

Paloma Varga Weisz's fourth exhibition with Sadie Coles HQ encompasses a group of new sculptures and a series of watercolours dating from the 1990s. Three wardrobe-like cabinets containing hand-carved sculptures and various found objects are presented alongside stand-alone carvings placed on shelves. The presentation of objects within a wooden cabinet (or *schrank* in German) marks a recent development in Varga Weisz's sculptural practice, while the carved elements glance back to her early training as a woodcarver. The art-historical and literary resonances which pervade her work – German folklore, Christian iconography, Modernist sculpture – are compressed and magnified within these simple, unassuming wooden units. Each cabinet forms a compendium of personal and historical allusions in the fashion of a collection of reliquaries.



Placed on shelves within the rough-finished wooden cabinets, Varga Weisz's assorted objects glance back to the tradition of the *wunderkammer* or *kunstkammer* – the 'cabinet of curiosities' which became the epitome of connoisseurship and collecting throughout the Renaissance and into the eighteenth century (containing anything from archaeological fragments to natural history specimens, religious relics to rare books). These encyclopaedic troves were the precursors to modern museums, and marked the development of academic taxonomies and categories. In their sparing arrangements of small-scale sculptures, Varga Weisz's cabinets stand in pointed contrast to the bombast of those historical glory boxes: their wood is untreated; their doors stand casually ajar; and in one, piles of folded skirts interrupt the sculptural array in a narrow seam – as if at any point, the cupboard might be returned to a mundane domestic function.

Yet each cabinet also constitutes a complex visual anthology which chimes with the eclectic and ranging spirit of the *wunderkammer*. While certain objects are readily identifiable – a toy-like carved bear, a felt riding hat – others defy easy interpretation, for example the oval basket mounted on a wooden stick. In this way Varga Weisz's agglomerations of objects resist any single, totalising 'explanation'. Each is akin to a Modernist poem in terms of its fragmentary array of subjects and styles, or to medieval altarpieces with their compartmentalised structures and elaborate allegories. The cabinets therefore reflect upon the nature of art-making and collecting – there is a tension, always, between the 'autonomous' sculptural object and its place within a larger scheme or allegory. Raised on miniature pedestals or hung from the cabinet's raw planks, the objects remind us of the fact that modes of display – cabinets, plinths or even museums – are a mere matter of historical convention.

In concert, such ambivalent objects express a myriad of different (even contradictory) emotional registers – childlike anthropomorphism, the serenity of archaic statuary, a cartoonish wit, or a strange dolefulness. This metamorphic quality is encapsulated by the face of the artist's father which bears a benign smile and is crowned by a broad wicker hat. Other sculptures are self-contained and individually allusive. Hewn from a single piece of wood, *Birth* (2014) takes the form of a bust of a woman crowned by the head of a baby. It suggests both a surrealist piece of headwear and a spectacle of birth out of the head, such as when the Greek goddess Athena was born out of the head of Zeus, or the Egyptian god of wisdom, Thoth, sprung from the head of Seth. *Mountaineer* (2014), another carved figure, offsets a clichéd pastoral archetype (the intrepid male adventurer) – resonant of many a mantelpiece knickknack – with a carved penis which bluntly spells out the priapic subtext.

Many of the carvings, both inside and outside the cabinets, closely resemble the imaginary characters and creatures of Varga Weisz's watercolours. A series of these dating from up to twenty years ago involves a similar interplay of architectural, human and animal elements: we find truncated figures resembling busts sitting atop columns or shelves or the edge of a bathtub; or a monkey cradling a child; a bird receives the head of another bird within its hooked beak, in what could either be a menacing or tender gesture. Each delicately painted vignette resembles a scene from a fable in its conflation of myth, mirth and psycho-sexual ambivalence.

Paloma Varga Weisz (born 1966) lives and works in Düsseldorf, Germany. She trained at Staatliche Kunstakademie, Düsseldorf. Major solo exhibitions include *Krummer Hund*, Kabinett für aktuelle Kunst, Bremerhaven, Germany, and the Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin (2013); that at Museum Morsbroich, Leverkusen, Germany (with Rosemary Trockel); *Spirits of My Flesh*, Chapter, Cardiff (2011), and that at the Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin (2006). From June to August 2014 her work will be included in the exhibition *The Human Factor: Uses of the Figure in Contemporary Sculpture*, Hayward Gallery, London. Other significant group shows include *Sculptures from the art academy Düsseldorf since 1945*, Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf, Germany (2013), *Exquisite Corpses: Drawing and Disfiguration*, Museum of Modern Art, New York (2012), the Folkestone Triennial, UK (2011), *Lust for Life and Dance of Death*, Kunsthalle Krems, (2010), and the Berlin Biennale (2006).

For further information please contact the gallery at +44 (0)20 7493 8611 or press@sadiecoles.com

www.sadiecoles.com

69 South Audley Street London W1K 2QZ

62 Kingly Street London W1B 5QN

T +44 [0] 20 7493 8611 F +44 [0] 20 7499 4878

Reg in England no 3211376

Vat no 690 6671 06