

# Radouan Zeghidour: Jian

Essay by Meg Boulton

Radouan Zeghidour is an artist of and out of time. The series of pieces on display at Yamamoto Keiko Rochaix explore an archaeology of forgetting and a construction of memories that at once are and never were, presented through a series of sculpted works that guide you around and through the space of the gallery, in a manner that evokes the artist's process of making work. The pieces in Jian present object identities that speak of fragments, of found objects and of encountered places now lost, acting as both memory and monument of the artist's experiences and his forbidden discoveries, here made manifest for a public gaze. The works presented in Jian find their inspiration in Zeghidour's private explorations and wanderings in the subterranean, abandoned, illicit spaces of Paris, performing in the gallery as the remembered record of the past objects and places discovered and created by the artist, now presented for our experience as we shadow his footsteps through his work.



Nec Hemo, 2016, Polystyrene, resin, canvas and wax, 200 × 80 cm

Zeghidour's sculptures provide a veiled, temporal encounter with the forgotten, the prohibited and the abandoned, enlivening the hidden spaces and abject objects of his uncovering, unveiling them, remembering and remaking them - allowing them to intersect with our present in the space of the gallery. In a wide-ranging, nuanced practice that encompasses a diverse range of referents and media, the works are ephemeral and shifting, comprising gigantic structures and beguiling surfaces, all with an elegant and intuitive attention to the material qualities of both the original encounter and the (re)made, remembered objects displayed here.

Ruin and Myth are both here in the gallery, informing our engagement with the works, glimpsed through these created objects and structures that look to a classical tradition and emerge from an intense interest and pleasure in the ruined, the forgotten or the left-behind. We are now in a place of lost things, refound. The forms in the show, like the mythological narratives that inform the artist, emerge from the underworld of his exploration to shape our encounter with them in the space of the gallery; appearing different, changed and full of secrets, offering hidden, runic maps and elided ripples from which to begin our own exploration. Building on the lost and the hidden, resonating with the temporal works Zeghidour creates in his wider practice under the Parisian streets, Jian plays with the idea of fragment and ruin: presenting a series of works that explore “Ruins of the Past, Ruins of the Present” and imaginary “Ruins of the Future”.

Keiko Rochaix, the gallerist and curator of Jian, says of Zeghidour’s art:

“Grossly primitive and infinitely precious at the same time, his works are visually grasping, hitting the viewer at first sight. And that is before one digs into the conceptual sides of the body of his oeuvres; all the works are held together by almost enigmatic, other-worldly notions. Radouan’s talent as a visual artist is that he recreates/produces unearthly ideas with such base, physical, tangible materials. And that is exactly what you see in Jian: the notion of ephemerality, somehow physically present in the space of the Gallery.”

The ephemeral quality noted by Rochaix is unavoidable here – Zeghidour’s work offers an embodied, sculpted encounter with ideas of the past and the future, presenting traces of what has been, alongside an intimation of things that may never yet come to be. These works display a complex relationship between time, substance and memory, realised through objects and through surface – seen in form, and inscribed in the detail of his works. His sculptures emerge, Persephone-like, from the subterranean spaces that feed and inform his creative practice, works torn from dark spaces, slowly fading in the light – material dissolving into memory before our gaze.

Out of this body of work the pieces envisioned by the artist as the “Ruins of the Past” are perhaps particularly intriguing as they play with ideas of art and artist, making and meaning – apposite considerations for a show concerned with themes of reclamation and destruction, desecration and memory, object and time. The sculptures, “Nec Hemo” and “Ekpurosis”, both made in 2016, are bas-relief panels, created from old and abandoned sculptures the artist discovered in the underground basement of the school of the Beaux-Arts in Paris during his studies. The original objects in this subterranean storehouse date from a period of art making that relied on the classical copy – learning to make through the repeated process of remaking, resulting in a plethora of classical (re)constructions now long-forgotten in the studio practice of today, copied works shrouded in obscurity and placed out of sight. Zeghidour describes finding these works in the basement of the École, “full of dust and partly destroyed”. Taking these found objects he then took moulds from the classical copies, working with this unauthorized collection without permission, reworking them, transforming them, adding complex layers to their borrowed forms. Like much of his other work, these pieces are clearly, in part, an archaeological exercise, extracted as they are from the past methods and traditions of the School, here replicated and transformed from shadowy, forgotten objects into something new, something other, something else.

