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A touching experience

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STORY BY TAMMARIN DEJSUPA

When a friend first introduced Valerie Goutard to clay, she had no idea it would turn out to be a revelatory experience that would change the course of her life. Her dreams until then had revolved around publishing a book, but after one touch she came to realise the creative power she could wield with her hands.

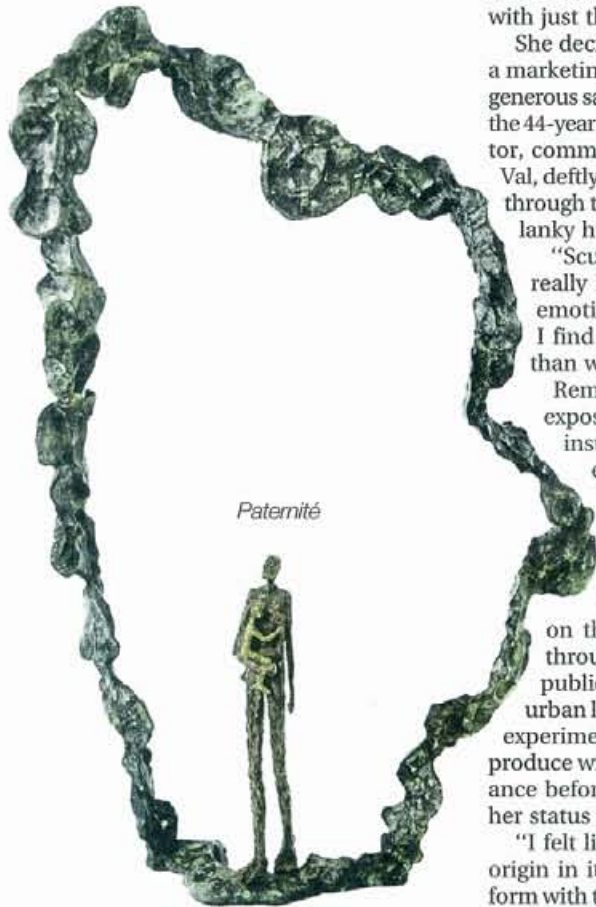
"My encounter with clay gave way to a fantastic realisation that one can do so much with just their two hands," said Goutard.

She decided to leave her previous job as a marketing manager, and the security of a generous salary, to pursue her passion. Today the 44-year-old Thailand-based French sculptor, commonly known in the art circles as Val, deftly captures the vitality of humanity through twisted bronze coils and intricate, lanky human forms.

"Sculpting is like life's gift to me. It really helped me to express my inner emotions for a larger reception, which I find are easier to express [this way] than with words on a page," she said.

Remarkably candid and unafraid to expose her vulnerabilities, through her installations Goutard draws on the emptiness and fullness of the dimensional universe and the harmonious Zen balance of lightness and visual illusion. She produces, via her confidence in her hands and mind, an exposé on the positive vitality of humanity through a blend of the private and public consciousness and fragility of urban life. Goutard spent only two years experimenting with what her hands could produce without any formal classes or guidance before creating artworks, confirming her status as a gifted individual.

"I felt like I was unravelling the Earth's origin in its three-dimensional shape and form with the universe enclosed around it," the artist said. "It's like putting the universe into the actual sculpture in its fullness and emptiness. For me, our surrounding environment is really fundamental to my art pieces. You could say my pieces are engaged in a



