

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Ugo Rondinone

nuns + monks

530 West 21st Street

April 30 – June 18, 2021

Gladstone Gallery is pleased to present an exhibition of new works by Ugo Rondinone from the artist's latest body of work, *nuns + monks*. On the occasion of the inauguration of this new series in 2020, Rondinone spoke with Mitchell Anderson for *Mousse*.

[Organic Accord: Ugo Rondinone](#)

By Mitchell Anderson

Since the early 1990s, the work of Swiss-born, New York-residing Ugo Rondinone has cultivated a sense of wonder in viewers around the globe. Expressing an enduring interest in our primal and romantic collective relationship with the natural world, his works utilize advanced technologies to reveal or replicate that which is lost or forgotten as civilization plods on. In the past this has taken the form of rainbows lighting up the night sky as electric signs, fairy-tale forests rendered in ink at epic scale, and giant stones dramatically painted and balanced to form colorful mountains and blocks of raw stone stacked to create human forms.

In the fall of 2020, Rondinone continued this last project with three simultaneous exhibitions at Esther Schipper, Berlin; Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich; and Sant'Andrea de Scaphis, Rome, debuting a new series of sculptures. In the spring of 2021, Rondinone debuts new works from this series at Gladstone Gallery in New York. I caught up with Rondinone to hear his thoughts about the place of the artist in a world increasingly unable to ignore the natural; the planning behind these major installations; and his faith in the capacity of form to convey narrative.

MITCHELL ANDERSON: Your new series *nuns + monks* (2020) debuted last September simultaneously at three galleries whose locations draw a more or less vertical line down the middle of Europe, and now makes its premiere in the United States at Gladstone Gallery. How much of this planning was logistical, and how much was simply your choice? Does this become part of the sculptures' reception and life span?

UGO RONDINONE: The concentrated symbolic energy of the new body of work goes hand in hand with its synchronous presentation. Once I lift up a new sculpture in three different places at the same time, the sculpture has a greater chance to enter people's souls. The work is open but sharp and suffused with a combination of humor and pathos. At the same time, it represents an investigation of the mutable potential of sculpture as both a physical medium and a site of rich cultural disclosure in contemporary art.

As the exhibition's title suggests, the sculptures in *nuns + monks* address varied iconographies associated with these most resonant of forms. Nuns and monks occupy the literal and figurative centers of human life, but they also appear in a wide range of social and narrative contexts. I wanted to reveal the multivalent potential of nuns and monks as vessel and beacon, human body and mystical source. In so doing, the work reveals a broad array of interests, notable for both historical depth and up-to-the-minute urgency. Through human history religious imagery has had immense transformational power; a familiar symbol can transform another symbol, like a stone, into something richly metaphorical.

MA: Your work is remarkable in how it operates: an exhibition of yours is almost a work unto itself. Your installations are a total aesthetic and perceptive experience, involving for instance wall paintings, lights, and works that connect to a larger narrative. Does the exhibition concept emerge from the works, or from the space? And how do you work on a series—as a totality or in pieces?

UR: The exhibitions are the products of intense focus and a constant renewal of my relationship with the materials. To this end, I organize my studio so that I can dedicate myself to only one production at a time, and it fully occupies my attention. Nonetheless, subjects and formal experiments carry over from one medium to another, and the window sculptures in *nuns + monks* provide a sense of the scope of my interests and passions between the inner self and the natural world. They also demonstrate how I give my motifs space to come into focus at their own pace. As I return to a set of motifs and symbols over the years—as is the case with the windows and stone—they reveal their emotional complexities and reverberations, gaining in mystery and becoming only more elusive as I hone them and explore their intricacies. Knowledge and familiarity are never taken for granted; rather, I keep the unknown squarely at the center of my gaze.

MA: With *Seven Magic Mountains*, installed ten miles south of Las Vegas Boulevard in 2016, I'd say you reinvented Land art for the twenty-first century. It's a great deal more accessible than Michael Heizer's relatively

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nearby *Double Negative* (1969), both physically and emotionally. A lot of this, I think, has to do with the colors. What are you achieving when you contradict our natural idea of what a stone mass looks like? What function do these painted surfaces achieve for you?

UR: The mountain sculptures, the stone figures, and the recent bronze sculptures *nuns + monks* evoke archaic and contemporary sources alike, concretizing cycles of time and life as physical form. I'm putting faith in stone as material—in its innate beauty and energy, its structural quality, its surface texture, and its ability to collect and condense time. The grotesque biomorphic distortion that characterizes the lifetime of a stone can become a haunting openness when transformed by color and palpable emotional charge. All three groups of works share a paradoxical mixture of vulnerability and strength, and express solidarities between human and nature.

