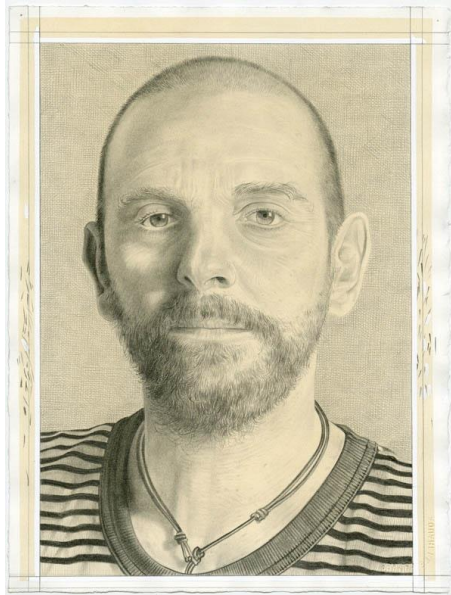


BLIGHTED LUMINANCE UGO RONDINONE with Jarrett Earnest

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Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

Swiss-born Ugo Rondinone came onto the international art scene in the 1990s with sculptures of glamorous and subtle materiality. His seemingly disparate forms are united by a consistent ambiguity and intense psychology. One might use James Joyce's description of the 19th century decadent Joris-Karl Huysmans—"illuminated by a blighted luminance"—to consider Rondinone's aesthetic. Many New Yorkers know his rainbow *HELL YES!* from the facade of the new New Museum, and Parisians recognize him from an elaborate 12-piece installation *Sunrise East* in the Tuileries in 2009. In 2011 Rondinone moved his studio to a church in Harlem, where he recently met with Jarrett Earnest to discuss isolation, the treachery of language, and his new installation in Rockefeller Plaza, *Human Nature* (April 23 – June 7, 2013, organized by Public Art Fund and Tishman Speyer).

Ugo Rondinone: For Rockefeller Plaza I made nine stone figures that are between 18 and 23 feet tall. A year and a half ago Nicholas Baume, the director and chief curator of Public Art Fund, approached me to develop an artwork for the plaza. I visited the site over and over and I ended with something very basic in order to have a contrast with this highly developed site in Manhattan. The stone figure is the archetypal representation of the human form, and I show it in the most elemental and archaic way using the most ancient material—stone—and name the figures after our fundamental state of being: feelings. The bluestone is rough-cut into blocks that are stacked over one another to form the human figure. The methods by which it has been worked are apparent to the viewer and not obscured by subsequent handling. Drill-holes and split structures are visible traces of the work quarry where the blocks were taken from the ground. The stones are allowed to be what they are: heavy, coarse, and marked by wind, weather, and corrosion.

Jarrett Earnest (Rail): They seem formally the opposite of your *Nudes*, which were cast from humans and highly detailed and refined.

Rondinone: They are materially opposite, soft versus hard, but fundamentally the same. Like the stone figures, the *Nudes* were also a crossing of nature and the human figure. The body casts were made with a mixture of clear wax and different earths, which gave the body parts the different brown colors. I got earths from all over the world and ground them up and mixed them with wax. The *Nudes* and *Human Nature* present the human figure in a basic, stoic form of being. The *Nudes* are sitting and the figures in *Human Nature* are standing.

Rail: Despite the fact that these figures are standing, they are not active.

Rondinone: They are just standing. They don't express movement. You will never see an expression in my work that indicates a movement or directness or an action. I understand art as essentially static; it creates its own artificial gravity system where the work states its own void or abyss.

Rail: They are like monoliths, with a celestial/astronomic implication, like Stonehenge.

Rondinone: The starting point for the figures' leg size was the size of the biggest standing stone of Stonehenge. But this information was only a mental guide for me, an existing measure that has been tested and works. The artwork would become too loaded if I transported every thought and cross-reference I ever had in the process of making it. I do have a constant interior monologue about my work, but these thoughts do not need to be communicated in a public dialogue.

When I was preparing my first artist talk, I realized all I want to do is be as accurate as possible in describing the work, because by describing the work I can offer an understanding of the whole thing without saying why I'm doing it.

Rail: The materials are literally what they are but they also serve a metaphorical function.

Rondinone: The material transports information. I like the reference to the primitive and essential, where the working material becomes the means of an action, and traces become the effects of thoughts.

Rail: In completely the opposite mode, I read that one of your favorite books is Huysmans's *A rebours* (*Against Nature*). I feel it has been referenced in talking about your work in a rather superficial way, and I would like to try and use it as a lens to think about some deeper aspects, perhaps at the risk of being foolish. One aspect has to do with this idea of the "inactive" as a strategy, because the whole narrative thrust of that book is about inactivity.

