

GLADSTONE GALLERY

DIALOGUE TALK

Audio Interview

Paloma Varga Weisz

— *Artist* —

Born 1966



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Feri Varga

– Paloma Varga Weisz –

Artist



*M*y father was Hungarian, and he was an artist. And he was born in 1906. So, maybe this is an important detail to know, that he was quite old when I was born. So, he was in his early 60s already. So, I grew up with parents that had a big age difference. And my father then came from Hungary, very early in the 20s, to Paris, to study art. And there he also worked as a cartoonist, in a magazine called “Monde”, and because of this link, and as well as his Jewish background, when the Nazis came to Paris, he had to leave the city, and he moved, via Lyon, to the south of France, where he continued his career as an artist. And he was quite early involved in the very lively art scene in the Cote D’Azur, where he was in the friendship with Picasso, and Jean Cocteau, and Matisse, and Andre Verdet, and Prevert, and all these kind of people who were becoming the heroes of this period.

And he also worked together with Jean Cocteau in a book, where he made the prints, the paintings, and Cocteau wrote poems. So, this became a very beautiful limited edition, with this book. And so, he became an abstract painter. And in the early 50s, he met my mother, and moved then in the late 50s to Germany. And so, he had a very difficult step that he made from this background, going then in a country, in a little village, in a winery area, where he’d become extremely isolated. And so, the biggest audience for him suddenly became his children. So, he had his — his difficulty with the German surrounding, and also the very bourgeois setting he suddenly went into, became a father of three children, and his whole career had a kind of break from all these movements.

And so, he continued working. But his abstract painting became more and more, how I say, organic, and different materials were put on the surface as well, like hairs, or very bizarre textures. So, I was surrounded, as a young child, with all these paintings. And maybe it’s in the nature of a child that you always try to understand what is — to see a face or — to try to see something that you know, like an image of an animal or — yeah, and that’s how I reacted as a child to these images. And my children’s — my room was packed with these huge paintings, and only my little posters were around these big abstract paintings, because I was not allowed to put them away, because he somehow didn’t have an exhibition, so the whole house was a huge exhibition of his paintings.

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Hundeportrait Und Doppelkopffrau

– Paloma Varga Weisz –

Artist



I like to go into churches when I go in other countries. I think it's for me, like a — calming down in a city, is going into — checking out some museums, going into a church is kind of like a fixing point for me. Maybe I'm simple-minded as a tourist, but I have something on my list. But going in a church is also kind of like going in an exhibition show and seeing how they work with space, how they've put the figures, how the benches are made, how is the choir organized. And of course, there is a certain period, especially in the German South, there is a city called Ulm, and there is the Ulmer Münster, and there is this choir, where you can sit behind the altar on these benches, where all these people are carved. It's 1400 something, where you see these heads very close to you, from people who donate money to the city, to the church, other religious people.

So, you can sit there, and you are surrounded by these heads and when I saw this, I got this idea to build up a bench where you can sit — the viewer on this bench being surrounded by these characters, and seeing — the viewer sitting on the bench is being surrounded by this sculpture. It's also an interesting view for the other viewer, or lying on the bench. And in the show that you might know, where I work with these benches, the form of the benches is very related to the architecture where this show has been shown first time. And it was a very brutalistic building from the '60s, where you can see these benches outside, on the piazza in front of this museum, it's called Kunsthalle, in Dusseldorf. And I copied this from these benches, and transformed them into this exhibition space and put then these characters on the benches.

Kunstakademie Dusseldorf

– Paloma Varga Weisz –

Artist



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J was deeply confused, because there is so much influence from so many sides. I mean there are the other colleagues, and jealousies, and competition, and when we had these yearly exhibitions, and all this stuff, fighting for place. And focusing on your own was, for me, during this period, was a fight. And then we had, in Dusseldorf, this system that we had — we have a class system. So, you have a professor with his students. And in Dusseldorf, there are a lot of very well-known artists from around the world who teach there. And so, they have their students, like 20 to 40 students.

