

THE COMMON GUILD

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Photo by Ruth Clark

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COMMENTARIES

Ugo Rondinone

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The Miraculous Ability of Nature

Ideas of transformation pervade Ugo Rondinone's practice. The sculptures and interventions the artist has made for his exhibition at The Common Guild have physically transformed the nineteenth century townhouse, and through the sum of its individual parts Rondinone affects a process of alchemy, magical in its suspension of time and place.

The title of the exhibition, *primitive*, takes us back and forward between art histories, from the caves of Lascaux to the appropriation of non-Western artefacts by modernist artists. Rondinone has played with such connotations before, creating series of tribal masks, described as the artist's own personal 'zodiac'. In The Common Guild, the central motif of the birds, each named for a different natural phenomenon and the clocks without hands, perhaps point most obviously to the primacy of the earth and its cosmological forces over the contrivance of measurable time imposed by man. Yet, on entering the exhibition, we enter a luminous, liminal space, where the outside world is no longer visible through the whitewashed windows, where light shifts subtly and time is uncertain, and where, in the accumulation of these elements, new associations are offered up.

The handless clock faces appear like suns, their stained glass evoking the medieval craft designed to inspire awe in those that experienced its refracted light and dazzling colours in sacred places. The birds, made by hand in clay and cast in bronze for perpetuity, are each unique, their poses and features suggesting the characteristics of youth, age and traits of human sensibilities. The names of the birds encompass both minutiae and vastness in the natural world: *the dust, the storm, the pebble, the cloud, the forest, the stone, the hail*. Just as the birds possess anthropomorphic qualities, the knots and fault lines of the wooden panels that cover the floors transform into eyes and mouths, the wings of butterflies, the beaks of birds. Wood appears in other works by Rondinone; its grain forms the backdrop for his portfolio of woodcuts *Poems (X)*, over which words gently fall: 'time / has / no / sisters'.¹

Birds, cosmology, the sun, time and wood. These most elementary components, brought into the interior realm of the gallery combine to produce a complete environment that nevertheless hovers between states. It is a three-dimensional space that evokes the two-dimensional territories imagined by Max Ernst, the surrealist artist acknowledged by his peers as the magician of the movement. In 1929, the surrealist writer, André Breton likened the work of surrealist artists to that of medieval alchemists. This was not a reference to the mythic transmutation of base metals into gold, but to a reading of alchemy as a journey leading to enlightenment and self-knowledge. In Ernst's compositions of the 1920s we find the matrix of wood, bird, circle/sun interwoven with the alchemist's vocabulary of signs and symbols. His innovation of frottage brought the texture of bark and wood grain into his dense forest landscapes.² Birds populate Ernst's works, a recurring image that relates to his fascination with Freudian theories of psychoanalysis but that also references the symbolic place of birds in alchemical phases. The hollow suns that linger in Ernst's darkened skies recall the circular diagrams of ancient alchemical studies that plotted the alignment of the planets. With these elements, Ernst created compositions that engage senses beyond the rational. His landscapes reflect the psychological terrain of dreams, conveying man's subconscious drives and the awesome, mystical power of nature.

The dream-like and the non-rational return us to Rondinone's *primitive*. For the artist emphasises that his work is to be felt, rather than to be understood. And indeed, the alchemical journey Rondinone leads us on, transports us to a realm of suspended time that reveals logical comprehension to be incomplete, reminding us that we must all ultimately heed our inner instincts.

Lucy Askew, Senior Curator (Exhibitions),
Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art

¹ Ugo Rondinone, *Poems (X)*, 2006, portfolio of ten woodcuts, edition of 33. The woodcuts in the portfolio feature different texts.

² Ernst's process of frottage involved working media over paper or canvas laid at random on pieces of wood such as floorboards and bark to produce textures on the support of his drawing or painting.