

天天看蒼蠅

# Not Vital *Paintings*

London  
15 January—6 March 2021



Thaddaeus Ropac

London Paris Salzburg

# Not Vital

## *Paintings*

London

15 January—6 March 2021

Opening: Thursday 14 January 2—8pm

Ely House, 37 Dover Street, London, W1S 4NJ

[ropac.net](http://ropac.net)

Thaddaeus Ropac London is delighted to announce Not Vital: *Paintings*. The forthcoming exhibition will present the renowned Swiss artist in an intimate new light. Focusing on a series of Portrait Paintings initiated 12 years ago, the exhibition will feature a selection of portraits never previously exhibited in the UK and many of which have never been seen by the public, revealing a unique dimension to Vital's multifaceted practice.

Rendered predominantly in a minimalist palette of white, greys and black, the series of oil paintings features individuals close to the artist; important historical figures, such as singers, poets, philosophers or artists; anonymous subjects; as well as self-portraits in which Vital sometimes adopts guises. Reduced to the delicate interplay of light and dark, achieved through the subtle tonalities of a limited, greyscale palette, Vital captures and portrays the unique essence of each of his subjects, honing in on their identifying elements or characteristics. The figures are repeatedly presented as darkly coloured orbs floating against the void of a seemingly 'empty' background. The unpainted areas function as both empty space and as representative of a certain uncertainty — a mediation on the limits of knowing — while the subjects become a mediation on the human presence itself, replacing an emphasis on the minutiae of detail with a focus on the overall form. Preoccupied with the expression of an inner reality, the works highlight the potency of essence as opposed to detail.

Over the past ten years, the Portrait Paintings have come to occupy a deeply personal and significant position in Vital's oeuvre. As Vital says of his work in this medium: 'Painting is the best way for me to see, feel and smell the light'. Born from a highly meditative mode of looking — and of making — their intricate gradation and depth invite a deeper form of contemplative viewing. They are produced through a process of application and reduction, whereby the artist creates the facial form by repeatedly adding and removing layers of paint until the portrait seems to emerge from the material and present itself. In this way, the works offer a unique addition to his sculptural practice, at the core of which lies a distinct and innate sensitivity to light, space and form. This sensitivity, along with the artist's palette, is largely influenced by a youth spent in the Swiss Engadin valley the Canton of Grisons, or 'grey-land', which is known for its dramatic Alpine scenery and enveloped by snow in the winter months. Vital observes how the lack of colour in such an environment requires an attentiveness in looking both out of necessity but also thanks to the allure of its subtlety: it produces a level of mystery that draws the viewer in.

Vital's palette is further reflective of the subdued light within the studio itself and of the artist's intensity of gaze as he paints. When painting in his Beijing studio, Vital observes his reflection in two large, reflective walls made of stainless steel, which function to both distort and agitate the image of his subject.

Thaddaeus Ropac

London Paris Salzburg

*Everything around me is emptied, everything almost loses gravity, like floating or falling or day-dreaming. This might be one of the reasons why most of the space surrounding the heads and most of the canvas is left untouched. When a head stands alone, I work better. No need to add anything, it would just be more.*

— Not Vital

Begun during a trip to Beijing in 2012, the Portrait Paintings reflect the socio-cultural interests that course through the artist's oeuvre. Here, the anonymised figures or 'sea of faces' become reminiscent of the urban metropolis, their transience a metaphorical representation of the fleeting encounters of a daily commute, whereby a viewer encounters face after face but will only be able to discover the existential, metaphysical qualities of each individual by taking a moment to pause, look and reflect. As the artist has observed, the face is often the first thing one sees in another human. By sometimes selecting recognisable figures as his subjects, the questions of closeness and knowability become heightened, while the self-portraits of the artist in costume hark towards surrealist traditions and Arthur Rimbaud's influential line, "'I' is another'.

