

Iztok Maroh

STAGING OF THE PRESENTED

25 February–19 March 2022

artKIT

In the exhibition *Staging of the Presented*, Iztok Maroh, who works as an artist, curator and lecturer mainly in the field of artistic sculptural ceramics, presents his works created in the past year. True to his primary artistic material – clay or ceramics, Maroh's current gallery installation stages the narrative through a dialogue between different (interactive) media and materials. As in his previous exhibitions, the artist explores the relationship between the visual, phenomenal world and human in his continuous redefinitions of »artistic events« and the use of »ready-mades«. He explores the ways in which they deconstruct, establish, define and transform each other. What are the factors that condition these processes? What defines a person through observing an artwork and vice versa? How are the construction of the meaning of an artwork and the aesthetic experience conditioned by contemporary social, political and economic transformations?

The story Maroh is staging this time is multilayered, as is typical of his works. Naturally, the artist's tireless contemplation about the aesthetic experience of the modern man cannot bypass the current state of mind that humanity is facing. The story the artist tells through the gallery space is about discomfort, individual and collective anxiety, the construction of value and the evaluation of labor within the capitalist structure, the alienation of the individual, the absurdity of the material, the absence of meaning and, consequently, one's search for »footholds« and familiar associations within the phenomenal world, which he is trying to make sense of. Like any good story, this one, too, engages the viewer repeatedly with each individual artwork – the artist uses a fragile material such as porcelain and the menacing depth of the Black 3.0 black pigment as well as individual motifs of artworks to create formal and conceptual antagonisms.

La Belle Chocolatiere de Vienne (2022) is a multimedia installation consisting of a porcelain figure and a video. Maroh based the porcelain figure on *The Viennese Girl with Chocolate* (originally *Das Wiener Schokoladenmädchen*, pastel on parchment) by the prominent Geneva painter Jean-Etienne Liotard. The painting was so popular at the time that the Viennese porcelain manufactory Augarten made a porcelain figure of the same name in 1750. It is a valuable collector's and decorative artefact; the white porcelain figure is considered a true rarity. The artist broke this precious artefact, reassembled it and placed it back under its protective glass cover. The very performative act of breaking the figure, which the artist also recorded, deprived the object of its primary aesthetic and commercial value, thus emphasizing the absurdity of the material within the consumer culture and the abstract nature of the financial evaluation of



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artistic artefacts. Materiality as such is determined exclusively through the eyes of the beholder, which of course affects the value of the sculpture itself. Although Maroh has deprived the figure of its primary value as a collector's item by breaking it, he has added a new artistic value by reassembling and redesigning it. The video, which is played alongside the exhibited figure and shows the breaking of the figure, heightens the tension of the action – the destruction of the beautiful. The antagonism emanating from the work evokes in the viewer contradictory feelings of contemplation and discomfort. The screen, placed on the stone gallery floor, thus connects the virtual and the real space; the floor in the video is also made of stone (a material that is an additional antipode to porcelain). Maroh filmed the video in the Schönburg Palace in Vienna, which is historically linked to the Augarten Manufactory, where the porcelain figure was actually created.

Traces (2022) is a large-scale reproduction of a painting of the Mozart family, which was made by Johann Nepomuk della Croce in 1781. Maroh painted the painting with Black 3.0 black acrylic paint (99% light absorption), made by artist Stuart Semple and his colleagues. He made the paint in response to an exclusive agreement between star artist Anish Kapoor and Surrey NanoSystems manufacturer to use »the blackest paint in the world«, Vanta Black (99.96% light absorption). In fact, with this agreement, Anish Kapoor obtained the exclusive right to use the pigment, further indicating the elitism, relentlessness and competition within the art system at a global level. In the process of transferring the painting, Maroh has extracted the details of the hands of the painting's protagonists, but with this direct intervention, together with the use of the aforementioned specific black paint, he has re-constructed the message of the work. The hands, extracted from the menacing blackness, which absorbs everything visible, thus become the universal motif of one's »working tool« – the artist's aid in the materialization of an artistic idea, the individual's aid in manual labor or everyday tasks. By erasing the other motives from the painting, Maroh preserves the hands as artefacts and further glorifies them in their meaning using animation, which he projects onto the painting. The visual and artistic effectiveness is thus transferred almost to the three-dimensional level.

