

if there were anywhere but desert., 0, 2000



AW
24

KING KONG

ISSUE 18

KING KONG



18

£ 20



€ 25

AW

24

UGO RONDINONE

UGO

RONDINONE:

Light, Grief, and Timeless Symbols

Swiss artist Ugo Rondinone reflects on the intersection of nature, art, and the human experience. He delves into the spiritual and transformative power of art, his use of universal symbols, and the balance between austerity and playfulness in his work. Drawing from personal grief and the impact of the AIDS crisis, Rondinone explores how his practice connects the mystical with the everyday, inviting viewers to slow down, reflect, and find meaning in simplicity. Through his use of color, scale, and familiar motifs, he seeks to bridge the gap between the human and natural worlds. Known for his ability to create immersive experiences that resonate emotionally and intellectually, Rondinone's art transcends boundaries, making him one of the most compelling voices in contemporary art.

to think”, “Just describe what you see”. Could you talk more about the way you feel art should be looked at, enjoyed and experienced? How important is a sense of freedom for you? How did you enjoy art growing up? What made you want to become an artist? And how did you become the artist you are today?

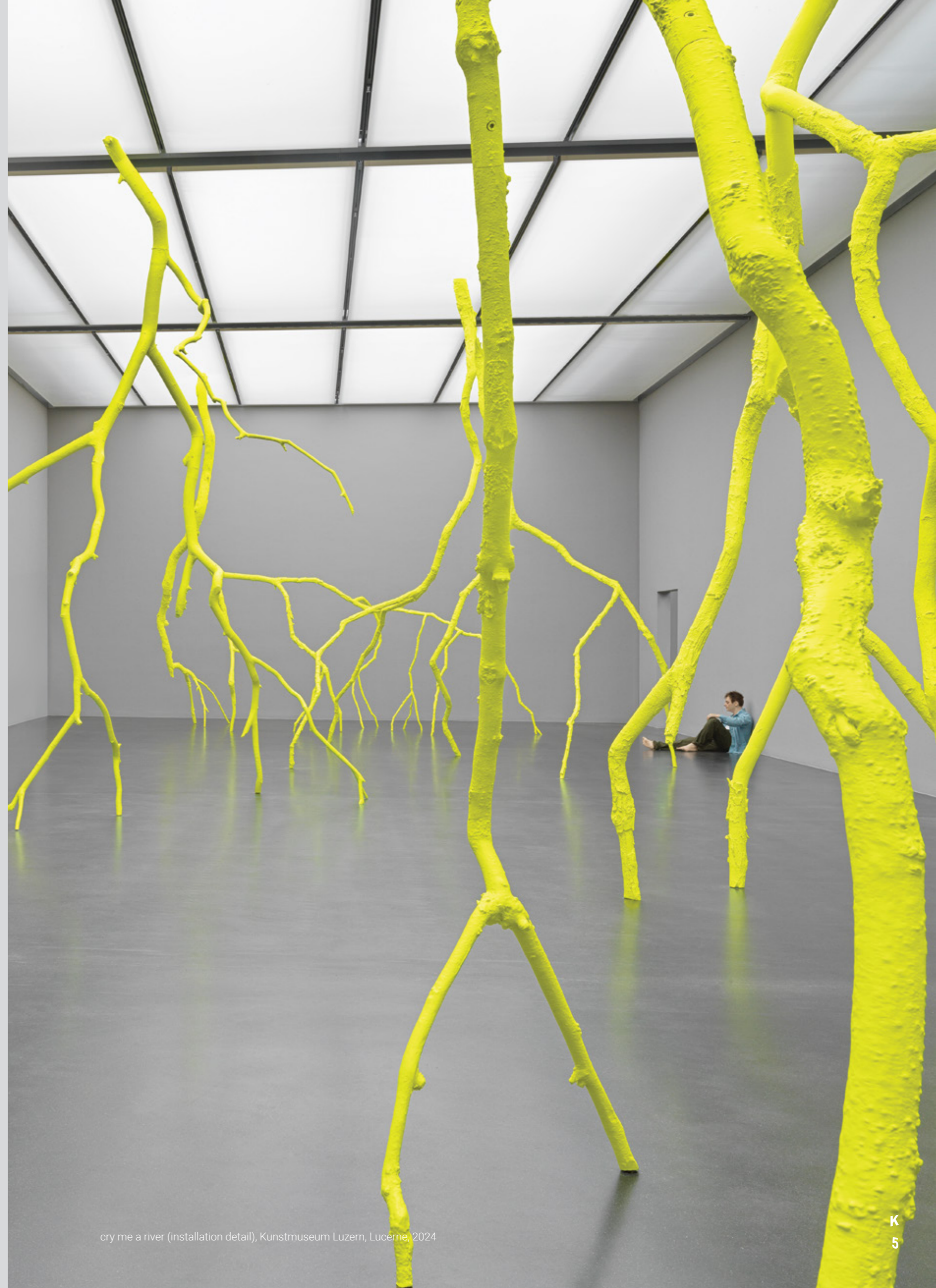
Ugo Rondinone: There is no right approach to how one looks at art, just as there is no right approach to how one listens to music. A set of eyes, a set of ears – that's all you need. Be present. Focus on what is in front of you. Allow yourself to become absorbed in the image. Be emotional. Let yourself feel whatever the image evokes – whether it's joy, sadness, excitement, or calm.

