



Featured in
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Paloma Varga Weisz: My Influences

From her father's illustrations of Jean Cocteau's poetry to Lucas Cranach, Giorgio de Chirico and Gerhard Merz, the German artist discusses the evolution of her pictorial language and *Jennifer Higgie* responds to her 'heart-breaking hallucinations'



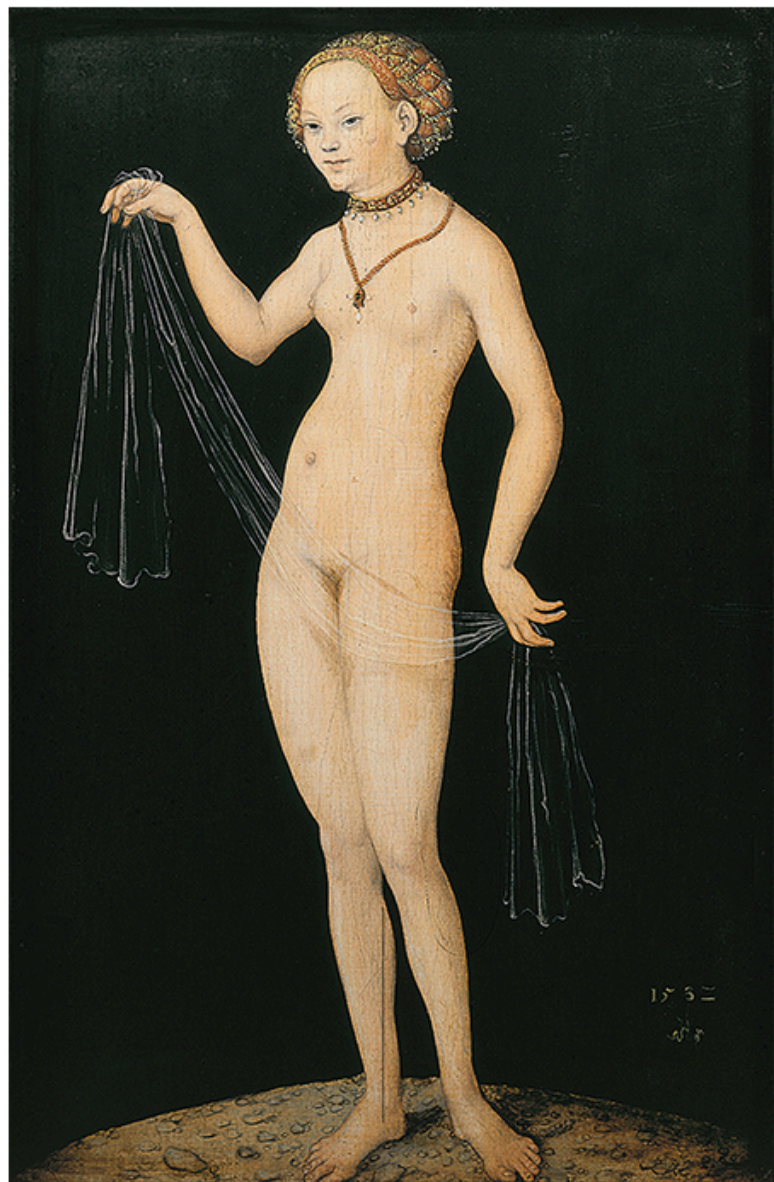
BY JENNIFER HIGGIE IN INFLUENCES | 01 MAY 14



Paloma Varga Weisz

The first art that moved me was that of my father, Feri Varga. He was a Hungarian artist, born in 1906, who moved to Germany to be with my mother in the late 1950s. He lived most of his life in France. Our house was filled with his work; there were large abstract paintings in my bedroom that I used to look at, searching in them for the face of a cat or a dog. My father did not feel comfortable with his bourgeois existence and he used to tell us stories about how he had lived in the South of France and knew Jean Cocteau, Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso. Cocteau asked him to illustrate 20 of his unpublished poems, 'Hommages', in 1955. My father encouraged us to put on our own exhibitions, which we did when I was three and four years old and then asked our parents to buy our work, so quite naturally, from a young age, I assumed that being an artist was my profession. For a while at school, though, I thought I would like to become an actor and so I joined the theatre group in order to prepare for the drama academy. However, the first role I had was in Jean Anouilh's *Antigone* (1944) and I got so bored learning lines that I fell asleep; I realized then that acting was not the profession for me. So, I decided to become an artist. But when I wasn't accepted into the art academy, I went to a small school near the Alps, in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, and trained as a wood carver; we were only 15 students. After a while, I realized that I could express everything I wanted to say, wherever in the world, with a small piece of wood and my tools. I learned a certain language as a starting point. But when I went to art school in Dusseldorf in the 1990s, I was told to reject my training as a wood carver. It was depressing: at that time it was all about political correctness and, whilst in this state of confusion and groundlessness, I became strongly involved in student politics.

