

# GALERIE TSCHUDI

*i naiva be per quai aint  
be per far alch  
l'avantmezdi dal 2006  
be per far alch  
cha'l diavel leva  
id es stupend  
co cha tot va inavò*

Not Vital

Not Vital has many houses. Some of them lack a roof, others have no door or no windows, yet others again are conceived as a pure window, a window onto the world. What they all share, is that they are habitats, rather than houses in a traditional Western sense. To Vital, as soon as a structure is accessible it becomes a habitat, a place in which he feels secure and sheltered. The great Korean poet Ko Un once said “the world’s too vast, to live in a single place, or three or four”. Undoubtedly, Not Vital has elevated this verse to his dictum, leading a virtually nomadic life that takes him from one continent to the next. The artist’s temporary destinations are often located in regions that are neither easy to reach, nor to inhabit. This circumstance doesn’t influence Vital’s perception of those places as a habitat – on the contrary, the more troublesome, the better.

When reasoning about the concept of *Heimat* in the case of a nomad, the most evident inference is the assumption that such a way of life results in a detachment of the notion of “home” from any kind of fixed geographical site. But what if, in some cases, all the strings that one has spun out into the wide world start to form an increasingly strong rope hauling towards the homeland? Irrevocably, in the case of Not Vital the second scenario has come to life – in the form of a strong emotion connecting him to his *Heimat*, the mountains of the lower Engadin. A tree with sweeping branches relies on deep roots, after all.

In cadence with Not Vital’s way of life, his art migrates dreamlike between foreign imageries and native allegories. By means of fleet-footed alchemy he domesticates the exotic and transforms the local commonplace into a surreal-minimalistic visual vocabulary. Identity and transformation, re-location and de-contextualization have consequently evolved into key concepts within Vital’s oeuvre.

*NAIV* brings together recent works by Vital that, notwithstanding their distinct materiality, flaunt the grey-white palette of the wintery Engadin like conscientious siblings wear their Sunday suit.<sup>1</sup> Considering the fact that the Engadin is snow-covered for about six months a year, it is far from surprising that the color white, as well as the motif of the snow, have played a central role within the artist’s practice since the very beginning of his career. The first sculpture that Vital made as an adolescent in 1964 is a roof gutter, painted white. With *Channala da Tet* (1964), the artist’s use of the color white emerged within a context of appropriation and transformation. Along with the diversification of Vital’s oeuvre over time, more and more materials began to function as carriers of the color white – plaster, marble, glass, oil and paper. Scrutinizing the manifestation of

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<sup>1</sup> In Raeto-Romanic, Not Vital’s mother tongue, *naiv* means snow.

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the motif of snow within Not Vital's body of work more closely, one discovers that in New York in the 1970s the artist had made works that absorbed the wetness of snowflakes, thereby responding to the city's snowfall. Following this subtle and situational piece, the motif of snow began to manifest itself with increasing vigor in the subsequent decades.

The oil paintings comprising Vital's new series *Snow* (2017), which are at the heart of this exhibition, while aligning themselves with prior works broaching the subject matter of snow, reveal an entirely new conceptual momentum – that of duration. Commencing at 10:59 and ending at 12:22 they confront us with a more and more boisterous snow storm, silently drawing us in. Whilst earlier works like *Pissing in the Snow* (1998) and *Snowball Wall* (2006) reference a liberating and energetic childhood act, the suite *Snow* suggests a meditative attitude – the calm before the storm, so to say.

As soon as we spot the surreal marble sculpture *Sled* (2002), the moment of immersion, which we experienced when contemplating *Snow*, is quickly transformed into an oscillation in between disbelief and fascination – a discipline that Vital masters just as well as throwing snow balls. Since we are unable to trace any marks of the manufacturing process and the gray and white grain of marble coats the sled like a veil, we experience this common symbol of amusement and dynamism at once as a surreal, dreamlike and a static, eternal apparition. Because of this very coexistence of the relational and associative character of the sculpture with its alien materialization, *Sled* serves as a paradigm for Vital's aforementioned mastery of either domesticating cultural fragments or, as in this case, distorting them.

Vital's strong bonds with his homeland, especially his attachment to the mountains of the Engadin, but also his capacity to condense and transform visual impressions, his wit when dealing with everyday feelings and traditional wisdoms, as well as his playful approach to the concept of habitat and the notion of architecture are the subtle melody underlying his drawings. Especially while travelling, when the making of large-scale sculptures is rarely possible, the medium of drawing functions as the artist's outlet for emotions, as well as a playground for experiments. Mostly with either very simple, or else with rather unconventional materials - such as tape, plastic bags, cotton pads, dental floss, sigolin, straws and silicone patches - Vital captures the shapes of his homeland as well as moments of adventure on paper. Another important group of drawings is *Drawings for Buildings*, which unites conceptual preliminary sketches that were made for by now existing buildings, as well as utopian ideas and the study of simple architectonic forms. In this exhibition *Roof* (2017), *House* (2017), *Hard + Soft House* (2017) and *School House for Timbuktu* (2017) serve as examples of the autonomy and conceptual quality of this group of works.

*NAIV* is not trying to teach us anything, and yet the works show us, that we should learn to look, to look and to believe. When our eyes stumble upon *Snow Balls* (2017), the 700 plaster snowballs that cover the floor of the gallery's attic and that somehow appear like the friendly, animated half-brother of minimalism, we recognize that perhaps, every now and then, we should simply have a laugh.

Giorgia von Albertini