

Reto Steiner Formwild

100 kilograms of concrete in the display window: bulky and yet delicately carved and polished, this drain pipe, stripped of its function, oscillates between sculpture and relief, revealing the vibrant terrazzo structure of the concrete. Noble and purely functional elements engage in a fascinating exchange. The inconspicuous pipe, which has the important function of directing water underground, of limiting the wild and giving it form, now serves as an object carrier for art on the surface. The work „Bildröhre I“ created in 2022, is both a stumbling block and a focal point of the „Formwild“ exhibition at the König Büro gallery, introducing the viewer to Reto Steiner’s universe of relief works.

The relief serves him as a means and an experiment to show stone in a different light. As a closed pictorial space and brought to the wall, a symbolic treatment with simultaneous three-dimensionality becomes possible. The diversity of the relief works is great, both in terms of treatment, materiality, and form.

„Relief (Asporanin)“*, a stone relief made from Rosso Bilbao limestone, captivates with the extraordinary light veining in the red stone. This natural pattern competes with the shape carved from the stone, which vaguely resembles a rocket or a root. The artist plays with this divided attention and our associations, inner images, and handed-down narratives that, however, do not seem to be grasped. Steiner’s motifs arise from ideas, feelings, experiences, and the act of doing. He carves fleeting thoughts into stone, playfully dealing with the proverbial „carved-in-stone facts.“ The resulting forms are disconcerting—the deliberate lack of clear classification adds to the tension. The pictorial motifs are centrally positioned and not cut off, which, similar to a coat

of arms, enhances the symbolic nature.

Despite the weight of the material—the relief weighs 60 kilograms—„Relief (Asporanin)“ exudes a dynamism that stems from the inherent process of stone carving. By treating the stones as working material that can be used, set aside, revisited, and reworked, the artist frees himself from reverence for the ancient and expensive stone, stripping it of its „natural sanctity“ and weight. He consciously chooses used and more affordable stones, such as the so-called „formwild“ unprocessed stone blocks or rubble stones from garden construction. He directly engraves his ideas onto them with a milling machine as sketches. This rapid mechanical process is complemented by hand grinding. The interplay of material and surface treatment is beautifully demonstrated in the work „Relief (Iridium)“ The light Portogallo marble shows darker inclusions that resemble veins, perfectly complementing the form of the supposed „hand.“ The surface has only been ground and not polished, making the stone appear like pale skin, slightly matte and powdery.

In contrast to many contemporary stone works, which are commissioned externally, Steiner, as a trained stonemason, does everything himself. The direct engagement with the material and its resistance is elemental to his work. If a relief doesn’t succeed, he discards it. It is an unstrained and uncompromising approach to working with stone, granting new freedoms and bringing a lightness and authenticity that counter the rigidity and inertia of stone.

That stones are by no means rigid is demonstrated by the „Crusts“ formations of melted stones made from reused kitchen countertops. Melting stones feels archaic and is an artistically little-explored field. It is a science of its own, based on experimenting, failing, optimizing, and professionalizing the process. When melting at very high

*The titles of the stone reliefs, such as Asporanin, Iridium, and Cortenid, are taken from the fictional material collection of the Star Trek saga, offering the artist a way to categorize his works without any recognizable connection to their content.

firing temperatures, the forms of the cut stones are dissolved and transferred into a new state of matter. This process is not completely controllable, overthrowing the traditionally classic approach of a sculptor. Here, the artist's expertise is required: to let go and yet be able to control. The paradox of the word „formwild“ is thus visibly brought to life.

Predecessors of the „**Crusts**“ are the „**Casseroles**“—melted stones shaped into form. Ceramic frames prevent the liquefied stones from spilling over when fired together in the kiln, binding ceramic and stone. A delicate process that involves high losses, as the two materials behave differently under heat.

The „**Flosse**“, porcelain reliefs, are being shown for the first time in the „Formwild“ exhibition. They arise from plaster molds of children's balloons, which are cast in porcelain, assembled into multipart sculptures, fired, and finally glazed. With their nipples and torn openings, the reliefs appear corporeal, the hand-mixed greenish-yellow glaze of iron oxide contrasting with the perfectly smooth surface of the stretched balloon, individual and defiant.

The woodworks were created during this year's studio residency in Shanghai. To avoid the challenge of transporting stone sculptures back to Switzerland, Steiner used the light material wood for the first time. This allowed him to engage with the long tradition of Chinese wood carving. His wood reliefs are made from kitchen „cutting boards.“ These proved surprisingly suitable for carving and grinding and can be used like a sketchbook: active error-making is allowed, making the selection of works all the more important. The boards further connect to food and cooking, which for Steiner is the most important approach to the Chinese culture that is unfamiliar to him. Chips packaging, cookies, or chicken feet served as inspirations for his motifs. vertraute chinesische

Kultur. Chipsverpackungen, Kekse oder Hühnerfüsse dienten ihm als Anregungen für seine Motive.

In Finnland und ebenfalls 2024 entstanden sind die farbenfrohen «**Fragmente**» aus finnischem Granit. Sie verweisen auf etwas Grösseres, zeugen von der Faszination des Künstlers für Teilobjekte, und spielen mit dem menschlichen Wunsch nach Ergänzung, nach Wissen, ohne diesen zu erfüllen.

In this show, Reto Steiner virtuously demonstrates that stone sculpture can contribute significantly to the current artistic dialogue. He uses the systems of art to rethink stone sculpture. By both melting and carving, he succeeds in reflecting on the processes of stoneworking in two ways: When melting, he lets forms emerge that look as if they were carved in stone—his carved reliefs, in turn, approach flowing forms. The contradiction between shaping and wildness is relativized by the fact that, as a tamer, he keeps the stones in check while allowing them the necessary flexibility.

Carole Kambli, August 2024