It was one of my professors, Gerhard Merz, who, despite being a radical conceptual artist, encouraged us to understand the past, and it was through him that I found my way back to wood carving and art history. I became interested in religious paintings, in their atmosphere and expression, the temperature of their colours and their melancholy; I wanted to distil their atmosphere and get rid of the emotional baggage.



Lucas Cranach the Elder, *Venus*, 1532, tempera and oil on beechwood, 37 × 25 cm. Courtesy: Städel Museum, Frankfurt

It is hard to single out one artist who I admire, as I adore so many artists from so many centuries. However, I have always liked how Piero della Francesca simplified faces: *The Nativity* (1470–75) is a good example of this. Especially when I was studying, I felt very close to Lucas Cranach's paintings: I loved his naked bodies, which look like small wooden sculptures. The colour he used reminds me of limewood. Hans Holbein the Younger has also been an influence, especially his painting *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1521); it is so easy to imagine it in a niche in a wall. I also like how Giorgio de Chirico connected elements from reality with an imaginary world, and the atmosphere in his empty cities. I feel very close to Louise Bourgeois and I am inspired by how her life developed. The fact that she created art when she was very old made me realize there was no rush; there is still plenty of time to discover things. I met her at one of her Sunday Tea Salons in 2002 in New York. It was quite a bizarre experience. We were asked to bring something, and so I took her a little wooden figure I had made, wrapped up in a kitchen towel.

The human body has always fascinated me. Very often I begin with my own body or the bodies of people I am very close to. My body is just one example of a life; it could be everybody or anybody. It is very important for me to develop a piece of work completely by myself. A lot of artists have a very clear vision about what a sculpture should look like, and they go to a workshop and have someone else make it for them. I could never do that, because creating a sculpture is like a journey that can take me to surprising places; I can swerve and end up in a totally different world. If I gave my sculptures to other hands to make, I would miss all that.



Feri Varga, *Hommage à Jean Cocteau (Cagnes)*, (Homage to Jean Cocteau, Cagnes) 1956, oil on canvas, 88 × 116 cm. Courtesy: estate of Feri Varga

The different elements of my work create a kind of mental vertigo; I think about all the things I see, while I move on to making new ones. My cabinets are like a poem of space or like words in a sentence; the sculptures are placed on the shelves to create a particular rhythm. The different spaces between the shelves play a role as well. It is the rhythm between order and disorder, like you have in a wardrobe, trying to keep things together, but the doors are open. In my desire to hold onto things in a world that constantly drains itself by people passing away, I collect objects and, although they come without their own memories or records, I transform them in wood.

There are the things that fall into my hands, and the ones that I search for and find: traditional handmade objects, handcrafts, also things from other cultures. A sculpture starts very playfully and then, while I'm playing, it becomes more and more serious.

Carving is very hard: it's like peeling a wooden apple and you cannot correct mishaps. It demands both great physical and imaginative effort and concentration.

My work is neither mystical nor is it influenced by fairytales. I'm not religious; I am open to various possibilities and do not want to be told how to look at, or understand, the world.

Paloma Varga Weisz lives and works in Dusseldorf, Germany. Earlier this year, she had a solo show at Sadie Coles HQ, London, UK; in 2013 she had solo shows at Kabinett für aktuelle Kunst, Bremerhaven, Germany; Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin, Ireland; and CAPRI, Dusseldorf. Her work will be included in 'The Human Factor', Hayward Gallery, London, which runs from 17 June – 7 September this year.



Paloma Varga Weisz, *Mountaineer*, 2014, limewood, 71 × 28 × 27 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Sadie Coles HQ, London; photograph: Stefan Hostettler

JENNIFER HIGGIE The natural home of Paloma Varga Weisz's sculptures is not a gallery; it's a haunted house. The white cube is too neat, too linear, for these heart-breaking hallucinations; what they require is an architecture of nook, cranny and moat, chimney stack and dusty corridor; unexplained cries flavoured with the odd rumour, say, of a fleeing wolf. For Varga Weisz's is an art of benign, bewildered ghosts of indeterminate age and century who crowd together, united, I imagine, in their longing for a *mittel*-European hut, preferably deep in a forest. However, despite evoking a distant past even when it's brand new, her work is not nostalgic: it's more complicated than that. The artist trained as a traditional wood carver for three years in Germany before studying at the Dusseldorf Academy in the early 1990s, which was, at the time, deeply immersed in theory; she felt pressured to reject her technical skills and grapple with ideas instead of tools. These opposing forces are evident in what she has made over the past 20 years or so: pitting the visual against the conceptual has lent her work a mood of rich temporal and spatial instability. Looking at her recent show at Sadie Coles in London, I wrote in my notebook: 'Is the present a dream of the past or a hangover from the future?' That's what her work does to you. The conflict (if that's the right word for something so troubled, so mysterious, so weirdly joyful) she expresses is both personal and social; she takes a conventional type – a mother, say – and confuses it. Her approach is not unlike Stanley Kubrick's in *2001 A Space Odyssey* (1968) when, without explanation, he places an astronaut in a baroque bedroom.

