

**Not Vital: MOVING & removing**  
by Rukhsana Jahangir

Conveying the mark of the eternal through the simplest elements of quotidian existence is a hallmark of the practice of the artist Not Vital (\*1948). Over an artistic career spanning more than three decades, Vital has been accustomed to gaze out upon both cityscapes of cutting-edge urban modernity and landscapes of breathtaking natural beauty—effortlessly calling either “home.” What these environments have offered him in terms of inspiration has been wide-ranging and various and Vital continues to feed this into his practice. From the soaring, mountainous surroundings of his native Engadin valley in Switzerland, to the raw industrial New York of the ‘70s and ‘80s, the acrid bustle of Cairo, solitary self-imposed isolation in Patagonia, Chile, an adopted village life in Agadez, Niger, and now the extraordinary and exponentially developing city of Beijing, China—Vital has immersed himself in living situations as diverse as they are extreme. There seems to be no encounter that does not prove fruitful for this perpetual traveller, who finds potential for collaboration in each new situation. The assimilation of these new cultural impressions into the body of his practice is a constantly occurring process.

This exhibition, Vital’s second solo show at Galerie Urs Meile Beijing, is entitled *guarda* 看, meaning ‘to look at’ in Romansch, the native language of the artist. With this title, Vital states from the outset that a degree of prolonged contemplation is essential. Vital has conceived a multi-layered landscape field, a hybrid of manmade and natural materials that examines the intersection between these two polarities. A series of powerful installations operate as discrete and yet interconnected entities: an imposing metallic head, a field of blackened coal mountains, a scattering of mounted Dali stones, an enigmatic and monumental stainless steel staircase, and a series of obliquely overlaid lotus sculptures.

The sole quasi-humanistic presence that one encounters throughout the exhibition is *HEAD Self-Portrait* (2013), a sculpture that is isolated and planted directly on the floor without a base. Although the work is set forth as a self-portrait, the subtle and scarcely expressed facial features render it with a universality of being. The paucity of detail also recalls the earliest forms of artistic articulations, the abstracted representational forms of prehistoric sculpture. Yet despite these allusions to some of his earliest art historical predecessors, the artist has rendered this commanding depiction with an aesthetic finish that undoubtedly belongs to this age. The highly polished PVD (Physical Vapor Deposition) coating of the sculpture results in a lustrous, mirror-like surface that encompasses both convex and concave sections, creating a simultaneous “push/pull” force. At certain points, areas of the surface seem to draw in reflections, yet on other parts of the sculpture these are abruptly cast outwards—a disconcerting effect that both attracts and repels the viewer.

Mountains are traditionally considered to be places of monastic isolation, sites of solitary thought and unencumbered meditation. This sense is certainly evoked in the grouping of sculpted coal forms that Vital presents here, each a ‘portrait’ of the *Piz Nair* mountain from the Engadin valley. Nietzsche described the Engadin as a landscape “...so far away from life, so metaphysical.”<sup>1</sup> Against a backdrop of vertiginous peaks and deep valleys, myth and reality seem curiously intertwined in the extraordinarily breathtaking landscape of the region. The valley is deep and often narrow in parts, again creating an acute sense of isolation. In the Engadin, one of the most commonly held traditional beliefs about mountains was that they were the home of the gods. Similar convictions were held in Chinese history: emperors would complete pilgrimages to “mountains...to receive the homage of the deities dwelling there,”<sup>2</sup> often performing rites and rituals on these journeys. Throughout China, mountains are invested with deep and potent symbolism, one of the most significant examples of which is the Sacred Mountains of China, revered by both Taoists and Buddhists. Having gazed upon the original form of Piz Nair countless times throughout his lifetime, it is one that Vital has revisited repeatedly in his practice, a recapitulation that becomes a meditation piece. On the occasion of this exhibition, it is sculpturally iterated ten times. Each mountain represents a range of aesthetic dialectics across its parts: gleaming yet dull, sharp yet smooth, steep yet shallow—each absolutely individual from one another. Yet it is not only through aesthetics that

1 Bertram, Ernst, Nietzsche: Attempt at a Mythology, University of Illinois Press, 2009 [1918], p 216.

2 Naquin, Susan, & Yü, Chün-Fang, Pilgrims and Sacred Sites in China (Studies on China), University of California Press, 1992, p 13.

these forms embody dialectics; they also stand as symbols of a duality that lies at the heart of contemporary Chinese society. Advancing at an astonishing rate, China steadily confounds all predictions in terms of growth and progress. And yet it remains a country that is resolutely wed to the past, its traditions and history, all of which continue to resonate through every single element of life—culturally, socially and politically. These coal formations, formed over millions of years, harsh and blackened, embody the ceaseless hard work that the Chinese are renowned for. The rough, untrammelled materiality of these forms suggests something of the sense of raw experimentalism that Vital has spoken of experiencing in contemporary Beijing. Yet these severed, distinctly unique sections of fossil fuel are presented on shining stainless steel plinths, symbolic products of the indomitable force of industrial modernity.

