



Lithuanian, born and based, Augustas Serapinas is an artist who works with curiosity and context, devising site-specific installations and uncovering rich human stories hidden just out of sight. His work is born of empathy and open-ended engagement. Most of Serapinas's shows begin with a conversation with whoever happens to be nearby.

His most recent solo exhibition at Emalin involved "rescuing" a fleet of snowmen from the streets of his hometown of Vilnius and transporting them to a freezer in the east London gallery. The title of the show, *February 13th*, refers to the snowmen's birthday. He is also the youngest artist showing at this year's Venice Biennale, where he has two works on show, the *Chair for the Invigilator* series – in which a series of lifeguard chairs to be used by the otherwise invisible exhibition invigilators are scattered throughout the Arsenale space – and *Vygintas, Kirilas & Semionovas* – in which the three eponymous children were invited to rearrange materials taken from a disused Soviet-era nuclear power plant in Lithuania.

Guy Mackinnon-Little spoke with the artist about everyday creativity, the contradictions of the art world and doing things without knowing why.

**How do you understand the role of biography in your work? You draw heavily on specific stories and scenarios, but these are often presented so as to remain a little oblique.**

I don't give the whole story away because the work comes together in a very spontaneous way. For instance, I'll have a conversation and someone might make some passing reference to "the labs" nearby. And I say, "Where are the labs?" They'll say, "I don't know, but the person who worked here before might." So then I go and speak to that person and they'll lead me to someone else. There is a certain lightness in how I approach my work in that it mostly happens in one go. There is no deep research. I arrive somewhere, and things start to happen. I just see where it leads. And this is why you don't feel a full story, because I myself am not really aware of the full story myself. I'm aware of bits of stories, and that is what I bring to a show.

**Is that process of discovery pleasurable?**

Yes, definitely. If I were to make something deep where I had to research it for months and months, then I already know everything and there is no point in making the work. It would be self-illustrative. I learn through the process. I do something without really understanding why. You start a conversation and you see where it can lead. Of course, you think what you can do on the back of it, but it's a spontaneous, expressive approach. Every few days the idea changes in the lead up to the show. At a certain moment, I stumble onto something I know may have potential and after that I don't think further, I just do it. I try to catch up. The moment I don't know what I'm trying to do is what's important. You don't know what you do, and this is why you do it. This is why I am an artist.

**I read somewhere that you see your work as essentially about human relations. This struck me, as "human relations" is often evoked as quite a grand, almost transcendent idea, but your work, as you've just described, is incredibly context specific, in a way the whole thing is context. Could you say a little about the tension, or the lack of tension, between this attention to specific contexts on the one hand and this very general condition on the other?**

When I say my work is about human connection what I have in my mind is very literal: I approach every situation through people.

**"About" is almost the wrong word. You could instead say your work is composed of human relations...**

Yeah, it's just present in my practice. It's about relations, but it's not directly about that. It's the way everything is made though. Without those relations there would be no work. At the same time, it doesn't necessarily mean I become friends with the person. You chat, you talk and you get something.



Augustas Serapinas, *Vygintas, Kirilas & Semionovas*, 2018

**The way in which your work is arranged often makes me think of how, if a child has to pass the time – on a long trip or in a waiting room for a doctor – they will just start to rearrange the objects in front of them – stacking small objects, bending paper clips into new shapes or building forts. That seems to relate to the spontaneity and improvisation with which you approach your work, but this kind of activity is made use of directly in *Vygintas, Kirilas & Semionovas* where children construct the work. Could you say a little about that process? What is it that interests you about childhood?**

For a long time I knew there were these auctions that take place for disused nuclear power plants in Lithuania. Then I found one and I bought these two pieces of wall and then I thought, “What can I do with this?” That’s how I work: I know where to put my first step, but not my second or my third or my fifth. Then I started to think about the kids of people who work in that power plant. The town where they live, it’s not quite disappearing, but the plant is shutting down and its future is unclear, already many people have left. It’s the kids who will have to deal with that. Every time we show the piece, the kids come and start to play. I build a rough structure, they arrive, and then when they say it’s finished, it’s finished.

As to the second part of your question, I always ask myself when I do something what I would think if someone did that for me as a kid. That moment of, “Wow, it’s like that!” I construct my work through those impressions.

**When a child plays a game they’re always working things out intuitively and taking things in as they go along. There are rules, but they can change in an instant.**

Exactly. I play within the rules of the art world. Most of my inspirations don’t come from art. I’m inspired by how people

solve everyday problems and how creative people can be when faced with unusual situations. One example I sometimes give is a prison. People come up with all kinds of ingenious plans – how to make a knife, where to hide it and so on. There are all kinds of systems designed to suppress that kind of activity, yet still they manage. I find that kind of practical ingenuity amazing.

**It makes me think of that idea that you can gain a new understanding of a machine by taking it apart and rearranging it in a new way, and how that intuition can be applied to the world.**

That's how I think. I have a show, and I head out into the neighbourhood to see what could happen. Or I ask someone. We are here, speaking as part of a certain circle. There will be other people nearby who are part of a very different circle. There are many parallel timelines that overlap in a place. There are, as you say, different parts that can be put together. You change your view, you step aside – becoming a viewer rather than a creator – and gain a new awareness. I don't want to modify things, I just want to note them. Most of my work comes back to, "Look at this!" or "Look at that!" or "Look, invigilators!"



Augustas Serapinas, *Chair for the Invigilator (Brown)*, 2019

**Could you say a little bit about the *Invigilators* series? What were some of the intuitions behind the work?**

I won't name the institution but I saw a show, or one work in particular, which was all about racial oppression, and there was this black cleaner cleaning around the work. That image struck me. There is always this kind of mismatch in the art

world. Usually in a show, there's the artist, the curator, the production, the technicians, the cleaners, the guards and the invigilators. I just wanted to note this. For me it has always been interesting how art often deals with all these topics more broadly, it's in fashion to be political, but still doesn't refer to any of this.

In Venice, they call them mediators not invigilators. They have two shifts of four or five hours, and they have nowhere to sit. My idea was, on the one hand, just to give them somewhere to rest and, on the other hand, to elevate them. Obviously it's a little humorous, but there's a truth in every joke. They sit when they're tired. It's important that they are actually using it. Like we were saying earlier, it's not just about them but implicates them.

**To end off, I've heard most of your studio visits take place in an old sewer pipe off the Vilnia River. What is the significance of this place to you? How did you encounter it?**

I was finishing at the academy and that was my main work. As a young artist with a simple background, I had no money to rent a studio. As I said earlier, creativity can come out of necessity. I was interested in how the space could affect our activity. By arranging a space in a certain way, I could change how the conversation might unfold. When you do a studio visit normally, you never get to the point. That space was a way of demonstrating my work rather than just talking about it. Now, it might be seen as humorous, but at the time I took it incredibly seriously. The first time I invited a curator, I thought this is either going to go really well or it will be a complete disaster. ●