And you have your — it depends from professors, but you have your talks, your weekly talks, or monthly talks, or meetings. And yeah, as I said, it depends from the professor, if he does it person by person, or in the group. And in that time, a huge confusion, I went to a professor called Gerhard Merz who was a very strong conceptual artist, much more known in the '80s than now. And I think he was like an antipode to me. And I was like growing up on his side, in being against him. He was like a father, where you have to grow up in being the opposite of what he is saying. And I think this was a chance for me that I took this position as a chance to develop something in my mind.

And this was helpful, but I think it's a super hard time going through this academy period. And this life somehow starts afterwards when you are out of this whole thing and really stand on your own feet, and really feels hey, I'm a person standing on the ground, and what do you want to say? I'm not a student from here or da-da-da, from there. I'm just this one person. And it's just, we — everybody needs to give himself this time to grow up, and to develop. And in Germany, I think we can be happy that this Dusseldorf Academy has kind of an open space, but as more as it becomes academic and school system like, with notes and all this, the harder it becomes to grow up an artistic mind.

Limewood

— *Paloma Varga Weisz* —

Artist



*O*kay, limewood is for me the — I mean it's the classical carving wood, especially from this period of like Riemenschneider or Middle Age stuff. And it has not so — it doesn't have a strong texture. So, it's very neutral in a way. It has a nice color, and it has a neutral surface. And I think the way the works are looking at the end, I never had an idea in advance how it should be at the end. It's such an intense process, carving. And I really need to work as long as I've got a connection to the work. And then these faces end up looking a little bit like characters from this

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time, it's maybe then that suddenly a connection has been built to me, or to my soul. And I just let it flow. I don't have — I think I have my preference to make a laughing face in wood, it's technical work for me, but I don't know how to do it, and maybe that's why I don't want to do it. But the kind of characters are never set up from the beginning when I start.

Mother

— *Paloma Varga Weisz* —

Artist



I must tell that this was a time when my mother became very ill. It was not sure that she will die immediately, but there was somehow, I'd say, a feeling that she could die. I mean she was already 83, but super fit till then. And she had kind of an accident. And from that moment on, she became less and less active. And I really felt like death is in the air. And I had suddenly the memories that when my father died, I was with him, and I followed him in these days when he died, and also was on his side during the process of his dying, through hours. I was sitting next to him, and made drawings of his face while he was dying, and I did this when I was 23 or something, when he died.

And then, this 2011, when my mother was in these circumstances, I felt what can I do when I'm not with her when she's dying? And I asked her if I could make her already lying on a deathbed. And so, we have a very dark sense of humor in our family. And I asked her if I could do a lifecast of her body, in clothes, and she agreed. So, I did this work with her when she was lying on a bed. So, this work was developed then in 2011, and somehow very strange and very dark, I had then, in 2012, in January, a show in London, and I was exhibiting this work. And during the exhibition, she was dying, in real. So, she was already lying on her deathbed in a London show, while she was dying in real. So, the whole thing becomes so turned around and strange.

And also, I developed in this year, 2011, these works of my father, again, because the memories came back when I did the work with my mother, that I want to keep like — to keep something alive, keeping a memory of a face alive. So, I got these memories of my father's face again in my head. And so, I made this work called Father, as well.

Natural Step

– *Paloma Varga Weisz* –

Artist



Becoming an artist was really a very natural step, because really, from my little childhood on, we did these little paintings and drawings, and made small exhibitions at home, and sending my works to my parents. So, the whole attitude of being an artist was extremely early and very familiar. And during school, I had the idea of becoming an actor — would be a possibility, because I was in the drama class at school, etcetera. And I didn't really work as — I didn't really did artworks during my school time. And when I was then after school trying to apply for actor's school, I totally found out that it's not the thing I should follow up. It's kind of boring for me to read all these old texts, and train in Shakespeare, whatever. And someone told me that I should go a different thing and try to become — to enter in an art school.

So, I was then, after school, in the school of my father for one year. And he became my model. So, I was really only focused on him, and his face, and his person, to draw him all the time, or make a portrait of his head, and make this portfolio for academy, and all of them didn't want me. And a friend of mine told me that there is this little school in Bavaria where you can train to become a woodcarver, and that I should apply for there. And I went there, and immediately became a student there. And it was a tiny school. We were only 15 students. And it was in the middle of the Alps, in a tiny town called Garmisch-Partenkirchen.