In *ǒu* (藕) (2013), Vital presents a series of overlaid stainless steel sculptures, each of which depicts a simple cross-section of a lotus root (rhizome). Being indigenous to China, the lotus plant is indeed a ubiquitous sight across the country, yet it stands apart as being deeply invested with symbolic meaning, religious and otherwise. In Buddhism, the lotus is revered as a sacred flower and connotes purity of the heart and mind, being one of the Eight Auspicious Symbols of Buddhism. The structure of the lotus, rooted in the earth at its base and rising to the peak with its pristine white flower, is held as a symbolic representation of the philosophical pathway from base materialism to enlightenment. One of the most famous scholarly texts on the flower is from the Confucian scholar Chou Tun-I (1017-1073), who writes: “[The lotus] emerges from the muddy dirt but is not contaminated; it reposes nobly above the clear water...the Lotus is the flower of purity and integrity.”<sup>3</sup>

In the West, the quarries of places such as Carrara, Italy, are justly famed for the beauty of their marble. In China, such is the renown of the source of this stone, the Dali area of Yunnan province, that the name for marble in Chinese is simply “Dali stone.” Like an atonal composition of music, Vital has devised a very particular and unconventional arrangement for the installation of Dali stones that he presents within this exhibition. These carefully cut sections of marble are each mounted on uniquely shaped plaster forms and placed in an irregular pattern, ranging from floor-based to high on the wall. The search for an easy line of vision throughout these is therefore thwarted by the artist. Instead, one must move between the works as if they are discretely separated elements of a landscape, from one point catching a glimpse of the subtle white surface of *Ice* (2013), from another gazing up into the delicately veined surface of *Mountain* (2013). This grouping of works here stands as representative of a fractional, fragmented extraction, elements of a greater actual whole that the viewer can only begin to conceive of in imaginative form. Recalling the formal elegance of traditional Chinese ink drawings, each marble surface presents a lyrical mass of undulating linear forms that sketch an amalgam of natural formations. The exquisitely presented stones become forms of physical poetry, elegies to their natural place of origin.

A sense of journeying ascendancy is repeated again and again in Vital’s practice, from the imprinted footprints of *Boots for Climbing Piz Ajüz* (1991) to the emphasised verticality of works such as *Leading the Way* (2013). Most notably, the staircases and ladders of his *House to Watch the Sunset* (2005) and *House to Watch the Moon* (2006) reiterate this implied upwards journeying. These Houses, which began in 2000 in Agadez, Niger and are ongoing in locations as various as Flores, Indonesia and Shanghai, China, are sharply essentialist and minimalist in their form, structure and function. Their staircases are recalled in this exhibition through the monumental installation *Stair(e)* (2013). The pristine surface of these stainless steel steps encompasses the space, reaching across the entire width of the gallery and from floor to ceiling. The ritual-like implied action of climbing these stairs creates a singularly focused sense of journeying from microcosm to macrocosm. There is a sense of ascending with a final goal in mind, promising a reward of some form of enlightenment. Yet somewhat frustratingly in this case, ascension is not an option. These steps shall not be blemished by the footstep of an onlooker. Yet the lines of movement implied here also expand out to the importance of travelling that is held throughout Vital’s practice. The tradition of journeying away and then returning is one very common to Engadiners, and this is a sensibility shared by Vital, who has spent a lifetime in constant travel but continually returns to his home village of Sent. A sense of belonging everywhere and nowhere, of being part of every man and yet no man, permeates his practice.

Yet what is the end point of such journeys that Vital evokes? Perhaps it could be said to be the search for a sanctuary of some kind, a respite from contemporary existence. Such forms of sanctuary exist

3 Li, Hui-Lin, *The Garden Flowers of China*, Ronald Press Company, 1959, p 69.

amongst the architectural sculptures that Vital has placed within a rugged park in his home village of Sent. From *Chasa dasper l'aua* (*House by the River*) (2004) to *Jösijö* (*Disappearing House*) (2007), Vital has created a series of refuges, each one offering the potential for restorative respite. Isolated from each other amongst the landscape, it is rare to even be able to view one sculpture when standing by another, and thus the impression of isolation is augmented. Traditionally, the artistic representation of landscapes has encapsulated a search for such sanctuaries. In Chinese history, this became of particular importance during the collapse of the Tang dynasty (618-907), when “the concept of withdrawal into the natural world became a major thematic focus of poets and painters.”<sup>4</sup> Landscapes became far more meaningful than the materiality of their physical existence; they were symbolic of a striving for serenity of mind, of worlds within worlds. This sense of solitary meditation permeates *guarda* 看. The absence of human presence and signifiers of time and place create an anchorless space, a release from the measured, scheduled urban life that exists beyond the gallery walls. History and contemporaneity co-exist; there is no distinct claim to any time or place. Such specifics become subservient to the focus on wider, universal themes that predominate. Throughout this exhibition, and more widely in his practice, Vital can be seen to act as a kind of contemporary alchemist, transforming and elevating ordinary, commonplace forms into extraordinary creations, richly imbued with significance and depth that far transcends their material form.

---

4 Hearn, Maxwell K., *Cultivated Landscapes: Chinese Paintings from the Collection of Marie-Hélène and Guy Weill*, Yale University Press, 2002, p 5.