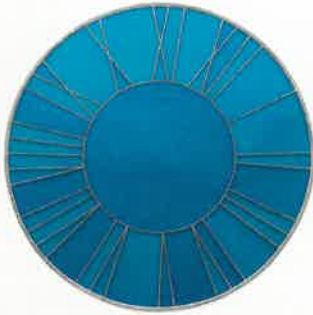


## How the Avalanche Becomes You

**UGO RONDINONE**  
**"CRY ME A RIVER"**  
**KUNSTMUSEUM LUZERN**  
**06 JUL – 20 OCT 2024**

Courtesy: the artist and Sadie Coles HQ



*blue clock*, 2016, stained-glass window, wire, 100 cm (diameter)

Swiss mountain mythology seethes with all kinds of magical personifications of natural phenomena, from living stones to sentient avalanches. Writing about Swiss folklore in 1872, historian Alexandre Daguët observed that “most of these tales have their roots in a fear of the unpredictability we face in life.” This retrospective of Ugo Rondinone (\*1964) at the Kunstmuseum Luzern, which marks the artist’s return to the region of his birth, is also a folktale of sorts, drawing on both local and personal lore and harnessing the mountains’ awesome mutability to tell a story of humankind’s ever-repeating attempts to face down life’s vicissitudes with art.

Retrospective is perhaps not the right descriptor here, as Rondinone smelts, strains, boils, and distills time with an alchemical hand, treating it as a material to be sculpted. Guests are welcomed into the exhibition through a corridor lighted only by the stained-glass *blue clock* (2016), its hands

removed and its numbers rolled off their axes, with ten at the top. From here, you enter a field of static lightning: Towering, cartoon-yellow thunderbolts formed from bronze casts of upturned trees fill the room. The branching pattern echoes throughout nature, and no less through the human body; here, it’s like walking into the lungs of a giant beast (*luminous light*, *glorious light*, *blissful light*, *sparkling light*, *sublime light*, all 2023). This joyful dance, from the figurative to the literal and back again, repeats across the works. Materials laugh and hum, the spirits loosed in them at odds with their physical natures.

In one corner of the same room sits a half-reclining human figure lost in thought. We find the hero of the tale rendered as a painted, life-size doll: the show’s title work, a strange, pensive self-portrait from 1995. Here and in the other acutely personal early works from the 90s, you sense someone looking back at previous iterations of themselves, dredging time’s riverbed for clues to the plot, trying to intuit a rhyme scheme, or, like Beckett’s protagonist in *Krapp’s Last Tape* (1958), playing old voice recordings of himself, “hard to believe I was ever that young.” This seated figure also recalls in its style and



pose Rondinone’s sculptures of clowns; truth-tellers, wise fools, simultaneously tragic and comic, so often conceals for how artists see themselves.

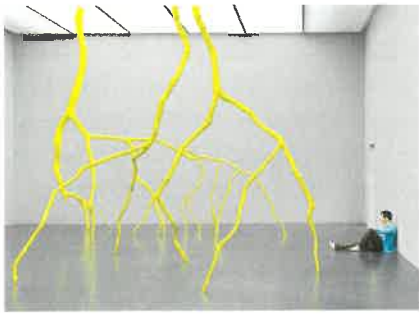
Its galleries painted a stormy grey, the exhibition twists like a gyre, drawing the visitor into its weather cycles. We pass from lightning through simulations of *rain* (2004) and snowfall (*thankyou*, *silence*, 2005), each captured with a comic-book simplicity that work as homage to Rondinone’s early interest in the form. As in many fables, we are accompanied on this journey by strange and unlikely animals, passing through one room of fish (who have no water to swim in), one of birds (who are too



*your age, and my age and the age of the sun*, 2013–, sun drawings made by children from Central Switzerland

Courtesy: the artist and Kunstmuseum Luzern, 2024

Photos: Stefan Altenburger



*lights*, 2023; *cry me a river*, 1995

heavy to fly), and one of horses (who are too small to carry us). These animals are also revenants of prehistoric art practices, the parades of beasts in cave paintings from tens of thousands of years ago told in stories time and again. A handprint embedded in the wall (*twelve sunsets, twenty-nine dawns, all in one*, 2008) nods again to the cave artists, while, like a bard in the shadows around a fire, Rondinone plays on scale over and over: One minute, we are dwarfed by a room of giant stone figures with archetypal names (*the angelic, the dedicated, the eloquent, the modern, the youthful*, all 2024); the next, we need to stoop down to look into a keyhole, which whistles with an unexpected breeze (*big mind sky*, 2007).

A monumental painting made for this show, two-sided and large enough to fill one's entire field of vision, depicts a double horizon: water meeting mountains, mountains meeting sky, the above collapsing into the below, in a blue on blue on blue that would be the envy of Ferdinand Hodler. You can walk around the work to be enveloped by the view, by night or by day. Their titles time stamps (*sechstermaizweitausendundvierundzwanzig* [6 May 2024] and *siebstermaizweitausendundvierundzwanzig* [7 May 2024]), both are painted in watercolor, their scale showing their maker's mastery of time.

A final room in the rotation comprises over 2,000 drawings of the sun, *your age and my age and the age of the sun* (2013–), the lot done by children from nearby cantons or drawn from the artist's decade-old archive. As much as



*thank you silence*, 2005, wood, paper, metal grille, motor activity, wooden box with snow, 30 x 200 x 40 cm. Below: *sechstermaizweitausendundvierundzwanzig*, 2024, acrylic on canvas, 400 x 600 cm.



a touching form of participation and a celebration of youth's creative torrent, the work is also a recognition that, for many people, something so simple as drawing the sky we see every day only really occurs in childhood. Like these many crude riffs on our most ancient symbol, Rondinone's visual language, with its bold colors and simple gestures, is accessible in a way a child can

understand. Interestingly, though, it is in no way compromised by this; rather, it is in this archaic simplicity that we can discern the sagacity of a poet.

**Leila Peacock**

*the crater*, 2016, bronze, 11.5 x 28 x 5.5 cm