Rondinone: It's not inactivity. There is a lot of activity in his head; he's just not socially active.

Rail: Well, it's about a social refusal.

Rondinone: A social refusal or a refusal of a social responsibility.



Ugo Rondinone, "If There were Anywhere but Desert. Friday," 2002. Fiberglass, paint, clothing, 40 x 170 x 45 cm.

Rail: Which is what you described when you said you decided not to talk about the motives behind your work.

Rondinone: Language is tricky. We explain concepts with other concepts. It's a losing game. There is a distinction between the affirmation of a powerless and delusional structure of language and my belief in the spiritual and magical power of an artwork. I don't have to understand an artwork through linguistic conventions; I have only to feel it.

Rail: A lot of people have referenced the idea of Romanticism loosely in relationship with your work, but one thing that struck me in thinking about *Against Nature* is that Osip Mandelstam cites it to distinguish between the Romantic and the Decadent: the Decadent novel—and *Against Nature* is *the* example—has the most psychologically sensitive characters. Your work relates to this structure of the Decadent; you are essentially an installation artist creating finely tuned psychological space. A lot of your work is about windows that you cannot see through and doors that cannot open.

Rondinone: Or that lead to nowhere. Windows, doors, brick walls, light bulbs, trees, and masks are reoccurring symbols in my work. They are static metaphors in transition, which undermines the nature of time in terms of linear progression. They elaborate an idea not as progress through time but in terms of circularity, entropy, passivity, and dreaminess. A present tense, where time has stopped and opened out to reveal suggestiveness or changelessness or hollowness.

Rail: That is straight out of a description of the protagonist Des Esseintes's interiors in *Against Nature*. He lines his dining room with cork so there is no outside sound, creating his own sensitized world in a castle far away from the city.

Rondinone: Right, he covers up his windows. I should re-read this book. I read it when I was 18 and was very impressed!

Rail: A lot of your works, even the gestures that appear very minimal, seem to relate to gay experience of a certain historical moment. Even the trompe l'oeil still-life objects seem like a form of drag: materials performing as something else, like Jasper Johns's beer cans or Robert Gober's legs.

Rondinone: The tangerines or the apples or cardboards are bronze/lead works called *still.life*. And as the title suggests, they present a self-contained frozen moment, weighted and isolated with lead. One of the reasons I filled the hollow cast bronzes with lead was to reinforce the notion of heaviness pulling towards the ground. It is time thickened and slowed into space, a stay against the passage of time. A second reason was to fill the active vacuum of the hollowness. A lead filled bronze cast of an everyday object like tangerines or a candle does not reach out for metaphors of expansion or progress, but reverts to the ideas of impact, isolation, and passivity.

Rail: Your *Moonlighting* photographs from 1999 show figures in rubber fetish gear photographed in black spaces.

Rondinone: The *Moonlighting* photos are not specifically about fetish or being gay. They are about isolation and disappearance. The black rubber isolates the skin from the outside world while the body is emerging into infinite blackness. I've used black rubber as material on different occasions, the first time in a 1998 sound installation called *I Never Sleep*, which contained seven cast apple trees that were wrapped in black rubber. The trees were standing on a rubber dance floor. Black wiring and round speakers were hanging in the branches. A male voice came from the speakers and spoke text from my diary. The voice would wander from tree to tree.

Rail: The experience of the person inside the suit is about sensory deprivation; isn't that about isolation as well?

Rondinone: At that time I had just read *The Box Man* by Kobo Abe. It's a book about the desire to escape from society. The box man rejects the world and goes inside a box and looks out. For me the rubber suit was a kind of box.



Ugo Rondinone, "The Tender," 2013. Blue stone, 518 cm (height).

Rail: That imagery reminds me of Nancy Grossman, who you included in *The Third Mind*, the show you curated at the Palais de Tokyo in 2007, where you also included Brion Gysin, Joe Brainard, Gober, and many other artists who happen to be gay. Is there a formal sensibility that connects or inspires your interest in these gay artists?

Rondinone: I have a deep respect for all the artists I chose for *The Third Mind* and for *The Spirit Level*. And some of them happen to be gay artists. But in general I don't distinguish between gay or straight. How could I?

Rail: I think you can look at the shows you curated as illuminating your own works—a kind of formal key.

Rondinone: Both *The Spirit Level* and *The Third Mind* were curated as a birthday present to my partner John Giorno for his 70th and 75th birthdays. There would be no exhibition otherwise. I see both exhibitions as love letters.

The artists I chose for both shows were artists who have a self-contained practice, who can isolate themselves with and through their work. They are in a constant dialogue with themselves. They don't need a public to complete their work. Their work serves as a vehicle of ontological meditation about their lives and life in general. They don't observe the world from a distance and comment on it. There is no cynicism or irony.