The concept of the labor remains a common thread in the interactive installation *t.i.n.d.e.r* (2022). The partially collaged colored etching represents an obscure device that has been lost in history. The device, called a »working mill«, was used in the mid-18th century to punish debtors and prisoners. The device had no function other than to spin in vain and acted as an absurd way for debtors and convicts to »serve out« their punishment. This work, which is only fully experienced by the viewer using the Artivive app, symbolically highlights and draws parallels between the absurdity of the aforementioned device spinning in vain and the absurdity of the modern, emptied world or the human being within it. The alienated individual is trapped in the grip of the modern way of life permeated by neoliberal logic, brutal working conditions, the control of global corporations over our habits and the absence of genuine, intimate relationships, which naturally leads to resorting to instant gratification of needs, which this structure minimizes to those that can be satisfied easily.

This narrative line continues in the rest of the works of *The Fisherman's Daughter* and *The Artificial Garden*, and is in fact divided into two thematic lines. The ceramic sculptures of the fisherman's daughters, which appear carnal through matter as well as color, address physicality. The female figures appear frivolous, almost decadent and playfully erotic, but after taking a closer look, the viewer is once again confronted with a sense of discomfort. The limbs of the women are embraced and devoured by fish, which in this context symbolize the elusive, the unconscious. It is precisely by using a symbol as broad and full of meaning as the fish that the artist opens

up the interpretive field for the viewer and actively involves him/her in the narrative of the exhibition. The artist painted *The Artificial Garden*, the six abstract ceramic sculptures that allude to biological forms and remind us of corals, microorganisms and other small plants, with the aforementioned Black 3.0 paint. In doing so, he has in fact eliminated the surface structure of the sculpture, while minimizing the artistic elements to their basic form. In this way, Maroh emphasizes the formal multidimensionality, as the sculptures could also represent biological or synthetic organisms produced or grown in a laboratory.

Formal and conceptual antagonisms and dichotomies guide Iztok Maroh's exhibition, which is also marked by a temporal dimension. The found objects, which evoke certain semantic associations in the artist and which the artist then reworks and re-contextualizes with various artistic techniques and artistic strategies, are often older objects, including antiquities, which carry moments from human history in their materiality. Maroh's artistic interventions connect different temporalities and actualize the aesthetic experience of the individual here and now. The gallery installation, which is in a way conceived according to the principle of a classical museum installation, offers the viewer a certain intimacy in the relationship and process of experiencing each work, while at the same time functions as an exhibition of curiosities that also contains didactic elements. The artist thus plays with the phenomenal world and the ambivalence of the aesthetic experience of this world on various levels, always treating the viewer as an equal interlocutor and co-creator of the »artistic event«.

BIOGRAPHY

Iztok Maroh (1976) obtained his master's degree from the University of Art and Industrial Design (UfG) in Linz in 2003. He first taught ceramics courses at the Famul Stuart School of Applied Arts in Ljubljana and was later an assistant professor at the Department of Industrial and Unique Design at the Academy of Fine Arts and Design Ljubljana, where he co-founded the Unique Design / Ceramics course. Between 2006 and 2011, he ran an open studio for contemporary ceramics in Maribor, where he organized exhibitions of contemporary ceramic production under his direction. He studied abroad several times, most recently in Istanbul. He is an active member of various associations, national and international juries, and co-founder of the ceramics section at ZDSLU, The Slovenian Association of Fine Arts Societies. In addition to his studio work, he also curates exhibitions in the field of fine arts and writes texts for exhibition catalogs and publications in the field of artistic ceramics and fine arts. Since 2018 he has been actively present in Vienna, where he is the project manager of *Time for artists* and the artistic director of the Migrart organization based in Vienna. He has exhibited independently and in group exhibitions at the Savin's Art Salon in Žalec, the Coastal Galleries in Koper, the Božidar Jakac Gallery in Kostanjevica na Krki, the Rotovž Exhibition Hall and the Maribor Art Gallery, the Gallery of Contemporary Art in Celje, the Bežigrad Gallery and Ljubljana Castle, at the 4. International Biennial of Contemporary Ceramics in Kapfenberg and numerous international exhibitions, including in China, Denmark, Austria, Germany, and South Korea.