

For her 2018 exhibition at Sadie Coles HQ, Paloma Varga Weisz presents a new series of sculptures in carved limewood. These works glance back to her origins as a woodcarver in Bavaria in the late 1980s, while also reflecting the layered personal iconography – surreal, mythological and Modernist – that she has developed over her thirty-year career.

At the centre of the exhibition is an articulated wooden figure – a life-size version of an artist's mannequin – suspended acrobatically from ropes. This alludes to the long tradition of drawing from wooden stand-ins or 'lay figures', and equally to the surrealist fascination with the doll or shop mannequin as a proxy body. Suspended above the gallery, Varga Weisz's sculpture appears poised to perform multiple roles – its ball-jointed limbs implying the possibility of altered poses and shifting meanings. In contrast to a traditional artist's model, featureless and neutered, Varga Weisz's figure bears the impressions of a 'real' identity – it is endowed with male genitals and the rough, vestigial markings of a face. It wavers between the status of an artistic paradigm and a human subject, implying both an awkward prop and an animate body – ensouled and erotic.

Around the gallery, Varga Weisz has positioned a group of carved characters who oscillate, in similar fashion, between generic and individual resonances. One of these is a hybrid form: part man, part dog. The strange creature evokes a figment of myth or folklore, but is also – in its introspective expression and faltering pose – imbued with psychological realism and specificity. Standing forlornly on two legs, with its large flaccid ears and six ample breasts, it is at once plaintive and comical, encapsulating a double-edged mood that recurs throughout Varga Weisz's work. Another character, a man clothed in bumps, has been finished in mottled gesso, recalling the medieval technique of plastering and painting wooden statues to endow them with verisimilitude.

In a sequence of sculptures, the artist presents elongated female nudes with simplified features, reminiscent of the rough-hewn 'primitivist' carvings of Modernist sculpture, on whose heads rest small circular vessels. Their simplicity is offset by a sense of the ceremonial or quixotic: each woman rests one hand tenderly on her stomach, creating a rhythmic repetition of poses, while the vessel implies a cup, hat, or architectural object – either a chimney or pedestal. Each body is a kind of plinth, akin to Auguste Rodin's carved marble statue of Pallas with a temple growing on her head, or to sculpted caryatids designed to hold up temple roofs. The idea of the sculpture as a support, which carries echoes of decorative artistic traditions, is extended in a work that depicts a doleful monkey holding a goose egg. Elsewhere, Varga Weisz employs the conceit of a sculpture atop a sculpture to juxtapose two distinct styles – smooth-planed serenity is superseded by an expressive realism recalling the grimacing countenances of Franz Xaver Messerschmidt.

Throughout her latest works, Varga Weisz continues to examine and rethink the ways in which sculpture has been presented and viewed. In various instances, the plinth is integral to the sculpture – hewn from the same block of wood, in the style of a herm. Elsewhere, the use of the plinth carries echoes of both modern museum displays and historical systems of presentation. At other moments, as in the central hanging figure, sculpture has broken free of its traditional moorings.

Paloma Varga Weisz (b. 1966, Mannheim) lives and works in Düsseldorf, Germany. She trained at Staatliche Kunstakademie, Düsseldorf. Major solo exhibitions include *Skulpturenhalle*, Thomas Schütte Foundation, Holzheim, Germany (2017); *Kabinettstück*, Fürstenberg Zeitgenössisch, Donaueschingen, Germany (2016; curated by Moritz Wessler); *Glory Hole*, Salzburger Kunstverein, Salzburg, Austria (2015); *Root of a Dream*, Castello di Rivoli, Turin, Italy (2015); *Krummer Hund*, Kabinett für aktuelle Kunst, Bremerhaven, Germany, and the Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin (2013); that at Museum Morsbroich, Leverkusen, Germany (with Rosemarie Trockel); *Spirits of My Flesh*, Chapter, Cardiff (2011), and that at the Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin (2006). In 2017, a new book documenting Varga Weisz's exhibition *Root of a Dream* was published by Castello di Rivoli, Turin.

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