Rail: A lot of your work depends on the tension around autobiographic expression—the fake diaries that you did from 1991 until 1998, or the photo group *I don't live here anymore* from 1995 with your face transposed onto model's bodies—and gains currency because it alludes to a certain type of self-expression that is immediately closed down. Maybe exactly because of this I want to ask you about when you first started making art.

Rondinone: In 1983, I had a girlfriend who worked in a gallery in Zurich that represented Hermann Nitsch and I became his assistant. I worked for him for half a year and then I went on and started art school in Vienna in the sculpture class of Bruno Gironcoli.

Rail: Were you working on Nitsch's performances?

Rondinone: Yes, I helped prepare Hermann Nitsch's very elaborate *Sechs Tage Spiel* performance that took place outside of Vienna in his castle in Prinzendorf. The three-day play needed a lot of logistics and planning: slaughtered animals, red fruits, white wine, music, and active participants.

Rail: But you would never do performances in your own work?

Rondinone: I would never do a performance myself but I do regard my short plays as performance, and I see the three sculptures that I did of myself between 1995 and 1996 as substitutes of a performance. All three sculptures represent me in a passive position, one sitting on the floor, one laying on the floor, and one leaning on the wall.

Or I had clowns come and sit on the gallery floor or in the street. The only instructions I gave were that they not interact with anyone. The performance represents a microcosmos of all social environments. It is an ideal catalyst for every possible engagement and observation of the human condition. It's like having the whole world in a handbag.

My voice plays are presented as an intimate theater of the mind with an economy of structure—voice and symbol. The symbolic stage-sets like trees, fractured mirrored walls, and zero holes work very much in the same way as dream symbols and dream voices. As with dreams, the symbols strive toward free-association and communal resonance.

Rail: What attracted you to Nitsch's work?

Rondinone: As an 18-year-old, being confronted with an artwork called "Theater of Orgies and Mysteries" made a big impression and turned my fantasy up side down—sex, rituals, black magic?!

Rail: All the things that are absent from what you do now! What were you doing in art school?

Rondinone: Before I went to art school I was very taken with Egon Schiele.

"I don't have to understand an artwork through linguistic conventions, I have only to feel it."

Rail: Another artist making "expressive autobiography."

Rondinone: The registered time in its familiar increments of days, years, centuries is the foundation of my work since I began my date paintings in 1989. It started with the ink landscape drawings and the sprayed blurred mandala paintings and continued through to recent "brick wall" oil painting. This ongoing project, which will end with my death, always includes a date as the title for each work. History as recorded in daily events, whether global or local, is bound together with the residue of individual activity and is memorialized under the rubric of the date. In this sense the "date paintings" confirm the existentialism at the heart of my work. A date offers testimony to a fundamental state of being; to be with and through my work. The work as diaristic notes. Time is nonetheless always and finally subjectively experienced in and through the present moment of myself.

Rail: There is so much about your aesthetic that is about the "artificial"—for instance there is very little color but when there is color it is crazy color. There is nothing natural, you are *Against Nature*—I think, for instance, of how Des Esseintes talks at length about finding garish colors that look the best in artificial light.

Rondinone: I need a certain dualism or dynamism in my work practice, like following the black ink drawings with the multicolor mandalas. Or the multi-colored clown work from 1995—a four screen video installation titled *Where do we go from here?* Leigh Bowery was a model for the clowns, they wouldn't have a belly like that otherwise, and he inspired also the makeup. In the year 2000 I made seven clown sculptures. The first three clowns had very tight spandex clothes, and the last four had shaman-like costumes with burlap, feathers, sheep fur, and leather.



Ugo Rondinone, "Night of Lead," 2009. Museo de arte Contemporaneo de Castilla y Leon.

Rail: And they just laid around galleries?

Rondinone: They just sat or laid around. Sometimes in combination with a dialogue sound piece of a fractured mirror wall. I did several dialogue sound pieces. Usually with a "man" and "woman" voice, for an obvious duality. The dialogue pieces are looped short plays that end like they start.

Rail: The structure of the loop relates to the mandalas and to the passive positioning, and to a certain societal refusal.

Rondinone: A loop doesn't go from A to B. The movement is circular like in a hamster wheel. It's another form of passivity, or suspended time. This is what I want from an artwork: for it to stop me. Because that is what you would like to have in front of an artwork, a suspension of yourself. And after that you are not the same anymore—it's a magical transition. It transforms you and nothing is ever like it was before. It was the gentleman art critic John Russell who wrote in the first volume of *The Meaning of Modern Art*, "When art is made new, we are made new with it."