I see the world as a mysterious place where appearances are deceptive, and ultimate reality is rarely perceived. It's a world in which everyone creates their own time and space.

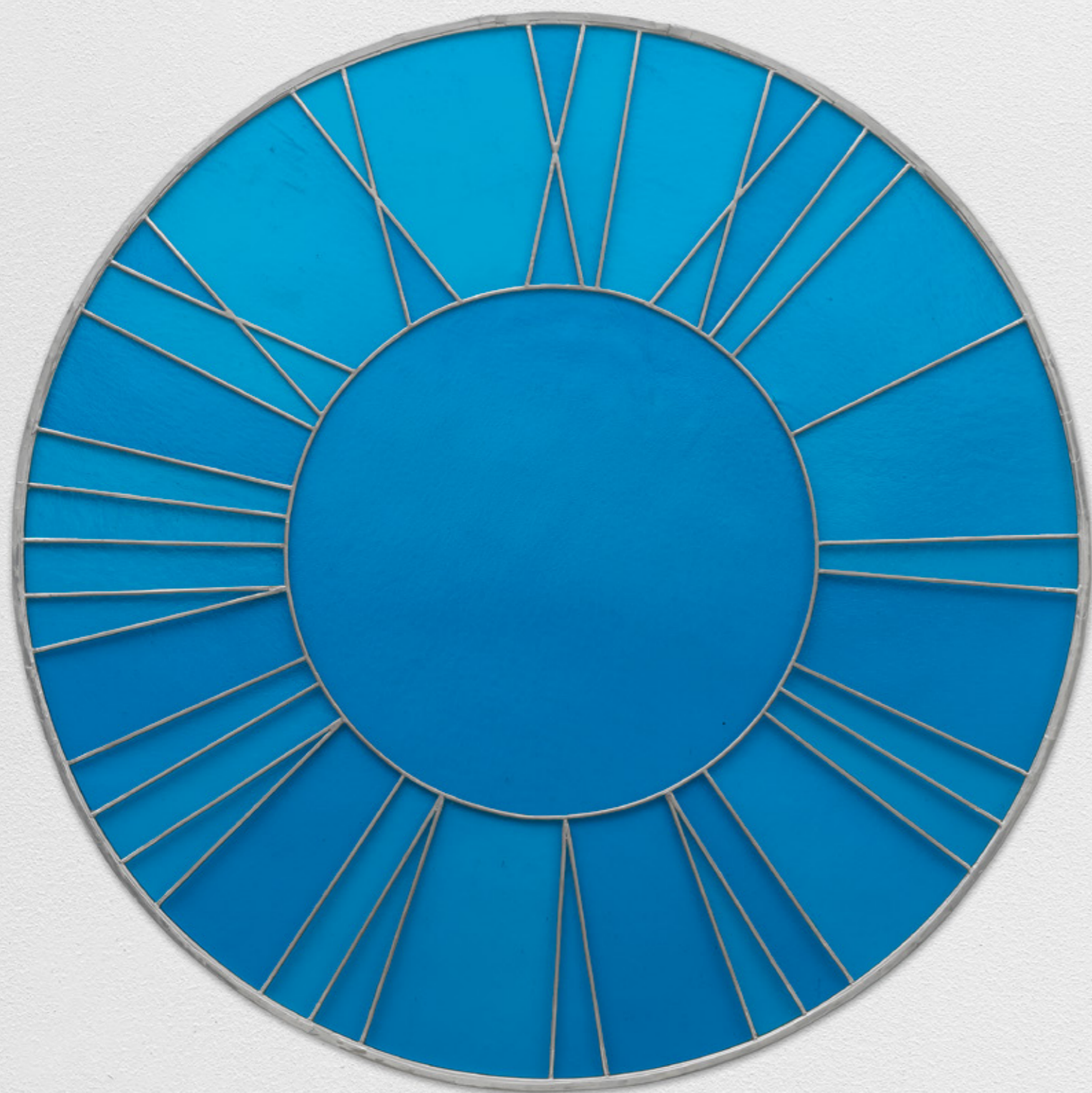
Nick Byrne: Some of your statements regarding how viewers should look at/interact with your work are very refreshing: “Something for everyone”, “You shouldn't have