Varga Weisz's vocabulary – which is informed as much by medieval carvings, German renaissance painting and feminism as it is by unfinished amateur woodwork and moulds sourced from eBay – is one that 20 years ago might have been described as postmodern. In her case, though, it's too strategic and too self-conscious a term; I suspect Varga Weisz is an artist for whom nothing could be more tedious than having to explain something that she has, in her own very particular way, made perfectly clear. Though an echo of religious iconography hums beneath these secular surfaces, feeling – divorced from the shackles of religious certitude – reigns, assured of the rightness of its own idiosyncratic fact. Moving between blunt symbolism and raw emotion, she returns again and again to certain motifs in her sculptures, works on paper and ceramics: disembodied hands tenderly holding a dreamy severed head; skin transformed by bulbous scales; enormous figures nursing tiny ones; multiple faces and eyes, often inhabiting a single body (like a kind of medieval cubism, as if two eyes and one head are not enough to take in the complexities of the world); sleeping babies emerging unheeded from a dreaming woman's cranium; human/animal hybrids (there are no hierarchies between species in Varga Weisz's world). It's the stuff of both horror movies and hope; the idea that somehow our bodies, or parts thereof, might reveal our motivations and do what we actually want them to do; the flip-side, of course, being that such a physical manifestation of our desires would leave our vulnerabilities gaping like so many wounds, and equally open to infection.



Louise Bourgeois photographed by Brassai at the Académie de la Grande-Chaumière, Paris, 1937. Courtesy: The Easton Foundation; photograph: Brassai; © The Easton Foundation/Licensed by DACS, London

Despite nodding to the visual languages of previous centuries, Varga Weisz's sculptures and works on paper acknowledge the uncensored daydreams of contemporary life; the kind that drift between the present, the future and the past with an ease that makes time-travellers of us all. Nothing is predictable here, least of all the function of the body, which is, in many of these sculptures – as in life – full to bursting of unexpected eruptions, desires and detours. There's no coyness about the function of genitals (whether literal or symbolic), or the intermingling of man, woman or beast. In one recent hand-carved sculpture, *Mountaineer* (2014), for instance, a man in a heavily textured one-piece – a soft cap on his noble brow, a sturdy wooden walking stick in his right hand – pauses, mid-stride, to gaze out at what we might fairly assume to be a view across the mountain ranges. Beneath his right foot, however, sprouts a wooden penis, as natural a part of the landscape as a rock – so natural, in fact, that he ignores it. Similarly, *Couple* (2014) comprises three separate carvings: a woman and a man, whose clothes and gestures hint at the iconography of a few hundred years ago, are frozen in their shared glance at a wooden vagina – as dislocated as Gustave Courbet's *L'Origine du monde* (The Origin of the World, 1866) – neatly placed between them. It's a simple, surreal reminder that the messy gender relations we grapple with today are nothing new. The wood is lightly charred, as if the issues around a woman's body versus a man's have literally been burned into our skin; after all, these are issues that, at times – and please excuse the pun – are too hot to handle. That humour is thrown into the mix only adds to the work's rich absurdity; Varga Weisz has fun puncturing the more pompous elements of art history's very male bias.



Paloma Varga Weisz, *Grüner Geist* (Green Spirit), 2002, watercolour on paper, 29 × 21 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Museum Kurhaus, Kleve

A sense of domesticity, an evocation of the idea of the home, is central to Varga Weisz's work – homes constructed not only from traditional materials but from flesh, too – our original homes. Last year she created a series of enigmatic cabinets, 'Krummer Hund' (Crooked Dog, 2013), which contain collections of hand carvings – ears, a small charred pig, a pair of elegant wooden feet and a single hand – and various found objects – including a mask, a hat and a small stuffed deer – all arranged neatly on shelves. It's as if she's swept up the fragments of her reveries, dusted them down and tenderly laid them out for public scrutiny; a reiteration that what we do today is taking place in the olden times of tomorrow.

Varga Weisz's work is steeped in a sense of discovery, wonder and, at times, fear – the kind that acknowledges the absurd beauty of our traitorous bodies, while knowing all-too-well that they are, ultimately, only a temporary refuge from the terrible things that time has in store for us. It stresses that the present, for all its newness, is as scarred and stained as a tree – and that, like a tree, it will now and then be transformed by the elements it finds itself battered and nourished by. This shouldn't be a cause for alarm. It's just how things are: haunted, alive.



JENNIFER HIGGIE

Jennifer Higgie is a writer who lives in London. Her book *The Mirror and the Palette – Rebellion, Revolution and Resilience: 500 Years of Women's Self-Portraits* is published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson, and she is currently working on another – about women, art and the spirit world.