And this was a very strict school to learn to become a woodcarver. And I totally fell in love with this material, and these tools. And this very regular daily school life, where you had hours to learn to draw from animals or portraits, or nudes, or train to build up some models in clay — so, it was very basic. It was something that you would think that an academy would learn you these days. But when I came then, afterwards, to Düsseldorf, to the art academy in Düsseldorf, you don't learn this stuff at all anymore. So, the whole tools and techniques I learned are kind of old-fashioned now for academies.

Rug People

– Paloma Varga Weisz –

Artist



I saw then this former Orient Express station, totally run down, and heard about this background that the Orient Express train, former times, came from Calais, from France, to Folkestone, and continued its journey to London. And also that the soldiers and the war — start their journey from Folkestone. So, I felt the atmosphere at this station quite intense. And I didn't really develop an idea in that moment. But then I came back a second time by car to really get a feeling for the distance from Germany to England, also taking the ferry, and yeah, getting a feeling for the closeness of the United Kingdom to Europe — to France.

And I went by car, and I crossed then from Calais to Folkestone. And I saw all these refugee camps near Calais — from all these people who are trying to come to England. And in that moment, I developed an idea, because they had these little huts all over the beach, and I went into this whole story of these people, and suddenly found out that the path that the smugglers are taking is the same route that the Orient Express is taking. So, they're coming from Istanbul, Vienna, Paris, to London. And so, these people are mostly coming from Afghanistan, Pakistan — yeah, coming by — how I say, by trolleys to Calais.

And so, these characters were built up as portraits of all these refugees. And also, one of these heads become a portrait of my father, because I felt that there is also a link to him, as someone who was kind of also a homeless person trying to find his place. And these figures were kind of like a group surrounded by cardboard, and the whole thing was cast in bronze. So, it'd become like a hut, where the heads are coming out, but it was standing on a huge orient carpet. And the link to this orient carpet was that I felt it's kind of an imagination that you can take a flying carpet through all these barriers, which is, of course, impossible, and also having a heavy bronze on a carpet would not work as well. You couldn't fly.

And also that the carpet itself is something that everybody accepts here in Western culture as — yeah, from the cheapest version to the most high priced version, everybody is involved in Persian carpets. But all these people, you don't want, or if this — people who are doing these carpets, they have their different stories.

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The Cabinet

– *Paloma Varga Weisz* –

Artist



J grew up in this area where wine is a — it's a wine area. It's Palatino, and so barrels are something that you see there quite often, but more connected to — like when they do their wine celebration. So, it's more like a nostalgic thing. Today, they do this in steel tanks. So, the old type of wood barrels is going more and more away. And in my work, a very — I'd say a strong link is always through old techniques that are more and more disappearing, like handicrafts. And doing a wood barrel is a job by itself to do this form, and very interesting on this form of a barrel, in itself, as a container.

And the idea then that I developed is that I used this barrel as something between a suitcase and a cabinet. So, like — it's an inner space, and it is like open a closet, and then you see this — and then this coat is a Persian fur coat. And also, there is a link to my mother as well, because it's her Persian fur coat. And her Persian fur coat, as well as her mother's, were in my cabinet for many, many years. Because it was in a certain period — I don't know if it was all over the world, but in Germany it was a symbol for a certain class of people owning a Persian.

And so, they kept these Persians, even if it was out of fashion to give it to their children, and to keep it as something with a value. But also, it gives a smell of a certain time from the '50s and '60s, maybe earlier as well. And so, I took this black Persian, put it on this hanger, and the hand and feet that come out are cast from my mother's hand and feet in wood.

Vagabond

– *Paloma Varga Weisz* –

Artist



*T*his roots I would describe first, I see this link to Hungary, but also like a vagabond, I don't know, like someone who has no home base. If you have a parent that felt

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sort of uncomfot in the place where he stays, and you grow up with an uncomfot of your parent, you've got it in your genetics, you understand, it's in me from my childhood, that there was someone who doesn't feel comfortable.

And he also said very often to us, when we were children, that we should leave the country when we are grown-ups. And maybe also because of his past, of the Jewish thing, that he didn't want to speak about that, he was afraid, things could come back. But he didn't want to involve us in all this. So, it was kind of a secret with what I grew up. And I think this is a cocktail that gave myself a discomfort for being in this country, and I do not have a feeling of a national identity.