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VAL

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Abstraction In Thailand

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Reviews



The Theater Of Isolation

By Ian Findlay



The sculpture of Valérie Goutard is a singular blend of private sensibility and public consciousness. Through her art she addresses such themes as loneliness, alienation, and the environment, all of which are at the center of contemporary art discourse. She is also addressing something of the fragility and instability of contemporary life.

Left: Val, Walk the City, 2011, bronze. All images: Courtesy of the Artist; copyright © Roraand Neveu.

The contemporary urban world is crammed with gleaming skyscrapers and streets alive with the incessant murmur of humanity on the move. Yet, behind this confident façade there is another reality, an intensely human one where anxiety prevails and where lives are lived out in “quiet desperation.” Modern sculptors have always understood the sadness of urban living as well as its pleasures. By participating in urban life fully sculptors have been able to make works in a wide range of forms—from formal figuration to pure abstraction—that express the myriad faces of the humanity, embracing everything from sadness to joyfulness, from tragedy to love, to the achingly sentimental to the boldly romantic and so making their art accessible even to those for whom sculpture is at best a passing intrusion.

Each generation provides a fresh urban narrative with which sculptors engage and for whom the articulation of the complexity of the human condition drives their art making. This is certainly true for the Thailand-based French sculptor Valérie Goutard, known in the sculpture world simply as Val. Her art represents a singular blend of private sensibility and public consciousness, embracing as it does varied expressions of love, human frailty, loneliness, alienation, the instability and fragility of urban life, space, the power of architecture in people’s lives, and the effort of creating a habitable urban environment. All of these themes form the core of her contemporary art discourse. Such things are clear in the 30 sculptures that comprise Val’s exhibition, *Moments*, at Singapore’s Red Sea Gallery.¹

The boldest and most precarious of urban sculptures are truly about moments,



Val, *Hide & Seek II*, bronze.

about human gesture, about quiet defiance in the face of unrelenting change and the seemingly crushing finality of contemporary life. Perhaps all singular art is about

defiance, but sculpture, which humanizes us with its three-dimensional reality, is especially powerful and, in the right hands, it is keenly provocative and dangerously defiant. One has only to encounter the strongest works of sculptors such as Jacob Epstein, Henry Moore, Kenneth Armitage, Richard Serra, Anish Kapoor, Ron Robertson-Swann, Nam June-Paik, and Inge King to understand this. While Val’s work certainly addresses sculptural power and how provocative it can be, at the heart of her sculptural statements is an intense sense of humanity that engages viewers immediately.

One finds this intensity in architectonic works such as the bold bronze *Ville Fantastique* (2011) and the gently undulating *The Roof of the World (Le toit du monde)* (2012). In *Ville Fantastique* the tiny inhabitants are imprisoned within the narrow confines of their teetering building: one expects it to collapse at the slightest touch. The structure, however, which reminds one of the architecture of a number of desert communities around the world, is stronger than one imagines, as are the people who inhabit it. There is a Gaudiesque quality about *Ville Fantastique* that is refreshing; indeed Val made this piece so that it may be shown as a vertical structure or dismantled and exhibited as a horizontal piece thereby changing the physical and emotional intensity of the work.

“In this work the primary idea was to have three different structures that could stand separately or be assembled as one vertically,” says Val. “This work came after one called *Home Sweet Home* in which I could open up the sculpture in a way that I felt myself a voyeur, peering into intimate space. This work was on a horizontal level, while *Ville Fantastique* was getting the same idea



Val, *Ville Fantastique*, 2011, bronze, horizontal (see Cover), dimensions variable.