Their forms are intriguing, their Classicized origins at once present and presented. The frieze form of the original is (re)presented here in the black and white iterations of surface that preserve the running forms of the figures, and their columnated environment, presenting them in their fragmented and partial state, remaking them in a new narrative that at once remembers the grandeur and struggle of their artistic

origin and acknowledges the abasement of their current state. During the making of these works the artist used latex to mould the original sculpted blocks; in the process inadvertently stripping these abandoned forms of the layers of dust and dirt that had collected on their surfaces; impregnating his subsequent casts with the visceral traces and molecular memories of these forlorn artistic remnants, that were then transformed with layers of pigment, and fabric, and wax and canvas and resin, that at once echo and obscure these dusty originals. Their surfaces perform differently for the viewer, one, as barrier, the other as window; asking us, as viewers, to look, and to look through.



Ekpurosis, 2016, Polystyrene, resin, canvas and wax, 200 × 80 cm

The Classical figures, the frieze form that contains them, the traditions that informed their original construction and their current emplacement are all here, in the works and in the gallery space with us, (re)called into being through Zeghidour's sculptures. These are twinned works, speaking of forgotten making and ruined objects, reminding us of the destruction of the Classical world, of the violent sackings, breakings and eruptions that infamously disrupted the cool, draped perceptions of calm, rational, civilization; historical toga-strewn phantasms constructed and then deconstructed in the mind's eye in the moment it takes to absorb the blacked patina and fragmented form of "Ekpurosis"; but here, also, amid the frantic and mobile haste of this imagined historical flight, where the sculpted surface acts as an echoic simulacra of the forlorn and immobile Beaux-Arts objects, here recast as work, but also there – abandoned, forever resting out of sight underneath the (art) world above. The layers of wax, resin, pigment, patina and polystyrene added to the moulded form are compelling, causing and creating breaks in the facture of the work; forming eddies, speckles, drifts, pools – spaces that arrest the eye and defy the narrative form of the original. In following the figures along the frieze, one is liable to visually fall into a slick of wax, or to stick, captive, in the be-speckled patina caught on the draped and outlined shoulder of a figure, or blown, dusted down the striations of a column. These layers, interleaved over form are timeless, and beyond time, they halt the narrative of the piece, and the experience of viewing it, an anachronic pause that murmurs of a larger, lost chronology.

The blacked pigments, and dust-speckled surface of "Ekpurosis" creates the impression of a rush of figures scrambling out of the rubble of a destroyed world, a ruin of the Classical ideal, a ripple of a long-gone, world-ending disaster, preserved in the patina of the piece, which melts and glides and puddles, while also presenting

an eschatological episteme of nineteenth century art-making. Here, in the gallery, it becomes an artistic marker, a grave-stone if you will; at once acting as classical corpse and as a memorial monument that is an unwilling witness to its own end(ing). "Nec Hemo," on the other hand, presents a rather different narrative to our eyes, white and shrouded, veiled, hidden. Where the surface of "Ekpurosis" is dark, mobile, frantic, patinaed and stained with the detritus of history, and dark, deep striations of colour, and form and substance, this piece is static and cool – asking us to look through the veiled figures, past the intimated surface texture and beyond the shadowed history of the object to the narrative layers beneath. This is a process of viewing that replicates the process of carving and casting that produced this sculpture and its model, as well as the archaeological methodologies that prompted the artistic impulse to find and revive these abandoned pieces from their obscure places, yet, perversely, impelled the artist to keep them draped, veiled, semi-seen. As well, like its counterpart, it informs the manner of our subsequent looking – which again demands a careful looking through, a looking past; uncovering, unveiling, revealing.

These skeuomorphic friezes are impossible objects, plaster casts of carved originals, resurrected here in their third essence, simultaneously embodying original, copy and representation - the remade form of an abandoned corpus, and the enlivened twin of objects that will, in all likelihood, spend the rest of time out of sight and out of mind. Here, though, they occupy both sight and mind, existing as complex objects that ask us to celebrate the idea of the ruin as we remember the past, summoning an awareness of time as both macrocosmic and microcosmic experience, speaking of the sweeping loss of past histories, and the smaller, more private loss of the forgotten object. These works exist as sculptures that potently occupy our thoughts, although, like their foreshadowing originals, are perhaps all too soon to inhabit only our memories - glimpsed here, briefly, through the intervention of the artist in bringing the long and not so long past into our present, revealing the obscured and revitalising the usually dormant.

All photography by Jean-Baptiste Monteil