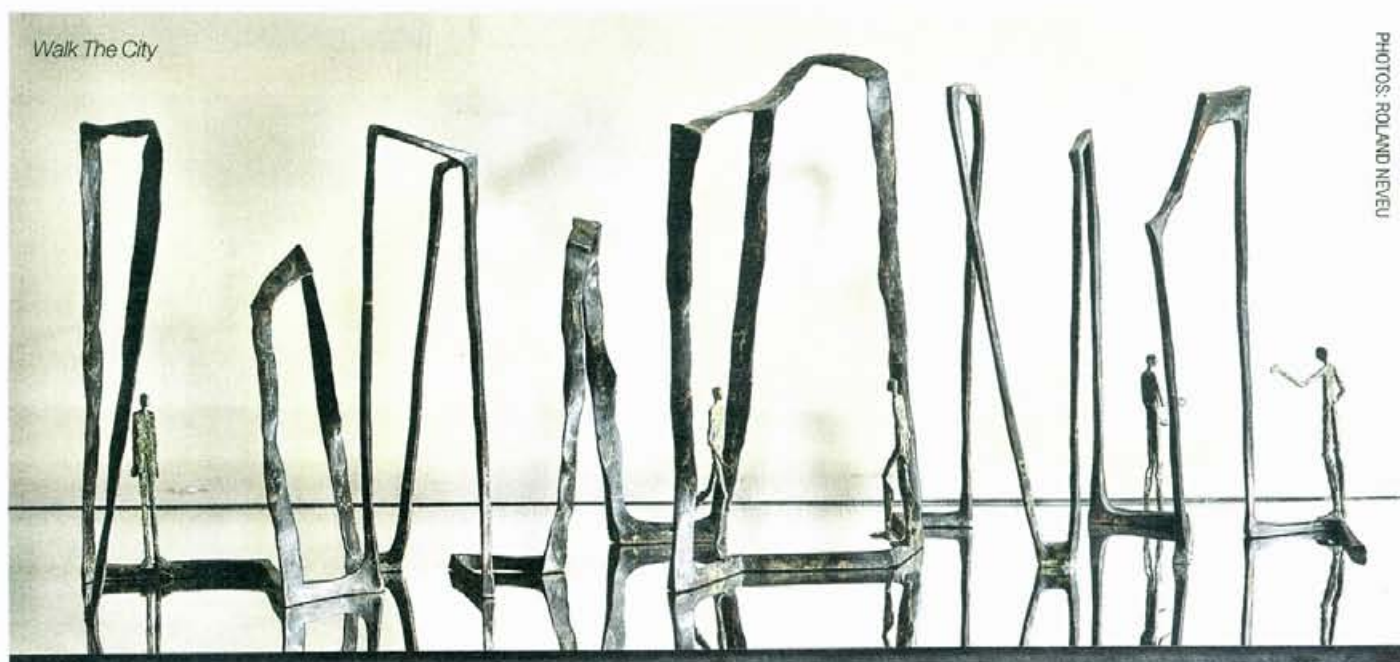
Paternité



Mignonne, Allons Voir



Tango



Walk The City

PHOTOS: ROLAND NEVEU

conversation with their surroundings — breathing and living its air."

With exhibitions from Asia to Europe, it is no surprise Goutard has been attracting attention in the nine years since embarking on her artistic career. The artist relocated to Thailand in 2004, and she has since accrued exhibition deals with major corporations.

Her reality has been one of striking contrasts, and from early on in Thailand this helped shape an outsider's view in a foreign land. She considers that her sense of dislocation and indifference can be attributed more to her work than her location, and seems to stem from her younger years.

"When I was a child, I didn't like the same things that other girls my age would like. There were times when I felt lonely, which I'm not feeling any more at my age," she added with a laugh. "It wasn't a matter of not having any friends, but rather, from feeling different. That's mainly one of the reasons why I felt the need to put myself in a foreign country to feel different, and thus, appropriate."

Shuttling between different countries and gaining exposure to a range of cultures has contributed to the person she is today, although ultimately she loves the idea of being a foreigner and this is reflected in her artwork.

"I think this contributes to my sense of creative freedom and personal happiness. What I really love doing is speaking French with [my husband] Frederick in a country other than France. Whereas when we are in France, we'd speak Thai in the streets. Of course, the people around would not understand," she chuckled as she looked across to her husband. She said this was like being in a private world where they are free to say what they want without restraint or prying ears.

When asked why she chose Bangkok to exhibit her pieces, Goutard said she fell in love with the energetic vibe of the capital city.



