

## Augustas Serapinas *Wood and Snow*

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## Wood and Snow

by Edgaras Gerasimovičius

*Wood and Snow* is the second solo exhibition of Lithuanian artist Augustas Serapinas at Galerie Tschudi, Zuoz. This title is a direct reference to the main materials used in the show, which embody the dynamics between revealing and concealing characteristic of Serapinas' practice in general. The exhibition can be seen as a laconic and critical rethinking of a particular place through the specificity of the materials and their interplay, emphasizing what is essential to the identity of a place yet usually remains invisible or purposefully hidden from the outsider's eye.

The exhibition *Wood and Snow* is a continuation of Serapinas' long-standing interest in the relationship between vernacular architecture and modern monumental sculpture, with his first project exploring this realm being *Four Sheds* (2016, Fogo Island Arts, Newfoundland, CA), and one of his latest, *Rūdninkai Bathhouse* (2021, 13th Kaunas Biennial, Kaunas, Lithuania). Spreading across the gallery's ground floor spaces and courtyard, the exhibition consists of variations of sculptural compositions, built from elements of abandoned and decaying wooden houses. Serapinas acquires these buildings—some of them dating back to the 19th century—in different Lithuanian villages by browsing popular classifieds portals, where they are for sale as fire wood, on condition that the buyer dismantles the building and takes it away themselves.

By buying up centuries-old buildings no longer fit for residential purposes, Serapinas not only saves them from turning into ashes and the smoke of oblivion, but also opens them up to endless possibilities of formal and structural variations. The artist meticulously cleans the decayed wood of the walls and beams, revealing both the usually invisible handcrafted elements of the building—the structural nodes and the organization of details—but also the true extent of nature's destructive effect on the materials. The decay process is stopped by proofing the cleaned parts of the building with natural antiseptic materials or traditional techniques, such as treating roof segments with fire—a technique previously used to disinfect the wood and protect it from pests.

The way Serapinas uses parts of wooden village houses as ready-made building materials to make abstract sculptural compositions is close to the practices of the minimalist sculptors in the 60s and 70s. However, unlike the classical minimalist artists who chose to use ready-made building materials in search of the most economical artistic expression, Serapinas balances between sculptural abstraction and highlighting the material's ability to preserve signs of a particular place's history and the lives of its people. Indeed, materials tell stories: Serapinas has left a contemporary house number plate on one of the walls, which even today could probably help us trace the specific location

of the original building. The artist also tells us that the well-preserved roof of the building indicates that it used to be covered with asbestos shingles (also known by the slang term “shifer”), a material popular in the Soviet era, which is poisonous when crushed and under certain conditions even explosive. This simple upgrade is a silent indication that the house was inhabited by several generations of people.

Serapinas manipulates not only the parts of the building by creating new forms, but also the interplay between materials: the main structure in the former hay barn space is built without any nails and these are used to smoke the window panes, by covering them in rusty dust of the finely grinded original nails and then re-firing them. As the artist says, starting with the process of searching online, he approaches these Lithuanian countryside houses as archeological digs and uses all the things found on site not only to access their expressive potential, but also to preserve them in new ways. Moreover, the material and structural qualities of these buildings actively interact with the elements of the gallery space. On the one hand, they highlight the differences in the use of local materials in architecture, and on the other hand they direct the viewer’s gaze from the objects in the exhibition to the details of their surrounding environment, thus expanding the range of their gaze’s journey across the materials. Of course, this emerging relationship between the two buildings also implies a quiet irony with regard to the condition of art today: what is a neglected building from the geographic margins of Lithuania doing in a gallery at the foot of the Swiss Alps? However, this irony (or rather self-irony) is juxtaposed with the artist’s own relationship to the material: by exposing traditional handiwork in a decaying building and highlighting nature’s destructive effect on the material, Serapinas surrenders to this tension. In other words, rather than shaping the material by creating a resistance to it, he searches for new forms and meanings by working together with existing resistances. This economy of decaying materials and interventions in them has clear ecological implication.

The title of the exhibition *Wood and Snow* can be read as a poetic metaphor for the ephemeral nature of human life and memory. The wood used to build oneself a home will inevitably decay with the passage of time, and its remnants will merge with the horizon in the whiteness of the all-embracing snow. This intuitive desire to link snow in the title of the exhibition not only to the Zuoz landscape, but also to the topic of human memory is supported by the aforementioned logic of combining the modesty of vernacular architecture with the minimalist approach to monumentality. In studies of cultures of memory, vernacular objects and architecture are usually linked to community memory, whereas monuments are associated with the representation of abstract community values. The forms of vernacular architecture are firstly determined by basic human needs, while representation plays a secondary role, whereas monuments can be considered as almost exclusively representational objects. By appropriating objects of vernacular architecture and remodeling them in ways that are close to minimalist monumental sculpture, Serapinas combines these aspects of the representation of living memory and abstracted values. This connection creates a fragmented narrative about the current state of the social landscape in Lithuania’s periphery and the wider region.

During the three decades of Lithuania’s independence, the population of the country has diminished by a quarter (2,806,000 people registered in 2022), mostly due to emigration that resulted in the abandonment of not only individual homesteads, but entire settlements and villages, which were thus left to decay. However, the landscape of Lithuania’s provinces has been

transformed even more by the return of these emigrants, with better financial conditions encouraging them to actively renew their material environment, thus simply eliminating the outbuildings and residential architecture that had been created, maintained and preserved generation after generation.

In the exhibition *Wood and Snow*, Serapinas captures this slow but drastic change in Lithuania's (and perhaps the whole region's) landscape, not only preserving the disappearing vernacular architecture—and with it the material signs of craft skills, techniques and knowledge—but also opening it up to a new life and alternative future prospects in the context of art.