Val, *The Roof of the World (Le toit du monde)*, 2012, wax model, dimensions variable.

vertically. In *Home Sweet Home* the line is simple, while in *Ville Fantastique* the line is much more elaborate. With the roof of *Home Sweet Home* there is the line of a gentle and fluid landscape that I have taken further in *The Roof of the World*, where the roof of the sculpture is undulating.²

The Roof of the World is a large bronze work in progress, in five sections on which she has been working for eight months, and had architecture as its starting point and then the figures followed. Where *Ville Fantastique* suggested only an architectonic presence, *The Roof of the World* also involved the environment. To combine the human presence, the architecture, and the fluid line of the roof that suggests the rising and falling of natural landscape “was a long process because each line should not be boring. There are five sections to *The Roof of the World* and the struggle for me was to create the rhythm and the balance of one section to another and then make sure that internally the lower parts of the work would be open and also in balance. For me the open architecture and undulating ‘roof’ should function as one. The figures within the work are a part of the narrative of humanity within the world or in an imaginary world. Cities are present in our world and people must live in them. *The Roof of the World* should, like *Ville Fantastique* and *Agora* (2011), represent a balance between the man-made and the natural worlds.”

Such works as *Ville Fantastique*, *The Roof of the World*, and *Agora*, which is an architectural piece of a passage with tall rectangular forms, may be seen as metaphors for time and space, of balance and imbalance, of freedom and imprisonment within one’s surroundings. *Sweet Chat* (2011), a sentimental work, possesses a sense of intimacy

that, when placed with such works as *Ville Fantastique* and *The Roof of the World*, serves to emphasize the lack of intimacy and warmth in the crowded urban and digital worlds in which we live now. Here there is an oppressive feeling of loneliness, the isolation of one neighbor from another, a visceral alienation, whether in a crowd or alone within a shaky building. Where Val’s line before was more of a drawing line, it is now, in each of these works, thicker, more voluminous so that it defines space. This quality is new to her work and adds significantly to its strength. By adding

volume to her line, especially in *The Roof of the World* and *Sweet Chat*, she also adds fantasy as well as a less severe reality.

In conversation with her there is the dynamic of a person for whom even the briefest moment in life cannot be wasted, as can be seen in her working on “four to five pieces at the same time.” “For me work is a regular life,” she says. “I want to be able to wake up in the morning and just go. When I wake up, the sculpture is there or I leave it in a corner for some time. It could be weeks or months before I get back to it; while I am working on other things and then suddenly the solution presents itself [and it is quickly completed.]” This ability to make pieces on a broad front is an essential part of her character, perhaps a hangover from her days in advertising.

Another vital aspect to understanding her art making is that Val rarely “prepares by drawing or sketching” her ideas. Although she admits to occasionally making “brief notes or [drawing] a line or two,” what is important is the spontaneity she achieves in her art, especially in the making of her small figures, whose rough-hewn forms remind one of the art of Elisabeth Frink (1930–1993) and Alberto Giacometti (1901–1966). The manner in which she makes her figures speaks to her sense of control over her artistic vision. Her figures, which are predominantly androgynous, are generally from 10 to 15 centimeters tall. Val uses a soft wax for the small figures while a harder wax is used over a metal armature for larger pieces.

Figures populate Val’s sculptures as studied observers of the world around them. The figures appear sad, isolated, and uncannily alienated from their surroundings, which can be seen as slimmed-down architectural



Val, *Corridor*, bronze.



Val, *Urban Gathering*, bronze.

statements as in *Walk the City* (2011), which has five small figures, and *Urban Gathering*, which has seven tiny figures. Such figures can be readily found in the work of such sculptors as Kevin Fung, from Hong Kong, Redy Rahadian, from Indonesia, and Josep Bofill, from Barcelona.

Les Mariés III (2011) has two figures magically suspended in the air and *Les Méandres de la Pensée* has a solitary figure climbing; *Hide and Seek* has two figures avoiding one another, while the two figures in *Together* and *Cabaret* are sitting quietly and dancing, respectively, yet no one is truly communicating. It is part of their humanity, a part of the play in which they are forced to participate. There is something sadly sentimental here, as there is in the action of parents swinging their child in *Newborn Child II* (2011). This sentimentality, however, gives the work a unique strength.

The two seated figures in *Le Rendez-Vous Amoureux* (2010) are much more robust, more vitally in tune with life. This work has something of the quiet dynamic art of the British sculptors Lynn Chadwick (1914–2003) and Kenneth Armitage (1916–2002). Whatever situation Val places her protagonists, when she is working on them “it is the posture on

which I concentrate [not the emotions] because posture is the most important for me, it is a moment captured.”

