

Dorment, Richard, "The Stylized Lines of Beauty," *The Daily Telegraph*, January 31, 2006

## The stylised lines of beauty

Richard Dorment

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**Pretentious, yes, but the work of sweet-natured Swiss artist Ugo Rondinone grows on you, says Richard Dorment**

**In pictures: 'Zero Built a Nest in My Navel'**

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The first major exhibition in this country of the Swiss artist Ugo Rondinone consists of a single installation in two parts being shown in the downstairs space at the Whitechapel. How you move through each part is, in large part, the point of the work.

When you walk into the main gallery you find an open-ended colonnade made of black Perspex filling most of the space. At the top of several columns, built-in speakers play gentle, melancholy music, while on one side of the gallery artificial snow falls softly. A huge yellow light bulb made of wax hangs from the ceiling, illuminating nothing.

The Perspex structure has been likened to a maze, but that's not accurate because when you step inside a maze, there is a right and a wrong direction to take through it. Here, there is no inside or outside, no walls to guide you, and no particular path to take as you wander aimlessly from pillar to post, looking at nothing in particular.

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At the bottom of each column we find small, cartoon-like drawings of ravens (an animistic symbol often used by Rondinone) doing ordinary tasks like washing up or taking a shower. On the gallery walls on either side of the colonnade hang 12 black polyurethane masks (inspired by those made by Yup'ik Eskimos in Alaska) representing the months of the year. These malevolent bird-like faces can look harmless, but some have sharp teeth and an appetite for eating little birds.

And then there are Rondinone's haiku-like poems, written on shafts of wood hanging on walls throughout the gallery: "Just/ Shadows/Shadows/On/ Sheets."

When I first started to look at this part of Rondinone's installation, I thought I'd stumbled into Pseud Central. But gradually, the atmosphere he creates through these audaciously hokey gimmicks begins to take effect. As the snow fell and the sad music tinkled, I began to feel as though I were in Venice out of season.

Yes, there is an element of pretension here, but then Rondinone is presenting us with a highly stylised summation of all human life, which he sees as an aimless journey under sun and snow, through the months and seasons, with no point or purpose or goal. The best we can hope for is to get through our daily routines of washing, defecating and dressing. And within this context, the poems - ie art - are the one thing that gives meaning or beauty to our existence.

The second part of the installation simply reiterates the nihilistic message of the first, but using the sound of human voice. Passing through an aperture encircled by a giant O or zero, we enter a completely empty chamber, the floor carpeted and the ceiling harshly lit by white fluorescent lights. As we enter we hear an argument taking place between an unseen man and woman that is going nowhere. Whatever he says, she parries, questions, throws back at him and then, exchanging roles, he does the same to her. The banal dialogue is completely circular, the differences between the two irresolvable.

Once again Rondinone trots out a time-worn cliché about the futility of life. Any comfort we imagine we might find in communication with another person is an illusion, just as in the plays of Samuel Beckett and the art of Bruce Nauman.

But, as before, he adds his own twist by manipulating the way the viewer physically responds to the piece. For it is almost impossible to stay in the chamber he's constructed for any length of time without pacing back and forth like a caged animal, restlessly walking from one end of the space to the other and back again. Once again, Rondinone has come up with an effective way of using the viewer's own movements to complete the meaning of his work.

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The more time you spend with Rondinone's art, the more it grows on you. My one real problem with this show is that both parts of the installation seemed to owe such a direct debt to Bruce Nauman, whose work has a bitter edge that the sweet-natured Swiss softly lacks.

At the Serpentine, Danish artist Michael Elmgreen and Norwegian Ingar Dragset have more or less re-built the interior gallery spaces to create their strange, original and completely unsettling installation *The Welfare Show*. Already seen in completely different forms in Bergen, Vienna, and Toronto, the show looks at what welfare systems mean in different countries by building a series of realistically detailed rooms, each devoted to a different aspect of what it might mean to be on welfare.

For the British version, they have made a waiting room of soul-destroying ugliness, a hospital corridor complete with a patient abandoned on her trolley - all perfectly recognisable, whether or not you have ever had any contact with the welfare system.

In their best and most shocking sculpture, a new-born infant is left at the base of an ATM, and on a reproduction of an airport carousel, a lone bag revolves around and around - the immigrant owner presumably taken away for questioning before he could retrieve it. Inevitably, the show looked different in countries where the word "welfare" doesn't drip with irony.

At once mind-numbingly boring and unsettling, this exhibition couldn't really be described as enjoyable, but that would probably be impossible since it's a glimpse of the hell that awaits anyone unfortunate enough to find himself out of work or at the mercy of the NHS.

- 'Ugo Rondinone: Zero Built a Nest in My Navel' is at the Whitechapel Gallery, London E1 (020 7522 7888), until March 26. 'The Welfare Show' is at the Serpentine Gallery, London W2 (020 7402 6075), until Feb 26.