

**TUNGA**  
From La Voie Humide

AUGUST 31 - OCTOBER 5, 2014  
OPENING: SUNDAY, AUGUST 31, 4PM - 8PM



‘— Time held me green and dying,

Though I sang in my chains like the sea.’

(from Dylan Thomas, Fern Hill)

Orpheus, a Thracian, was born to Calliope, mother of muses, and Dionysius, god of wine, merrymaking, epiphany and ritual madness. An uncommon man, he descended into the world of Death to retrieve his lost love Eurydice, suspending all challenges with his song - from the three-headed guard dog Cerberus, who slept, to the ferryman Charon, who bowed, to Hades, himself, who wept. In a pitch mournful and holy that froze the birds to their branches, he dissuaded intractable death to reverse its course and return Eurydice to the world of the living.

Hades gave one condition: Orpheus could not look back as he guided her through the shadows toward light until she crossed the threshold into life. But being only a man, he looked back too soon to see his love – a pace from the sun – recede into death.

Broken and disconsolate, Orpheus wandered in the fields and mountains, at last seeking out his father’s oracle at Mount Pangaion. There, he revered Dionysius at dawn and was torn to shreds by the Maenads, the god’s holy women – who above all else hold the night to be more sacred than the day. His disembodied head hung from the branch of a tree before it was cast into a river, buoyant on his lyre, singing as it went. Nothing stirred, or spoke, or sang until it reached the sea.

The story of Orpheus leaves us with a great question – how do the disembodied sing?

The cult of the Orphic mysteries sprang into being, occupying the imagination of the ancient Greeks from the 6<sup>th</sup>

century BCE to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE. A handful of gold tablets remain, inscribed with Orpheus' mantic hymns. Enclosed in the tombs of the dead, they lay a guideline for death and rebirth, a kind of cartography for the recently deceased on their path toward reincarnation. A recurrent and fervent injunction etched onto these tablets orders the soul to abstain from drinking the water of the lake of forgetfulness, and to drink from the lake of memory.

The tenor of this behest recalls the way the Buddha opened many of his sermons, saying, 'O nobly born, remember who you really are.' Indeed, one forgets, that the path in and out of life is essentially cyclic whether understood by the Orphic epitaph, 'Life. Death. Life. Truth,' or the Sanskrit notion of *samsara*, the 'continuous flow' of death and rebirth to which the material world is bound.

It takes vision to see the latency of the spiritual abounding in the material world around us, and a singular admixture of compassion, persistence and wile to reveal it. These are exactly the qualities that Tunga brings to bear on his prodigious body of strange sculptures. These works show not only his fluency in the language of form and the phonemes that conjugate life – the eye, the hand, the wing, the limb – but also delineate the essential unity of all things; from the organic to the inorganic and the alchemical power of desire to transform the inanimate into the animate and vice versa. A crystal or string of pearls placed in delicate tension on structures of iron hoops seem to allude to the still point of the turning world, where the genesis of all shapes is wound up in a globe of tight promise.

In their rigorous, intuitive equations, they coax spirit into matter through dozens of providential tinkering – tinkering that evoke the hand of nature in the infinitesimal symphony of the cell humming with the cooperative efforts of nucleotides. And like the cell, Tunga's work, for all its over-arching simplicity is bursting with nano-complexity – the subtle rhymes and ties of life and desire.

This may explain why, when confronted with his great original work, no matter how often we approach it, it seems to expand and expand again in front of us – thronging with possibilities. Nowhere in 'From La Voie Humide' is there a shadow of detachment. Life moves in everything, the inorganic bristles with vitality, all the materials have been roused out of their spiritual dormancy – like souls guided through the dark-encumbered permutation of forms.

How do the disembodied sing, and can this song transform us?

The poet Rilke wrote the following lines about an ancient Torso of Apollo, which provoked him to personal transformation,

'We cannot know his legendary head  
with eyes like ripening fruit. And yet his torso  
is still suffused with brilliance from inside,  
like a lamp, in which his gaze, now turned to low,  
  
gleams in all its power. Otherwise  
the curved breast could not dazzle you so, nor could  
a smile run through the placid hips and thighs  
to that dark center where procreation flared.

Otherwise this stone would seem defaced  
beneath the translucent cascade of the shoulders  
and would not glisten like a wild beast's fur:

would not, from all the borders of itself,  
burst like a star: for here there is no place  
that does not see you. You must change your life.'

Tunga is an artist as rare as Rilke's nameless sculptor, who perceives that to transform the world is to transform himself in the process; a knowledge rooted in the belief that all men and women should seek to transform themselves. He stands in the lineage of that unknown author of the braid, plaiting hair in the sheen of the fireside some two hundred thousand years ago in the first distant, discernable act of human harmony, who made three become one. Herein lies the ethical dimension of the alchemist's wisdom – a figure so often associated with Tunga – nothing is without.

That love is all there is,  
Is all we know of Love;  
It is enough, the freight should be  
Proportioned to the groove.  
(Emily Dickinson, CXII)

If there is an alchemy to life, its crucible is to be found in the human heart. It is only there that all things can be met and transformed. Wisdom tells us we are nothing and love tells us that we are everything, distilling the heterogeneity of the world into an all-encompassing point.

M. Wood, 2014