Val’s works are indeed moments shaped without preamble, molded directly, much as a painter paints directly onto the canvas without a sketch. And what makes the works memorable is that each speaks to

a different aspect of her emotional and psychological life as well as to those moments that she wishes to preserve. As she has noted, when she begins her work, she “has a vague idea, because I don’t draw or sketch out ideas beforehand.” Her spontaneity, however, does not lessen the feelings of the sad isolation and psychological anguish that dominates much of her art.

Val’s first encounter working with clay in the late 1990s while she was still in advertising was the catalyst in her becoming a sculptor. “What was important that day was that I was able to do something with my hands. It was like coming back to something that was essential.” Watching her work I sense that Val’s emotions are always steeped in the essentials of life. There is never a feeling that she has anything to do with the frivolous aspects of living. She says that she feels lucky to be a sculptor and is not influenced by any one sculptor in particular. Her early studies of literature, however, especially poetry, are clearly visible in the elegiac line of such works as *Urban Gathering* and *Walk the City*. “I need to have books with me when I travel because I need to have something to do, so that I don’t feel alone. When you study a text, you discover what the author wanted to express and so on; when I

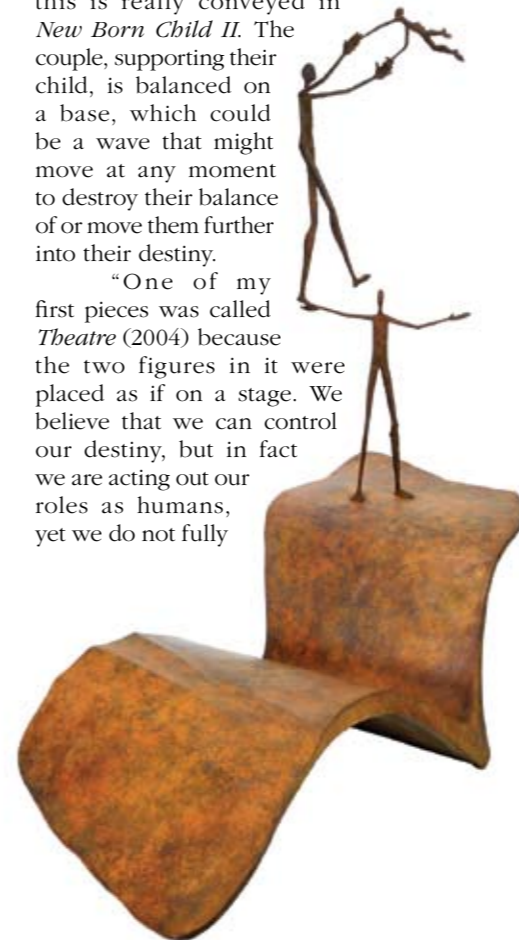


Val, *Le Rendez-Vous Amoureux*, 2010, bronze, 125 x 130 x 95 cm.

speak about a piece of my work with someone, it is like a textual examination. I have a rhythm in my work that may come from my early habit of reading aloud. There is a certain melody to it.”

Besides literary and poetic influences there is also a definite theatricality in Val’s art, a *Waiting for Godot* kind of theatricality. One sees it in such works as *Délices de la lecture*, *Corridor*, and *Blues*. In these works Val is addressing the essential loneliness of humankind, something that she feels deeply. “When I look back at some pieces I did a few years ago, there is a kind of sadness and sometimes loneliness about human destiny. But, at the same time, I don’t see this as a tragedy: I do see hope. For me human destiny is like walking on a tightrope. You have the capacity to do what you want to do and to live as you wish to live but you have to realize that all this can be broken or destroyed in an instant. And that is why I think that my work conveys the idea of enjoying the preciousness of the moment [even though it may be a sad one.] I think this is really conveyed in *New Born Child II*. The couple, supporting their child, is balanced on a base, which could be a wave that might move at any moment to destroy their balance or move them further into their destiny.