PHOTO: PATIPAT JANTRONG



Inle Balance III

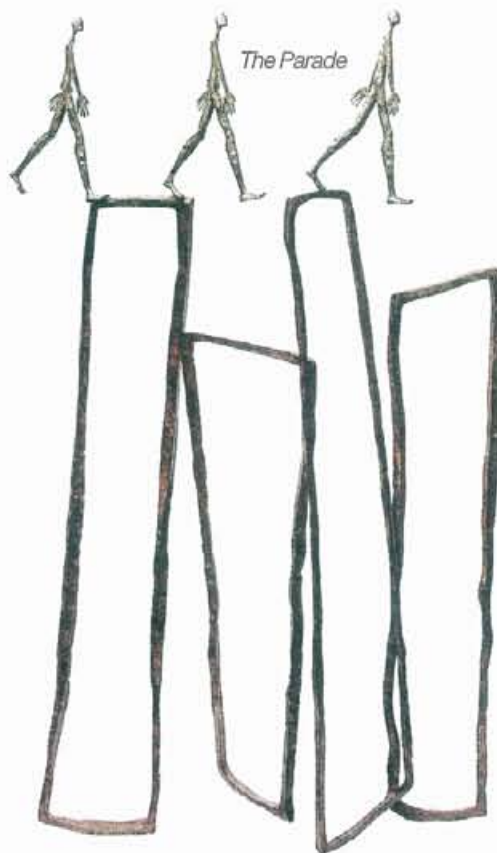
"You know how they say each city's got its own word and flavour? [In Bangkok], you can feel its dynamic pulse, which is exactly like this piece here," said Goutard, who rifled through photographs to single out a sculpture called *The Parade*. "The depiction of three human beings walking atop the high-rising vertical pieces resembles an individual's instinctual impulse to wake up and go on with life, despite the monotonous, emptiness of it all," she explained. Working exclusively in her Bangkok studio, sculpting is her comfort zone. "It's like my personal music — a reflection of my inner emotions."

This, like so many of Goutard's works, began with real-life inspiration, in this case, the architecture of Angkor Wat with its rickety stairs and winding corridors. She said it was about the spiritual idea of being surrounded by stones that had seen a lot of life passing through time. However, not all of Goutard's works are based on spiritual concepts, there is also an element of romance. "For most of my artwork, I try to depict the sheer happiness that stems from such pure emotions as love. For example, with a dancing couple in *Tango II* (2011), it mainly depicts the happiness and confidence between them. They almost seem to be floating with the joyous emotions of love."

"I like adding the feeling of lightness and the balance that it brings to the piece. I'm speaking to the kind of lightness that you feel when drinking a nice glass of wine by the candles with your loved ones."

Her style has evolved along with the ever-changing society, embedding themes from the core of contemporary life and fleeting expressions of love, inner spirituality, loneliness, instability and fragility. For her part, Goutard welcomes multiple interpretations of her work.

"Every individual has his or her own view towards an artwork," she said. "For example, with my sculpture of a man walking on a high pedestal, *The Parade II* (2010), I see him as a man of confidence in his whereabouts and what's he going to do next. But for some viewers, they feel fear and fragility in thinking that the man will fall over."



"I was surprised with this interpretation. I guess it's how one puts forth their inner subjective emotions into a piece. Personally, I feel that your way of looking at a piece reflects your inner emotions at that point in time."

With rawness and an investigation of humanity imbued in much of her work, Goutard called her signature hybrid beings — a combination of stretched human forms reminiscent of Tim Burton's macabre skinny characters — the depiction of "human conditions and gestures". And they have won her a burgeoning international reputation.

She was part of the 2010 Shanghai Art Fair and the Jing'An International Sculpture Project with her "Urban Life" presentation, propelling her status as a renowned sculptor in Asia and Europe.

With an exhibition about to open in Bangkok, Goutard is almost ready to turn her mind to what comes next.

"I will definitely try to surpass my current pieces in technique and execution. You just wait and see," she said.

"Les Illuminations: A Joint Exhibition By Photographer Manolo Chretien And Sculptor Valerie Goutard" will be on display at Chanintr Living Thong Lor, Noble Solo, Sukhumvit 55 from Wednesday until Aug 31.