



# q/a

## Just a Small Piece of Wood and a Knife: A Conversation with Paloma Varga Weisz

by Anna McNay

**Born into an artistic family** and trained in traditional techniques of woodcarving, Paloma Varga Weisz, who lives and works in Düsseldorf, Germany, uses sculpture, watercolor, and drawing to explore a world of masquerades and disguises, revealing histories and creating narratives. After she entered the art world in the early 2000s, her career took off quickly, with numerous international exhibitions, stipends, and awards. Varga Weisz's most recent exhibition, "Bumped Body," debuted at the Bonnefanten Museum in Maastricht, the Netherlands, before traveling to the Henry Moore Institute in Leeds, U.K., where it was reinstalled in a completely new iteration. Scheduled to be on view through January 3, 2021, the show closed twice for Covid-19 lockdowns. *Bumpman on a Tree Trunk*, however,

remains outside the gallery like an omen or watchman. Varga Weisz is also preparing to install an eight-meter-tall female figure, *Foreign Body*, in Joshua Tree National Park, in the Mojave Desert, as part of High Desert Test Sites, curated by Iwona Blazwick.

**Anna McNay:** You were classically trained at a small school in Garmisch-Partenkirchen in Bavaria and were taught traditional techniques of woodcarving, modeling, and casting, before attending art school in Düsseldorf in the 1990s. What made you want to learn the traditional techniques? And how different were the two experiences?

**Paloma Varga Weisz:** It was really by accident that I ended up in Garmisch-Partenkirchen. I had applied

***Bumpman,*  
2002.**

Polychromed lime-wood and wood,  
70 x 26 x 45 cm.

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to the art academies in Düsseldorf, Stuttgart, and Frankfurt, but kept receiving rejections. A friend of mine went to the school, which was how I knew about it. Its primary purpose was to teach people to become carpenters, but there was a smaller class where you could learn woodcarving. There were only 15 students in total, five in each year, so it was extremely personal, and we had a wonderful teacher. Ending up there really was the best accident I ever had; I was surrounded by nature, learning very traditional techniques of modeling in clay, making forms in plaster, drawing, and life drawing. Student took it in turns to undress and model—this was completely normal.

After my three years at that school, I applied again for the academy in Düsseldorf and was accepted. The first thing they told me was to forget everything I'd learned because it was old-fashioned and had nothing to do with art. For a long time, I felt very confused and insecure. I put my chisels away and became more involved in student politics. I was in Gerhard Merz's class, and he was a very conceptual artist. We were not allowed to work in the classroom. He was extremely selfish, always talking about his own work; by the end, everybody was making work that looked just like his. Today, I would see this as a form of abuse.

**AMc:** How did you move on from this after leaving the academy, and how has your practice developed in the intervening years? Would you describe it now as a combination of traditional techniques and more contemporary methods?

THIS PAGE:  
Paloma Varga Weisz

OPPOSITE,  
LEFT TO RIGHT:  
*Waldfrau (Woman  
of the Forest)*,  
2001.  
Limewood, fabric,  
and tree trunks,  
310 x 145 x 260 cm.

*Bumped Body*,  
2017.  
Silver-plated  
limewood,  
110 x 40 x 40 cm.

**PVW:** It was really at the end of my time at the academy that I rediscovered wood. I wouldn't be where I am now without that period of confusion. I had this dream of trying to say what I wanted to say in a very simple way—just having a small piece of wood and a knife is enough to bring your work to life. I had the minimalistic idea of not needing a big workshop, of being able to work anywhere, and so my first works after graduating were very small, delicate figures. One of them is in the exhibition at the Henry Moore Institute—*Deer, standing* (1993). The end of my time at the academy was my true starting point. A couple of years later, I had my first exhibition in a gallery in Düsseldorf, showcasing a group of ceramic models. I was lucky. It's hard to go from a community of students and professors into a world where you are a nobody and a beginner and to have to find an entrance into the art world. I had a lot of luck, and people introduced me to galleries. I had my first collaboration in Hamburg with a very well-known gallery. I was able to make a living. This was in the early 2000s, which, in terms of the art market, was a good period.

**AMc:** You talk about working directly with simple tools and the wood to say what you want to say. Is there an underlying message to your work?