“One of my first pieces was called *Theatre* (2004) because the two figures in it were placed as if on a stage. We believe that we can control our destiny, but in fact we are acting out our roles as humans, yet we do not fully



Above left: Val, *New Born Child II*, 2011, bronze, 250 x 241 x 98 cm. Above center: Val, *Les Mariés III*, 2011, bronze, 102 x 53 x 30 cm. Above right: Val, *Les Méandres de la Pensée*, 2011, 43 x 11 x 10 cm.



Val, *Cabaret*, bronze.

understand these. When I did *Walking Composition* (2006), I felt that we think that we are unique or special but in fact we are just playing a role. I think all the

ideas that we have are just a tiny part of the billions of people in the world with whom we must live. Theater, like all literature, is not real life. It is fantasy, dream, illusion, as in *Cabaret* (2011), which has two figures dancing, and *Blues* (2011) in which a tiny figure sits on the edge of the work, sad, but almost as if it is about to stand to deliver a monologue or soliloquy. In *Corridor* (2011) two figures are opposite each other but not quite in sight of one another as if they are on a stage set or in the wings about to come on stage for a confrontation.”

It is easy enough to speak of literature, poetry, and theater as informing her work, influences that are both subtle and clear depending on one’s mood. She speaks of her admiration of Henry Moore’s family scenes in landscapes, Matisse’s artistic sensuality, Modigliani’s portraits but not his sculpture, and Giacometti for “although his figures appear stiff...he does not so much reveal the external person, but rather the soul.”

Most obviously, however, architecture is the strongest reality that lends dramatic atmosphere to her works. The suggestions of buildings dominate Val’s moments. Her



architecture as theater holds her protagonists and gives them a setting in which to exist, to play out their various realities. Where such an influence comes from Val doesn't know, for as she says, "I have no real knowledge of architecture, but it is a very important part of my sculpture."

Val, 45, has lived in Thailand since 2004 and it has been a tumultuous and busy period since then. Thailand is, she feels, an ideal place to cast bronze, "because it has an ancient industry that has for centuries produced bronze sculptures for the Thai Monarchy and Buddhist temples." Thailand, with its traditions and energy, is also, she feels, the right place for her creative spirit. The word "Thai," in the old Siamese language means "free men," and it is the freedom expressed by this that Val particularly appreciates. Here she says is the freedom to express that which she wants without any constraints. "This feeling [of freedom]," she says, "gives me a lot of confidence in daring to create. I really feel that one sculpture is the step to the next one. It is like a game with Lego. It is work that you have already done that you can rely on to move you forward with other works."

From risk, she notes, changes and initiatives also emerge that help to develop one's art and to extend one's vision. "Ideas also come from mistakes that you make. For example, when something breaks. Ideas also come from conversations and comments. In working with bronze I see two major challenges in expressing my ideas. One is when I am scaling up from small pieces. I am seeking the same idea of fragility and poetry on a larger scale. The second one is, as I want my sculptures to express the fragility of humanity, I have structures and figures that always seem about to collapse. Of course they can't collapse but there should always be that idea of collapse."

Val likes this uncertainty a lot. She also doesn't like to



Val, **Blues**, bronze.

define the characters of her figures. "I want my figures to be anonymous and androgynous because it is not being a man or a woman that is important to me; rather it is just being a human being that is important.

easily than before. I have become more of a listener to the vibrations of the world. To be able to listen you have to let your guard down or throw away your protection against the world. You need to be open to

new things. I am able to do this thanks to my husband Frédéric because he will protect me from outside aggressions. He can be like a filter to me."

What emerges from Val's sculpture is that contemporary society has many faces. Behind the façade of contemporary pleasures lies a world in which sadness and doubt, joy and pain are constant bedfellows. But in Val's vision there is always hope, much as there is in the best theatrical experiences. Her art also suggests that we don't have to live out our lives in "quiet desperation." There is always contact to be made with others, however tenuous. Val is an urban sculptor who takes up the whole of human experience in her art, which is clearly not a passing intrusion to those who care to look. Δ

Notes:

1. The exhibition, *Moments*, is at Red Sea Gallery, Singapore, from March 31 to April 30, 2012.
2. Unless otherwise stated all quotations are from interviews with the artist in Bangkok on December 20 and 21, 2011.



Val, **Tango II**, bronze, 236 x 104 x 30 cm.