

ARTFORUM

REVIEWS

COLOGNE

KölnSkulptur #9

SKULPTURENPARK KÖLN

Eduardo Navarro,
Letters to Earth
(detail), 2017, bronze,
walnut kernels,
dimensions variable.
From Köln Skulptur #9.
Photo: Veit Landwehr.

Held every two years in a twenty-five-thousand-square-foot park by the Rhine, KölnSkulptur is now twenty years old. The project was set up by fervent German collectors Michael and Eleonore Stoffel, who began inviting curators to commission works for the park in 1997. The idea was that the sculptures from each iteration of the show would remain in the park for two years, after which the next curator would add new ones and decide which of the previous ones should be removed, left in place, or relocated. So in this edition, subtitled



“*La Fin de Babylone. Mich wundert, dass ich so fröhlich bin!*” (The End of Babylon. I’m Amazed That I’m So Happy!) and featuring the work of eight artists under the artistic direction of Chus Martínez, we can still see many older pieces, including Jimmie Durham’s striking *Pagliaccio non son* (I Am Not a Clown), 2011, and Joel Shapiro’s bronze *Untitled*, 1996/99.

Durham’s work is a tree trunk lying on its side, originally brought from the Democratic Republic of the Congo to be processed into wood veneer, while Shapiro’s structure is ultimately indebted to Minimalism, an aesthetic that has proved predominant throughout KölnSkulptur’s history. But if rationalist, quasi-architectural works have traditionally topped curators’ preferences, this is something Martínez has effectively done away with, in part by reducing the size of the new productions compared with many of the earlier pieces. None of the new ones has an anthropomorphic form, but they nonetheless have a lot to say. Rather than continuing to investigate the histories her predecessors explored, Martínez picks up on the narrative potential of Durham’s enormous tree trunk; it is no surprise that she has placed Brazilian artist Solange Pessoa’s multipart soapstone *Untitled*, 2017, close by. The formal procedures behind this work seem to defy logic; in it, matter seems not to be acted upon but instead “occurs” following its own rhythms, which are those of the materials employed and the stories they bring with them. Some of the other new works also reflect recent developments in the field of sculpture, where technical advances have enabled a staggering range of uses for many materials and have led to the emergence of a sculptural form of *trompe l’oeil*, here exemplified by Pedro Wirz’s fried eggs slipping down robust stones (*Trilobites*, 2013/2017) or Teresa Solar’s tongue bursting out from deep beneath the ground (*Pumping Station*, 2017). Both artists treat bronze as if it were some sort of sticky gum or still in a viscous melting state, while ignoring the material’s historical weight—and that of KölnSkulptur.

Martínez projects her signature vision into the background woven by the natural context, the old works, and the newly produced ones. What emerges from the exhibition as a whole is a reflection on temporality. The new commissions seem caught in their own conversations, indifferent to or simply unaware of the conventional narratives of recent art history. They are bewitched by myths and fables, and their unmonumentality is blatant. One might suddenly feel, for instance, a small bump beneath one’s foot: Eduardo Navarro’s gorgeous life-size bronze walnuts (*Letters to Earth*, 2017) are scattered here, many covered by leaves. One would have to kneel down to examine these diminutive works, which is hardly the usual way of encountering art in a sculpture park. Not too far away, concrete birds congregate at the rim of Andrea Büttner’s empty *Schale* (Bowl), 2017. Here, we feel time might have just stopped. The bowl’s shape is as schematic as those of Claudia Comte’s simplified marble succulents, *The Nordic Cactuses*, 2017. Both works share a puzzling confusion of scale and invite us to rethink our relation to nature in a world where we no longer play a leading role.

—Javier Hontoria