It's a paradox: on the one hand, we experience time and space as reliable and predictable entities, but on the other, they present us with a deceptive form of reality. The inner workings of time and space are labyrinthine and murky. An art experience should be almost narcotic in its enveloping nature – not necessarily to induce absence or trance, but to truly stir you. The first thing is to be still, to look, and to allow what I see to come to me. The body knows things much sooner than the brain. Art is primarily about the development of consciousness, not the development of a work of art. The work of art is merely a catalyst. When people tell me they don't understand a work of art, I say: it doesn't matter if you don't understand it – just look at it. Engaging with it is part of its power. Don't torture yourself by trying to intellectually dissect it. We don't expect to understand music in that way, either. For me, art is alchemy; like baking a cake, you put two or three ingredients together, and something new emerges.

There is no total freedom in art or artistic expression. All artists work within a tight circle of rules and historical knowledge. I don't know of any artist whose works set themselves completely apart from others. Every so-called new work depends on, or refers to, what has come before. Most of what calls itself contemporary art is built, knowingly or not, out of a desire to be 'liked'. It's created in imitation of what already exists and is admired. In other words, there is nothing truly new about it. To be contemporary is to rise through the layers of the past, like fire through a mountain. Only a heat so deeply and intelligently borne can carry a new idea into the air.



cry me a river (installation detail), Kunstmuseum Luzern, Lucerne, 2024



NB: The biographical elements of your life – your connection to Puglia, your mother and father, Matera – have been widely written about. However, you also talk about a certain separation between you as a person and you as an artist, keeping the viewer at bay and distancing yourself from your life and your work. Could you talk a bit more about the tricky areas between revealing too much of yourself as an artist versus the need to communicate personal involvement in your creative process? How do you create distance, and what are the limits of exposure?

UG: When I started my artistic life at the end of the '80s, I wanted to decentralise the notion of the self. One critic commented that my exhibitions looked like a lousy group show. What they didn't see was my intention to decentralise myself, offering as many perspectives as possible. I approached myself as a character from a research-based perspective. By viewing the role of the artist analytically, I could engage intellectually with the character's psychology, history, and actions without becoming emotionally intertwined with it. By balancing immersion with mindful detachment, I inhabited a character fully on the art stage, while still maintaining a clear separation between my many selves. Several groups of works evolved simultaneously, each taking a different approach to understanding multiple realities. This synchronicity gave me a large foundation from which the work developed.

