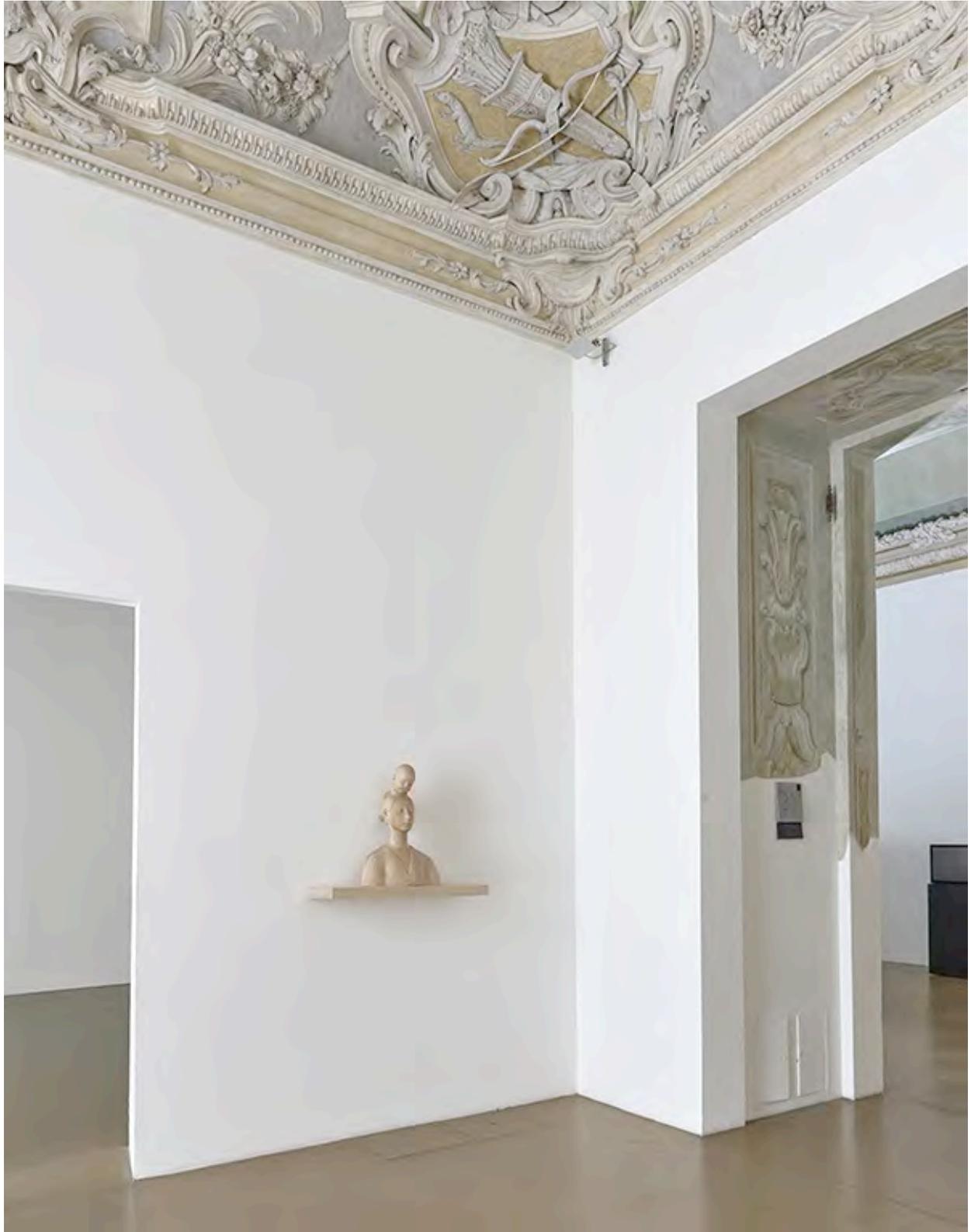
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