FIGURES OF EXPRESSION

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In her 30s, French sculptor Val left the corporate world for a life in art. The 47-year-old has since embraced the fluidity of the creative process. Her bronze sculptures engage the mind with architectural forms and imaginative human figures. We catch up with the artist at Redsea Gallery, where her exhibition, 'Presence', took place recently

When French sculptor Val speaks about her first experience with modelling and sculpting, she describes the moment as a forgotten memory that came back to her. "Lines and shapes came naturally to me. It felt really strong. And it became obvious to me to change from living a corporate life to being a sculptor," she says.

She shares, "What I did was work like crazy. I felt really old compared to artists who would study and begin to create in their 20s. I wanted the technical aspects to dominate and give me the opportunities to do what I wanted to do."

Apart from studying for two years with French artist Yanne Kintgen, Val is mostly self-taught. It is a process that she believes in. "To create something, you have to dare, that there is something very valuable in yourself to project in your work. When you begin and are self-taught, you have to dare to share with others. Your technique must be enough to be a good representation of what you want to express," she says.

The dedication paid off for the artist who now stays in the suburbs of Bangkok. It was merely 12 years ago when the 47-year-old plunged into the world of art. But in that time, her works have grown to include large-scale pieces and public installations.

With her team of five, and the foundry she works with, Val dedicates much of her time to her sculptures, never truly switching off. It is a preoccupation. "With my studio, there's a duality between the house and studio. A space that breathes as one, instead of separately. It's like when I read, I feel like working. There's unity in the spaces," she says. She designed her voluminous studio — it comes with a 10-metre-high ceiling — so that she could work on large installations.

In her works, where the architecture of the sculpture stands monumentally over each figure, Val seeks to explore the human experience in the environment. This disparity in scale and proportion, whether in the large Inéquilibre piece or smaller ones like Au long cours, invite introspection. Some offer a surprise

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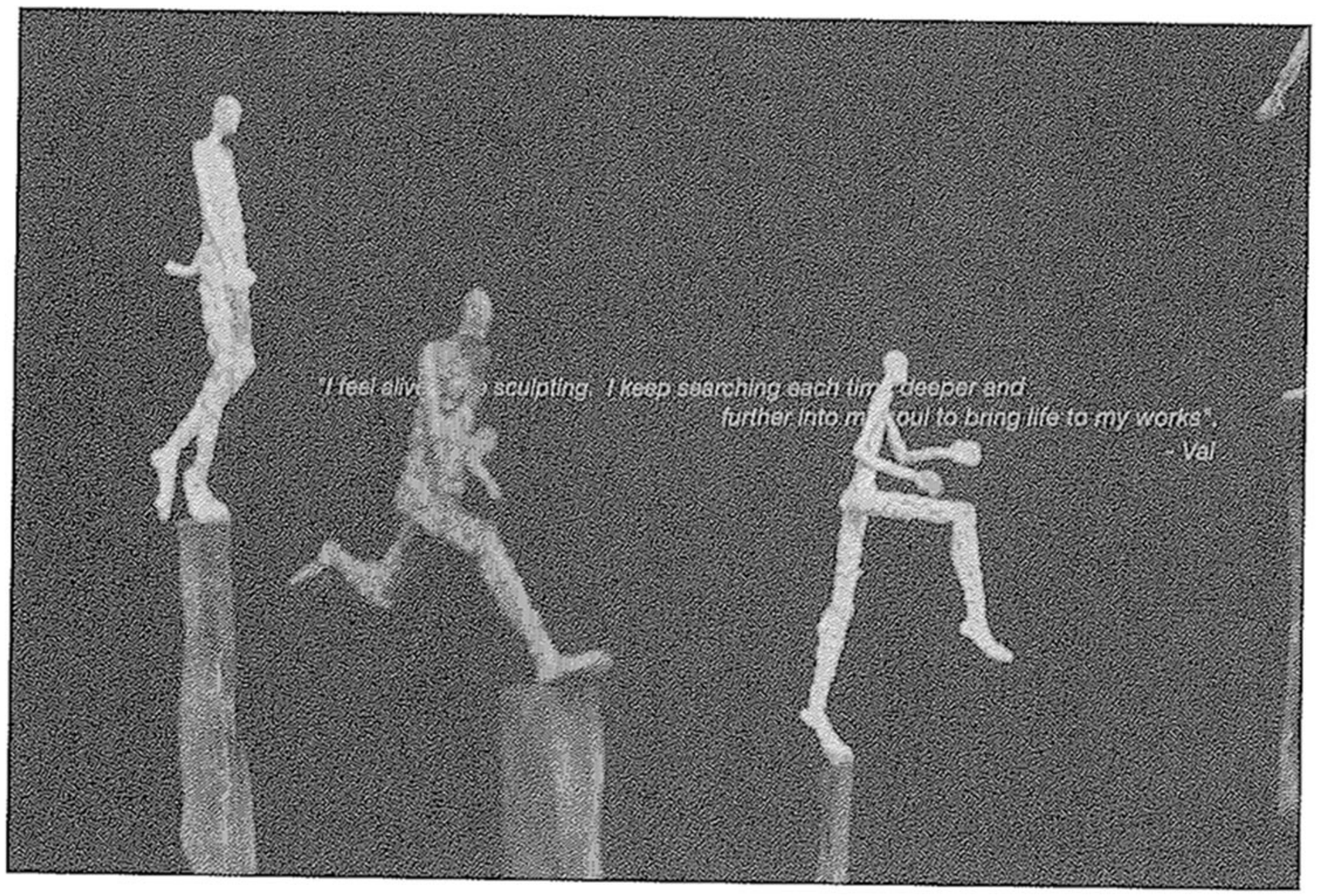
element or two. With Gatsby, a lone figure appears to walk in contemplation down uneven steps. The elevated steps are held up by two tall figures, creating a work that is open to interpretation. In pieces with more than one figure, they appear to be in interaction with one another, appearing to make sense of their environment. Slender and graceful like dancers, the bronze figures are expressive, as if speaking to the onlooker a secret language that only he understands.