For example, in 1995, I made a replica of myself, fully clothed and sitting on the floor. There was nothing else to see in the exhibition – just my own passive replica. The image of the artist sitting passively underscored the public's expectations on different levels, while simultaneously, it was my persona performing myself.

NB: You don't restrict yourself to one medium, and sometimes media are combined. Is this about exploring the different media in themselves, or is it about finding the best way to communicate a message? You've mentioned the need for effective communication in art, so does the message sometimes dictate the medium?

UG: The medium is a prosthesis, a tool, a co-existence. It paves the way for diversification and thwarts the construction of uniformity. The work is embedded in the observation of nature and its relation to the human condition. It connects us to our sources in the natural world – its beauty, terrors, mysteries, and connotations. The different mediums, such as paintings and sculptures, are not only an investigation of mutable physical forms but also sites of rich cultural disclosure in art. Additionally, they celebrate life – its seasons, rhythms, and the plants and stones with which we share the planet. Like a diarist, I record the living universe: this season, this day, this hour, this sound in the grass, this crashing wave, this sunset, this silence.

NB: I find it interesting that your work has this "stop-you-in-your-tracks" quality—the scale, the colors, the location, the materials—yet it also feels intimate with small details, like your fingerprints on the birds. There's an austerity and seriousness to your work, which commands respect, yet it also invites the physical presence of children. Could you talk more about the serious aspects of your work and the paradoxical need for

enjoyment? I think you mentioned that art was soul food, or food for the soul.

UG: There is a naivety in my work—one that still believes in magic and wonder. I like the word 'infantile.' I aim for my art to be as plain and straightforward as possible. I work with simple, archaic motifs. C.G. Jung describes in his Red Book that symbols like the sun, moon, circles, crosses, and squares exist in every culture. There is a collective consciousness that can't be explained rationally but is understood across generations. I tap into this symbolic power. The landscapes, masks, trees, sun, and moon in my work are like a human alphabet, familiar to everyone. Talking about magic is, of course, an interpretation. I believe every work has a magic that unfolds beyond words.

I created three groups of animals: Birds, Horses, and Fish. Each group consists of 59 animals, each representing a natural phenomenon. Collectively, they were named primitive, primal, and primordial. I sculpted every figure in clay, and you can see my fingerprints on the raw bronze surface. Though the sculptures look small and naïve, they represent something much larger—the wonder and pain of nature. My work seeks to show the intersection between the human and natural worlds, and the limits of human consciousness in grasping such a meeting. I hope my work allows us to peer beneath the constructions of culture and reason that burden us with an alienated consciousness, and instead celebrate the primitive and mystical visions of nature.

NB: You often mention the need for calm. Art slows you down, gives you time to think. Can you talk more about what art does for you, what it could do for others, and what your art will continue to do?

UG: Slowness is a way of life. In slowness, I determine how things develop.

In general, I like art that organizes a space for perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time, language, and image, all within an immobile place. There's no identity, history, or meaning—only what I construct for myself. I see art as essentially static, creating its own artificial gravity, where the work creates its own void or abyss.

The world my works map out is ontologically reduced, allowing them to shape their own universe, reaching out to fit it all together like portable metaphors.

I believe in public art and advocate for free entry to all museums. Christo's silver wrapping of the Arc de Triomphe in Paris in 2021 is a great example of how art can affect people. The atmosphere was wonderful, attracting those who don't normally visit museums, but they still enjoyed the experience. You could feel that people crave such experiences. It wasn't a flashy spectacle, but calm and engaging. This proves that people hunger for such moments. It's like when an orchestra performs in a park, attracting crowds who usually can't afford concert halls. I find it questionable that European cultural institutions are financed through taxes, yet only a small percentage of people can afford to enter them.