**PVW:** Every work has a story of its own. There is a thread running through my different materials—the drawings, single sculptures, installations, mixed-media works, film—but I think it's a story that is going to be told in different ways.

**AMc:** Does it develop as you go on?

**PVW:** Yes, I would say so. I think it gets deeper. Especially when you do a museum show, you become a choreographer for all the works from different periods of your life. In the end, they come together, and it's like a spider's web. Everything is connected. It's also interesting for an artist to revisit early works. They have a fresh naiveté about them, which sometimes gets lost when you become more professional and learn "the trick." You have to be careful of this trick, otherwise your work can become boring and repetitive.

**AMc:** How do you stop yourself when you realize you're going down that route?

**PVW:** I think my daily life is very intense because I



am running a family alongside my working practice. Quite often I feel as if my inner reserves are empty. But, to me, that is always a good sign, because then you can fill them up completely afresh with new ideas. Running out of ideas is one of the greatest fears for an artist, or for anybody in a creative business. But it's actually at that moment that you're ready to start something completely new.

**AMc:** [Where do you look for inspiration?](#)

**PVW:** I really don't know. The last time I was working intensely was at the beginning of lockdown, and I really enjoyed that time. I reconnected to drawing, and it just bubbled out of me. Sometimes I look in a magazine and see a face, which then develops into something, but this time, I felt extremely free not to focus on any given subject. I had just had a heavy schedule of shows and projects, and I needed to recover from having so much on my plate.





**AMc:** How significant a role does drawing play in your practice? Do you think of yourself as a sculptor, or do you prefer the term “artist”?

**PVW:** I’m definitely not a painter. Sculptors see things and think in three dimensions. They are physically more involved with the material. I don’t think I’d necessarily call myself a sculptor, but, at the end of the day, I am still a very traditional sculptor. I would say my approach to sculpture comes from a different

angle. I’m more like a storyteller, narrating through sculpture.

**AMc:** Do your drawings relate to your sculptures? Are they a means of playing with ideas?

**PVW:** They’re definitely not sketches. They’re as important as the sculptures themselves, maybe just the “easy part,” because they are quicker to make and involve less organizing. I can talk to people while I’m



drawing. I wouldn't say I have a daily practice of doing this or that. It comes in phases. I recently exhibited some of my drawings at Gladstone Gallery in New York, as part of the group exhibition "Drawing 2020."

**AMc:** I was going to ask if you had a particular routine.

**PVW:** I wish I did, but I don't. Being a mother, family comes first. This is something that I really understood during lockdown. I would have a completely different

Installation view of  
"Paloma Varga Weisz:  
Bumped Body," Henry  
Moore Institute, Leeds,  
U.K., 2020.

practice, and maybe a different output, if I didn't have my family. But then I wouldn't be me. I am happy to have kids, and I am lucky to live the life of a woman artist with children—something that does not have a long history in the art world.

**AMc:** Your father, Feri (Ferenc) Varga, was a Hungarian painter. Was he an important influence on your decision to become an artist?

**PVW:** Extremely so. He influenced our family enormously and was a very special person. I learned a lot from him, and, after school, before I approached the academies, I spent a year training with him. He was my model. I was constantly making drawings of and modeling his face. It was a very intense relationship.

**AMc:** You are named after Picasso's daughter, because your father mixed in those circles.

**PVW:** He was living in the south of France, on the Côte d'Azur, after fleeing Paris when the Nazis arrived. He met all those artists—it was one big community. He was very close to Françoise Gilot, Paloma's mother. He was an even closer friend of Jean Cocteau, with whom he collaborated on a book of poetry and prints. It was a difficult time, because a lot of these people left to go to America, and my father was Jewish as well. Meeting a German woman and then moving to Germany in the late '50s, when the war was still recent history, was not easy. He kept his past secret for most of his life.

**AMc:** Am I right that all your work is done in your studio, or do you collaborate with fabricators and other specialists in materials?

**PVW:** I work alone in my studio, except for when I'm making things in bronze, when I work with a foundry. I am also connected to a workshop that specializes in ceramics. But my preference is for working in my studio and doing things by myself, or sometimes with an assistant if it's necessary.