How long did it take for you to work on the pieces for Presence?

It's two years of work for me. For the gallery, it's very long preparation work. We spoke a lot about the atmosphere of the exhibition, the sizes of the work we wanted to present and lighting. Chris Churcher (owner of Redsea Gallery) came to the studio very frequently. I'm really open to people I trust commenting about my work. Sometimes, it's to change the direction, to give it new eyes and fresh air. And I think they did wonderful work. The atmosphere has a kind of intimacy.

Tell us about what you wish to express in your work.

Since the beginning, I've been obsessed with the smallness of man in the universe. Nevertheless, tiny as we are, we can live in balance in this world. I realise that it's also in the way we live out our personal destinies. We can have very nice moments full of happiness and accomplishments, but life doesn't go in a straight line. When we are lost, this life surrounding us and the expectations around us bring us hope and energy to overcome what's difficult. My work is to balance man with the natural or urban environment, just to live in balance with the outside. And it's also about searching to be in the right place and the right time, going further and further to do what you have to do in life. It speaks a lot about hopes and expectations.



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How would you describe your hopes and expectations as an artist?

Sometimes, it seems odd, like an endless road of hope. It's not like you aim to do the perfect sculpture. It's really different. It's like a string that you pull and you go deeper and further, and you go your way. For me, it is a matter of integrity and to do what I believe in and what I love to do, as well as to listen to my instincts and intuition. When I start the work, I don't have a precise idea of where I'm heading. It's kind of listening to what my intuition tells me at the time, as well as my materials and what my hands do.

What do you find challenging about bronze?

I have to be very precise. And I have to anticipate the difficulties I will have in the process considering my creation. When I do large-scale sculptures, I feel that my sculptures have life in them. I feel that my figures have illusions and emotions. They are expressing something. There's a kind of fragility, like the human condition. My challenge is to use the material, a traditional one in today's world, by mixing contemporary with tradition, and the weight and toughness of bronze with the tenderness and fragility of humans. This is the challenge and adventure.