

MASCHI FONTANA: RISING LOTUS

Melissa keys

Maschi Fontana's *Rising Lotus* has an air of mystery and open-endedness. The project's expansiveness – in both form and content – is consistent with collaborative artists Tom Müller and Jean-Thomas Vannotti's conviction that the enterprise of art is an unbounded process of experimentation and speculation.

Rising Lotus consists of a series of collaborative performances, installations and events within and outside the gallery. Combined these works encompass an elaborate range of mythologies, histories and traditions. They feature arcane symbolic languages, music, sound and light, along with evocative objects and materials. Throughout the project the artists explore and adopt a shifting range of positions and attitudes spanning humour, irony and seriousness. Intrigues, including allusions to shamanism, secret societies and the occult, riddle every aspect of the exhibition concept.

Longstanding friends, Müller and Vannotti, are unified by their faith in the restorative power of art. Their recent collaboration was born out of a life-affirming experience the pair shared. In 2009 Müller and Vannotti freed a bloodied and traumatised deer trapped in a fence near their homes in Switzerland. They worked together to disentangle the terrorized animal as it battered itself against the wire, desperately struggling to escape. This event galvanised their friendship and is cited by the artists as the genesis of their Maschi Fontana collaboration, *Rising Lotus* being the first exhibition in an anticipated ongoing series of projects.

At the Fremantle Arts Centre courtyard a key element of the *Rising Lotus* project is a large-scale outdoor sculpture standing sentinel in the courtyard. Variousy resembling a survey marker at the summit of a mountain, a satellite or perhaps a watchtower, this structure became a type of 'temple-site' for artistic revelry on the opening night of the exhibition. Animated by a spectacle of smoke and light effects and the pulsating soundscape of the ambient ensemble Masonik, the totemic form served as a conducting device for the energies of the collaborators and the artistic faithful.

The sculpture also functions as a fixed point for the triangulation of this geographically and thematically dispersed project, (which was created between two hemispheres and numerous locations around Switzerland and Australia), and is literally a point of intersection between places, peoples, forms and ideas.

Inside the gallery the artists unify a number of discrete elements and forms through a diffuse mass of smoky blue light. A central piece titled *Hidden Forces* consists of a charred and blackened upturned tree stump on a black ground. The stump is partially lit with an array of diffuse spots and pinpoint LEDs. Both illuminated and obscured by these light sources, the twisted mysterious matter of stump and root system has a paradoxically organic/inorganic character. Half seen in the dark mist its grotesque

riotous shape seems alive while also resembling the twisted inanimate wreckage of something man made.

Positioned near the centre of the gallery the size and apparent weight of the form suggests prodigious forces and energies at play. Only an event of magnitude could displace this mass leaving it mute testament to violence and upheaval.

Across the room a video titled *The Pilgrimage* captures a lone man as he traverses a barren but starkly beautiful salt pan. Apparently in a trance-like state, he drags a long, elegant kayak-like form extending from his head to the ground. Behind him it etches a trail into the smooth uninterrupted surface of the dry lake. As we watch him make his way across the blistering landscape we invariably wonder what it is he is seeking, what drives him and how his archetypal journey will end. Displayed in the gallery, the same kayak-form is now suspended as if hovering weightlessly. A glow seeps from its interior, evoking the notion of retained energy, the object 'charged' by its passage across the landscape. Or did this light provide the impetus for the journey in the first place? Reminiscent of Rebecca Horn's performative body extensions and sculptural pieces from the 1970's, *The Pilgrimage* performance and installation is similarly modernist (or modern) and mythic, folding form, body and landscape together into a single uncanny yet strangely transformative gesture.

Arranged on the gallery floor nearby is a piece titled *Trinity Protectors* comprising three helmets that are clustered around flickering candles. It is as if we encounter this scene mid-ritual: yet no participants are present. Looking for leads, the black helmets offer few clues as to their origin or purpose – their empty interiors a vacuum for speculation. Their apparent simple utility however – they are probably motorcycle helmets – does not restrict ones imagination, and they quickly become exotic relics of some sort of ceremonial rite.

Equally perplexing, the print *Secret Society 1* pictures an eerie black and white landscape overlaid with graphic triangular geometries. The plotted graphic reads like a set of trajectories or bearings suggesting directions, motions and actions, perhaps codifying the locations of sites unknown and unseen. Its companion piece *Secret Society 2* similarly presents a densely covered forest floor thick with shrubs and gnarled tree stumps, and white circles pierce the image creating tiny portal-like holes in the membrane of the 'known world'. The white holes are stark against the dark landscape as if containers of a brilliant energy – stirring the same kind of wonder as stars.

Named after a mountain in the Pennine Alps whose four principal ridges encompass almost exactly the four cardinal directions, the work *La Dent Blanche* continues Maschi Fontana's interwoven thematics of geography, mythology and symbolism. Embodied by an elegant black wall piece, this form is a pictograph-like distillation of the artists' thinking about the significance of place. It echoes the geometries encoded in the secret emblems guarded by clandestine societies that are often the source of pervasive conspiracy theories.



Châlet, Evolène
Switzerland, 2011
Photo the artists

The Swiss Alps and the Australian bush provide Maschi Fontana with an epic stage. Playful and investigative their cast includes history, mythology, geography and art. Each scene is propelled by a combination of intricate thematics and a dramatic orchestration of materials, media and format. Mystery, uncertainty and wonder energise their project. *Rising Lotus* fulfills the artists' intent as an expansive aesthetic and conceptual landscape of possibility - always concerned with the actions of shifting, morphing and transforming.

