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Claudia Comte's Forest of Carved Reliquaries Addresses Environmental Concerns

By Talia Elbaz

Claudia Comte's "When Dinosaurs Ruled the Earth" was recently on view at **König Galerie** in Berlin (April 26—June 24). The exhibition invited viewers to re-think one's relationship with nature. The artist mixed natural and industrialized materials in a sculptural installation that felt like a forest of hidden treasures.

Whitewall sat down with Comte to learn more about how wood, marble and bronze could provide answers about the future of our existence in a world of ever-increasing technological innovation.



Claudia Comte
"When Dinosaurs Ruled the Earth"
2018
Installation view

WHITEWALL: How do you generally get started on your projects? What comes first, the execution with the material or the idea that lays behind it?

CLAUDIA COMTE: A new project almost always starts with the location. Whether that be in the mountains for an outdoor sculpture park, in a museum, a gallery or an art fair, my working methodology hinges on the exhibition space, with its specific measurements and vistas. It is at this juncture that I am able to devise a measurement system from which the project can be extrapolated into form, context, material and so on.

WW: Do you see the forest of the exhibition as a sort of jump into the future?

CC: It is a leap into the future, a return to the past, and at the same time it speaks of the present. The concerns are certainly timeless. Plastic and aluminium are materials that remain in landfills for thousands of years before degrading and the stone quarries in Carrara continue to be exploited hundreds of years after Michelangelo first carved David. What we are learning from scientists, climate experts and the so-called anthropocene, the current epoch we have entered, is that we are ultimately destroying our planet's biodiversity, in the end killing not only our plants and animals but the human species.

I think the common feeling amongst many is that the threatening issues of our times are beyond our human control—which is not true if we all worked on being less complacent or apathetic. It is, of course, easy to feel powerless and fatalistic when presented with all the doomsday facts but I hope our nations have the capacity to implement proper changes in a bid to fight global warming.

WW: Why did you want to sue marble to depict materials that aren't biodegradable—such as the soda can in marble?

CC: I decided to reproduce plastic objects into marble to demonstrate its resistance and stability. For me, it became quite a confounding exercise because these marble sculptures turned out to be very beautiful to look at, and yet, of course, what they ultimately embody is a mass produced product made of fossil fuels which harms us all at the end of the day.

Because of and in spite of this, marble is a material that interests me, it signifies ancient times and stability of sorts. Marble is made of the oceans, the white parts are compressed shells and thus animal based materials. The grey and black parts are minerals. I feel very fortunate to have the opportunity to make sculptures with materials that have so much life and history.



Claudia Comte
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Photo by Roman März

WW: The concept of time is a prevalent element in your work, by using different materials from different time periods. Do you think it is important to understand the past in order to comprehend the future?

CC: It is important to understand how the earth was formed and how natural events (still) occur and I like to imagine things poetically or scientifically in order to ask some of the oldest human questions. That is why I lean towards classical materials such as bronze, marble, and wood.

I have worked with wood for more than 10 years now. Without any doubt, my attraction to wood came from growing up in a chalet next to a forest in the French speaking part of Switzerland. Much later, I had the chance to participate in a residency in Russia where I followed dendrochronologists as they collected data from trees in the Ural mountains. Part of their research was to recreate a total view of the climate since the last ice age, 11,000 years ago. Witnessing their complete and consummate devotion to this cause, working in the field day in and day out, was a life changing experience.

I learned that the life of a tree is very complex. So too is taking care of the wood once a tree has been felled. The correct way to cut trees, for example, in which direction and when to cut the trunk is all part of my research. These questions were quite integral when I first started working with wood. I only wish to continue learning and to gain a deeper, more acute understanding of this precious material.

With that being said, I have met so many lumberjacks, ébénist, carpenters and forest rangers over the years from whom I learned that it is impossible to gain an encyclopedic knowledge of this material, simply because it is too vast of an area. To me this provides a very nice metaphor about life, it is a material process that is impossible to control totally, like the passing of time, or the changing of the wind.

WW: As an artist, do you feel the need to educate people about sustainable developments? Do you think the message you are trying to deliver is being heard?

CC: It is crucial for artists to speak about the issues of their time and ecological concerns have always been an important issue to me. I would like to tackle these issues more in depth, in my work as well as in my personal life—it is necessary to act up.

While, it's not my place nor my inclination to take a moralistic view, I hope, nonetheless, that my work takes people to a place that allows them to think more about the natural world around them, in conjunction with the paradoxes and contradictions that accompany it all. They are markers of our time.

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