Rail: The structure of the looping doesn't seem quite like meditation; there is still something going on. Do you see it as related to meditation or relaxation or sleep?

Rondinone: The sound in the four screen video projection of the clowns was a breathing sound. I slowed down the room by making the breathing 100 percent slower than regular breath.

What interests me most in art is its inherent slowness, the experience of the slowness of words and images happening. I associate slowness with the possibility of being able to *be*. Unlike speed, which is inflammatory, slowness doesn't make demands on me, it doesn't tug me out of my time and into its time like speed does. When things are going slowly, the scale of measurement and values itself begins to dissolve. In my work I like to slow and elapse temporalities, in which nothing is ever over and done with, everything can recur or be revived, and in which past, present, and future are looped together.

Rail: When you do use words, which you do often, what do you want from them?

Rondinone: My use of words is related to poetry, like the public rainbow sculptures. I made the first one ("Cry Me a River") in 1995, and the last one ("We Are Poems") in 2012. If art is the great synthesizer, poetry is the ultimate analyzer. A poem seeks not for outward action, but for inward stasis. A poem is not about something; it is that something itself.

Rail: I think the sculptures you made based on enlarged "scholars' stones" encapsulate a lot of your sensibility. The original scholars' stones were selected from nature because they evoked other things; there's a space for projection, but they are also about hermeticism—sitting in the study of the scholar.

Rondinone: The stones evoke a world in miniature, a Daoist paradise. Monks would isolate themselves and contemplate the natural world outside their circumstances with the illusion that they are inside. For me, the most powerful presentation of the idea is in rocks that have holes within holes. Varying in size and orientation, these holes create the sensation of an ever-changing and infinite world within a finite object. I've collected scholars' stones for many years. They are never taller than 12 inches.



Ugo Rondinone, "Sunrise. East. August," 2005. Bronze, paint, concrete, 210 x 150 x 140 cm.

In 2006 I made a selection of 17 stones of my collection. 17 stones because I had a title or a phrase with 17 words in it: *We Run Through a Desert on BURNING Feet, All of Us are Glowing our Faces Look Twisted*. I like this kind of restriction. To restrict a work that could go endlessly. Like the restriction I imposed to my clown sculptures, I made seven and named each one after a day of the week. Or the 24 light bulbs, each for every hour of the day. The first was called "The First Hour of the Poem" and so on. This kind of restrictions grounds me. I don't have to think about it to make endless replicas of the same.

Rail: You seem to like using language as a system.

Rondinone: My work is very emotional, so it needs some system to ground it and give it an order. I like to give myself that.

Rail: What do you think about scale? Some are human-sized and others are much bigger.

Rondinone: I cannot make up any measurement if I do not see it somewhere real. Everything is out there either in urban life or in nature. And every size is powerful in the right circumstance.

Rail: It feels that most of the time there is a continuity of scale between the “outside” world and the “art” world, but the objects are altered in such a way that they cannot be continuous. However, then you have these giant light bulbs. Where did that image come from?

Rondinone: When I prepared an indoor exhibition with my six cast olive trees I wanted to bring in something obviously domestic like a light bulb.

Rail: They are very like Philip Guston, which is about the studio and the inside world of the artist.

Rondinone: Yes, very Guston, because of their comical exaggeration. The light bulbs always hang at my belly height. You always relate to sculptures with your body.

Rail: The light bulbs also relate to the bulbous bellies of the clowns.

To try and clarify this thing about isolation, as a tactic or an aesthetic: what continues to be important or necessary to you about it?

Rondinone: It is a protection strategy. If you are exposed and have a strategy of retreat then you are not exposed. I cannot really elaborate in a way that will satisfy you because a lot of the process is about keeping a certain magic.

Rail: And you feel that language is antithetical to magic?

Rondinone: When it is connected to logic and trying to reason, yes, because reason and magic are not compatible. Poetic language is more attuned, in its slowness, to visual language. I believe in the spiritual and magical power of an artwork. It's an alchemy of transforming my and the viewer's emotional and physical reality.



Ugo Rondinone, "1st Hour of the Poem," 2005. Wax, pigments, 140 x 82 x 82 cm

I don't have to understand an artwork through linguistic conventions, I have only to feel it. Did I say that before? Anyhow, it's worth to repeating.

Rail: Are you drawn to Bruce Nauman, or through to Samuel Beckett, and his clowns and repetitions?

Rondinone: I'm drawn to the German Romantics. The German Romantic movement was the first to blur the line between reality and illusion. In this sense I'm very attached to the idea of art and art making as an environment that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to a linear logic. In general I like art that is capable of organizing a space of perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time and language and image in an immobile place. There is no true identity, history, or meaning, but only that which I construct for myself.