MA: But these new works are not stone, they're bronze casts that have been enlarged from smaller maquettes in your studio. Approaching these sculptures, I sense an uncanny questioning of what the material is, thanks to the perfectly painted surfaces and the coloring, which seems to alternately add to and subtract from the feeling of weight. When I think of this kind of material shift or revelation in art, I would normally think a generation older than you. I know you have a long history of working with bronze at all scales, but with these pieces, what feeling were you seeking, from a material point of view?

UR: The decision to cast the sculptures was a practical one, not motivated by a surreal gesture of hide and seek—like I did with the moonrise masks (2005–06), where the sculptures look like fresh clay, but are in fact bronzes covered with a mixture of pulverized clay and polyurethane. First I was looking for a stone that breaks well and can look like the folds of a nun's or monk's garment. But a good breaking stone like limestone is not ideal at the size I wished to work at, because limestone breaks in unexpected places. So I decided to 3D scan the one-foot tall limestones and enlarge it to my desired scale.

MA: This year has been about nothing if not the environment and the ways that we as humans continue either bow to it or ignore it and suffer the consequences. The pandemic, the wildfires, the continued rise of the oceans—it's becoming harder and harder for us to escape or ignore the world around us. With these sculptures, perhaps more than with the stone figures, I find myself thinking of the times when on a hike or a drive I've searched for a human form in untouched nature. How do you view the artist's relationship to the natural world, and where would you situate your work in that respect?

UR: The natural world is my first source of inspiration. It started with the large ink landscapes at the end of the 1980s. In the middle of the AIDS crisis in 1989 I turned away from grief and found in nature a spiritual road map for solace, regeneration, and inspiration. In nature one enters a space where the sacred and the profane, the mystical and the mundane, vibrate against one another. *nuns + monks* continues to address the dual reflection between the inner self and the natural world. Just as the external world one sees is inseparable from one's internal structures, *nuns + monks* allows such layers of signification to come in and out of focus, prompting the viewer to revel in the pure sensory experience of color, form, and mass while simultaneously engendering an altogether contemporary version of the sublime. Like a diarist, I record the living universe: this season, this day, this hour, this sound in the grass, this crashing wave, this sunset, this end of the day, this silence.

The original version of this article was published by *Mousse* in November 2020 and is available at <http://moussemagazine.it/ugo-rondinone-mitchell-anderson-2020/>.

Ugo Rondinone was born in 1964 in Brunnen, Switzerland and lives and works in New York. Rondinone has been the subject of recent institutional exhibitions at: SKMU Sørlandets Kunstmuseum, Kristiansand, Norway in 2021; Medellín Museum of Modern Art, Colombia; Kunsthalle Helsinki, Finland; and Guild Hall, East Hampton, New York in 2019; Fundación Casa Wabi, Puerto Escondido, Mexico; Arken Museum of Modern Art, Ishøj, Denmark; and Tate Liverpool, UK in 2018; Bass Museum of Art, Miami; Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley, California; Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, Ohio; Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, Moscow in 2017; and Carre d'Art, Nîmes, France; Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam, NL; and The Institute of Contemporary Art Boston, US in 2016. In 2013, Rondinone installed "human nature", an exhibition of nine monumental stone figures in Rockefeller Plaza, New York, organized by Public Art Fund. In 2016, Rondinone's large-scale public work seven magic mountains opened outside Las Vegas, co-produced by the Art Production Fund and Nevada Museum of Art. In 2017, Rondinone curated a city-wide exhibition, "Ugo Rondinone: I ♥ John Giorno," which was presented in twelve New York non-profit institutions: Artists Space, High Line Art, How! Happening, Hunter College Art Galleries, the Kitchen, New Museum, Red Bull Arts New York, Rubin Museum of Art, SkyArt, Swiss Institute, White Columns and 80WSE Gallery. Recent and forthcoming exhibitions include: Sadie Coles HQ, London; Esther Schipper, Berlin; Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich; Sant'Andrea de Scaphis,

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Rome; Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt; Belvedere 21, Vienna; Galerie Krobath, Vienna; Museo Tamayo, Mexico City, and the Phillip's Collection, Washington, D.C.

Mitchell Anderson is an artist interested in the narrative possibilities of objects and images. Recent institutional exhibitions include Fondazione Converso (2019) and Fri-Art Kunsthalle Fribourg (2017). Recent and upcoming group exhibitions include Kunsthalle Zurich (2020), Kunsthalle Bern (2021) and MAMCO, Geneva (2019). He is a frequent contributor of criticism to a variety of international arts publications and has operated the project space Plymouth Rock, in Zurich, since 2014.

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New York gallery hours: Tuesday–Saturday, 10am–6pm
Brussels gallery hours: Tuesday–Friday, 10am–6pm and Saturday, 12pm–6pm