In the Chapel room of the gallery, the artist will present a unique and previously unseen series comprising 11 Monk portraits (all 2016), in which the subjects appear amidst seas of deep orange and annotated by the locations of 'Mekong' or 'Laos' in Vital's signature hand. Painted following a trip to the ancient capital of Laos, Luang Prabang – located in the convergence valley between rivers Mekong and Nam Kham – the works use the textiles of the monks' robes as their canvas. Presented side by side throughout the Chapel Gallery, the works bathe the room in varying shades of saffron orange, akin to the experience of wandering through the streets of the town. With each work a different size according to the individuals they depict, the pieces point to both the anonymity of the faces in the crowd and to the individuality of each of Vital's encounters. While walking the streets of Luang Prabang, the frequency of Vital's daily meetings with monks left a great impression on the artist, with the individuals varying greatly in age and experience – some of whom were older and would practice for life, some of whom were younger and only intended to continue for a couple of years, all of whom wore the rich and colourful saffron robes – and the variety of these experiences and relationships are reflected in the differences that run throughout the series.

Viewed within the gallery setting for the first time, the intensity of the series' presentation reflects this overall richness of experience, while calling on viewers to temporarily adopt the contemplative state of his subjects.

In all of the paintings on display, the glass of their framing forms an essential component for the artist. An integral part of the painting itself, the glass functions as a form of skin – unifying and protective, an inviting window and a barrier. Obscuring the images through its reflective quality, the glass layer forces the viewer to negotiate looking as a physical act and reposition themselves to experience the image beneath. The process therefore requires concentration, as well as a careful balancing of proximity and distance.

Coinciding with the exhibition in London, Not Vital, *lr.* opened at the Museum der Moderne, Austria on 8th December and runs through to June 2021. The exhibition presents a selection of Vital's sculptures alongside corresponding drawings by the artist.

## About the artist

Born in 1948 in Sent, Switzerland, Vital lives and works between his hometown, Beijing and Rio de Janeiro. He grew up among the mountains and forests in the Engadin valley near the border of Austria and Italy, but has spent much of his time travelling and living in places including China, Niger, Italy, Indonesia and the USA. He studied visual arts at the Université Expérimentale de Vincennes, Paris from 1968–71 and moved to New York in 1974, where he began his artistic career. In his native Engadine, Vital has a foundation with three sites: the historic castle of Tarasp, a sculpture park in his hometown village of Sent, and a historic house in the village of Ardez. Over the course of his career, he has realised many buildings for contemplation all over the world, including the *NotOna Tunnel* on *NotOna Island* (2009) in Patagonia, Chile.

Vital's work has been featured in numerous international exhibitions, including the 49th Venice Biennale (2001), curated by Harald Szeemann. Major solo exhibitions were held at Kunsthalle Bielefeld, Germany (2005); the Arts Club of Chicago (2006); UCCA Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing (2011); and the Museo d'arte Mendrisio, Switzerland (2014–15). In 2013, the large-scale installation *700 Snowballs* was on view on the island of San Giorgio Maggiore in Venice. His first major UK exhibition and his largest museum project to date was held at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park in 2016, followed by his first institutional project in Austria at the Museum der Moderne, Salzburg in 2020–21.

Not Vital's art is inspired by his nomadic lifestyle and experiences of travelling the globe, reflecting on habitations, nature and animals, and on the relationships between sculpture and architecture. Exploring the boundaries between abstract and figurative forms, his work is marked by a particularly intimate relationship with materials, including plaster, steel, marble, ceramic and organic matter. He often collaborates with skilled craftsmen around the world, ranging from Beijing steel-chasers and Murano glass-blowers, to Tuareg silversmiths and Bhutan papermakers. The physicality of his approach, combined with an innate understanding of his chosen materials' essential properties, results in visually challenging works that are often destabilising in their striking scale and presence

## Press contact

Catherine Boteler  
catherine@ropac.net  
T +44 203 813 8400  
M +44 7533 636 827

Thaddaeus Ropac

London Paris Salzburg