**AMc:** You said earlier that your drawings aren't sketches. Do you make sketches at all, or do you just have the idea in your head and start working? And how does this develop as you progress?

**PVW:** I would say it's a journey, especially with the bigger installations. Most of the time, I model my





THIS PAGE:

**Bumpman on a Tree Trunk, 2018.**

Bronze, view of work outside the Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, U.K.

OPPOSITE:

**Father, old, 2011.**

Glazed ceramic, 65 x 45 x 28 cm.

idea in clay and then transform it into wood. But, other times I need help, as was the case with *Foreign Body*, which was made for High Desert Test Sites. I transformed the small sculpture into something eight meters high. It's divided into parts and will be reconstructed in situ in Joshua Tree National Park. The sculpture is of a woman, sitting on a container, with a huge branch piercing her body. The branch looks like a bone, or it could also be seen as phallic. It goes through her and is quite aggressive. She has an extremely melancholic, vulnerable pose. The container will have a pop-up food stall, selling vegetarian dishes and vegetarian burgers.

The idea is linked to California roadside architecture from the 1930s, '40s, and '50s, which featured monumental figures, like signs, that could be seen from far

away. For example, you might buy your milk at a drive-in, between the legs of a cow. Some of these structures are still there, but many have been destroyed, because they were made from very simple materials. Of course, there's also an association with Hollywood stage architecture. My figure will be a very big sign in the middle of nowhere, which you will be able to see from far away.

**AMc:** "Bumped Body," at the Henry Moore Institute, has closed twice because of Covid-19, but *Bumpman on a Tree Trunk* (2018) has remained on public display outside the museum. Do you know what the response has been to this figure? I heard that at one point someone put a mask on him.

**PVW:** When we chose him to go outside, we had no idea of what would happen just a few weeks later. I

am very interested in images from the Middle Ages and 16th-century pamphlets depicting what, in German, you would call *Wundergeburt*. It doesn't really translate, but they are monstrous people—babies with two heads, misfits—who were seen as holy, sent from God as signs. *Bumpman* was inspired by one of these images, and so I feel that he is very connected to that history. He became a sign without being intended as such. When I made him, I wasn't interested in making a sign; I was approaching him as a sculpture with lymph nodes all over his body. But then, suddenly, there was a whole new lens through which to see him.

**AMc:** There's definitely a strong sense of illness about him, something to do with a virus or plague.

**PVW:** Yes, but I think he is also a character with whom you could make friends. He has a peaceful expression, and he gives you a feeling of happiness, like you want to hug him. I don't know—I'm not the person who should give you an interpretation, but I think he has a glimmer of hope, and I would like him to be seen as a positive sign.

**AMc:** How involved are you usually with the installation of an exhibition?

**PVW:** Extremely involved. It's very important how the works are installed, which room is the best for which work. At the Henry Moore Institute, it was quite tricky because, although it's a big institution, the space isn't easy. The exhibition was shown first at the Bonnefanten Museum in Maastricht, which is much bigger. We had to change the whole setup and bring things together that were not together before, but I really enjoyed doing that. Having a traveling show isn't easy because you are meeting new people and a new space, but you are restricted to a given list of works. It's interesting to flip the choreography and the importance of the works about a bit.

**AMc:** You also make cabinets, filled with smaller sculptures—like *Wunderkammern*. Are their contents fixed, or do you also use the cabinets in different exhibitions with different contents?

**PVW:** They are fixed. I see them as a form of poetry, with the shelves as lines of writing. On each shelf, there is a



sentence. It's a poetic way of installing work. I use a mix of found objects, private stuff, and small sculptures.

**AMc:** You've mentioned that you don't think you should be the one to interpret your works, but how important is it to you that viewers should know something about your sources of inspiration or about you as an artist?

**PVW:** I just had this discussion with my assistant, Sophie, after filming some short interviews with Laurence Sillars, head of the Henry Moore Institute, for the website. In the final episode, we talked about some very private stuff, and I was wondering, "Do I want this? Is it necessary?" I don't know. A lot of artists have private stuff in their work and, because of that, I perhaps have my doubts as to what really is private. Makers and their stories are just ingredients. The work is an independent thing, and the connection to the viewer is another independent thing, because you always bring your own story into the viewing of a work. ■

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