

Michael Dean

Under the stairs and by the fire.

12/06 — 14/08 2021

Mendes Wood DM is proud to announce the first solo exhibition in Brussels by British artist Michael Dean, presenting eight new large-scale sculptures. The title of the show, *Under the stairs and by the fire.*, which intentionally sounds like the title of a novel or a period drama, refers to how the works are displayed in relation to the gallery's domestic architecture. Occupying the area under the staircase and surrounding the fireplace, the human-sized sculptures appear to be talking to each other in a familial way, as if they were friends enjoying the warmth of a burning fire conducive to storytelling.

Many of the monolithic, typographic sculptures depict silhouettes of keys and keyholes, whose shapes are also in dialogue with the architectural features present in the gallery. Keys and keyholes hold the power of opening (or closing) other possible universes; they are tools that protect stories and are capable of either revealing or concealing them.

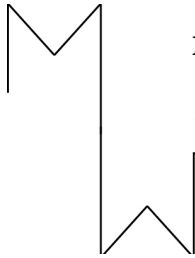
Through the sculptures' sizes and their placement in connection with their surroundings and with each other, Dean centers the viewer in front of the works, rather than the works in front of the viewer. The audience is invited to join in their intimate conversation and is encouraged to walk around the pieces in order to fully absorb their vivid presence and powerful materiality.

Made out of readily available materials, such as cement, sand, water and rebar, the sculptures are characterized by a pronounced porosity that gives the impression of corrosion and weathering. There is a heightened contrast between their thick and weighty texture and their strong hues achieved by a mixture of pigments. The choice of medium, inspired by Dean's upbringing in post-industrial Newcastle, reinforces the artist's goal of leading the audience into this shared experience. "I want to somehow write the work with the viewer. They should feel that it's a system that includes them and is only completed by their presence in it. I would call it democratic ceramics, this idea of using materials that we all have had access to. I'm talking about putting the viewer in the same place as me," says Dean. The recurring references to human body parts visible in the sculptures (such as crossed fingers or footprints) further strengthen the relations between artwork, the artist and the viewer. The body is the most basic means for humans to experience intimacy and it always participates in communication, extending the possibilities and limits of language.

Language has always been the central element in the work of Michael Dean. Actual writing can be found in the exhibition's sculptures, which appear to have been vandalized with words such as "LOL", "Your text here", "Friend", "Aww" and "Fucking mortal". More importantly, though, are the original texts by the artist, which serve as a departure point for his oeuvre. Dean abstracts and deforms his writings into new typographies, which are subsequently materialized into solid, concrete forms. His sculptures, together with the architecture that contains them and the spectators who observe them, can be understood as writing that happens in space. These physical expressions of texts by the artist, which are themselves in place of thoughts and emotions, are deliberately meant to be interpreted in an open-ended way. "I'd like to have my work facilitate you as a reader so that your reading is more like an action of writing, and then you somehow become an author in the landscape," says the artist.

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Michael Dean (b. 1977, Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK) lives and works in London.

Dean has studied at the Goldsmiths University of London and has since gained international stature as one of the four *finalists* of the 2016 Turner Prize. He participated in the 2017 *Skulptur Projekte* in Münster and was nominated for the 2018 Hepworth Prize for Sculpture. Dean's works are in several prominent institutional collections, such as Tate, Henry Moore Foundation, Walker Art Center, S.M.A.K., Arts Council Collection, KADIST, The Hepworth Wakefield and Nasher Sculpture Center.

His most recent solo exhibitions include *The End*, Converso, Milan (2020); *Tu texto aquí*, Museo Rufino Tamayo, Mexico City (2019); *Having you on*, BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead (2018); *Analogue LOL*, ShanghArt Gallery, Shanghai (2018); *Four Fucksakes*, Herald St | Museum St, London (2017); *Teaxths and Angeruage*, Portikus, Frankfurt (2017); *Sightings: Michael Dean or Lost True Leaves*, Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas (2016) and *Qualities of Violence*, De Appel, Amsterdam (2015).

Additionally, his work was part of institutional group exhibitions such as *Scrivere Disegnando: When Language Seeks Its Other*, Centre d'Art Contemporain Genève, Geneva (2020); *Transparent Things*, Goldsmiths CCA, London (2020); *Yorkshire Sculpture International*, The Hepworth Wakefield, Wakefield (2019); *The Hepworth Prize for Sculpture 2018*, The Hepworth Wakefield, Wakefield (2018); *Against The Wall?*, S.M.A.K., Ghent (2018); *Skulptur Projekte Münster 2017*, Münster (2017); *Turner Prize*, Tate Britain, London (2016); *Sculptures Also Die*, Centre for Contemporary Culture Strozzi, Florence, (2015); *Mirror City*, Hayward Gallery London, London (2014); and *A History of Inspiration*, Palais de Tokyo, Paris (2013).

Upcoming projects for this year include the artist's participation in the Watou Arts Festival and a solo exhibition at CC Strombeek, both in Belgium.

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