NB: I enjoyed hearing about your early landscape works, some large enough to walk into. *Waldeinsamkeit*. From spectator to participant. How important was *Die Romantik* for you as an artist? Do you feel you've moved from being a spectator in life to being more of a participant, or is being an outsider essential for an artist?

UG: My work doesn't begin in magic but in grief. During the AIDS crisis, I was a student at the Academy of Fine Arts. My boyfriend, Manfred Welser, died of the disease within three months in 1988. I realized life could end abruptly, and as a gay man, I feared the worst. After a period of shock, I turned away from grief and found comfort, regeneration, and inspiration in nature. Nature became a spiritual guide. It's a space where the sacred and profane, the mystical and the everyday, vibrate against each other. So, I wandered in nature and in the city. I became a flaneur, and that's how my first ink landscapes came about. I graduated with them in 1989. A year later, I began the sun paintings. These two groups of works, starting almost at the same time, have shaped my practice to this day. The large ink landscapes look nostalgically to the past, while the sun paintings, with their blurred, concentric airbrush colors, look hopefully toward the future. The landscapes were inspired by Goethe's drawings during his trip to Italy, while the sun paintings were influenced by artists like Kandinsky and Fangor, who shaped modernism.

NB: The importance of the written word. Poetry, slogans, simple words, complex meanings. What made you want to integrate words into your work? Are images sometimes not as strong as words, even if a picture paints a thousand? I found your diaries and poems powerful on both visual and literal levels.

UG: Art is a war on words. Words can elevate a mediocre artwork or diminish a great one. Language is tricky—we explain concepts using other concepts. It's a losing game. There's a distinction between affirming a powerless, delusional structure of language and my belief in the spiritual and magical power of an artwork. I don't need to understand art through linguistic conventions; I only need to feel it.

There is an inherent slowness in poetry and art—the slowness of words and images unfolding. I associate slowness with the possibility of simply being. Unlike speed, which demands attention, slowness doesn't pull

me out of time. We often mistake slowness as a negative, wishing things could go faster. But slowness isn't just the absence of speed—it's a loss of temporal relativity. When things move slowly, the scale of measurement and value dissolves.

Poetry and art slow down temporality, allowing nothing to ever be truly over or done with—everything can recur or be revived. Past, present, and future loop together like dream symbols and voices. Like dreams, symbols condense, free-associate, and resonate communally. A poem or artwork is a multivocal, choral setting without linear logic.

My work is made of unadorned language and accessible imagery. It has a pedagogical, almost homiletic quality. It's spartan, simple, rhythmic—sometimes bordering on singsong. I aim to avoid making the work appear clever.

The work is observational and direct, requiring no labyrinth or footnotes. It's like looking at a tree each morning and noticing what you missed before. The work is meditative. My most common subject, nature, may cast me into a genre considered passé, but my nature is the nature of movement through the world. It's observational and in the moment.

NB: You speak about the transformative power of art—do you find this leading you toward more political engagement?

UG: I don't react to current political events in my work. While I can acknowledge sorrow and mourning, I see myself as an artist of light. I want to guide the audience toward light—toward the sun, which shines equally on

all of us. Color is the light of the world. My often-childlike work welcomes the audience in. I don't want to build walls between myself and the viewer, I want to open windows and doors.

My first public sculpture was the rainbow poem *Cry Me a River*, created in 1996 during the height of the AIDS crisis. I wanted to make myself visible as a gay man. The rainbow is a bridge between everyone and everything—a metaphor for our evolving attitudes toward the environment and a reminder of our responsibility to local communities. Nature is not apart from us; it is intrinsic to our being. Our societies are natural constructs, and we must transcend racial, ethnic, and religious divides to find a shared concern for the earth, which sustains all life, human and nonhuman alike.



sechstermaizweitausendundvierundzwanzig, 2024

