

Venske & Spänle. *Origins*

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The beauty of stone

Michelangelo claimed that every block of stone has a figure inside it, waiting patiently and in silence for the right hands to bring it out. We can see as much in the *Prigioni* at the Accademia in Florence, the “slaves” originally conceived for the tomb of Pope Julius II who literally seem to come alive as they emerge from the stone.

Accordingly, sculpting does not consist in modelling an inert block of stone but in revealing the form that lies deeply asleep within the stone. Erwin Panofsky summed it up neatly when he said: “Michelangelo’s work shows us how real sculpture does not come from adding but from taking away, revealing the hidden essence that was always there.”

This is the foundation of the idealist theory of form, which consists of the divine encounter between the artist and the material, in which the sculptor is merely a medium who attentively listens to the “voices” whispering from inside the material, in order to liberate the figure lying within. In this way, every blow of the chisel could not in truth be called an act of creation, but rather a communication in an ongoing silent conversation between the tangible and that ideal form, between the materiality of the stone and the ethereal nature of its spirit.

On the other hand, more than a few historians and theorists have defended the fascination with the stone itself, the ranges of colour of each mineral and their potential for display. Indeed, a certain poetics can already be sensed in Bernardo Pérez de Vargas’s *De re metallica* (1568), when he recalled Virgil’s words about natural phenomena and defined

Physics as “the speculative science of natural things,” implying a manifest fascination with the material itself.

And here we can find an affinity with other intellectuals, like Roger Caillois and his extraordinary *The Writing of Stones* (1970). In her introduction to the English translation of the book, Marguerite Yourcenar said that Caillois “seeks a substance more lasting, an object more pure. And he finds it in the race of stones.” To be sure, Caillois has no problem admitting the sense of wonder he feels for the inner beauty of these minerals. This was also true for many others before him, like Ulisse Aldrovandi and Athanasius Kircher, among others.

Though its taxonomy is not the focus here, it is clear that for sculptors like Julia Venske and Gregor Spänle, the discourse on material is not a minor issue, especially when one’s notes their choice of marble from quarries such as Carrara and Laas. In fact, they told Marc Wellmann that “the material itself already has a soul and, once polished, it possesses the same translucent quality as human skin.” This does not entail an idealized conception of the material, but rather a profound fascination with its physical properties. In addition, “you have to be very sure with marble, there’s no room for experimentation.”

That being said, perhaps, for *Origins*, a more telling appreciation can be taken from Emil Cioran’s introduction to the original edition of the aforementioned book by Caillois when he described the “fascination with stones” as an exploration of and nostalgia for the primordial, to become “contemporary of the immemorial.” To address this possibility, it is worth recalling the trajectory of this pair of artists.

The Venske & Spänle style

Venske and Spänle have been working together since 1991, engaging in a particular type of collaboration. They confess that their “first joint exhibitions were more like staged confrontations between very different artistic conceptions,” with Julia Venske leaning more toward organicism while Gregor Spänle focused more on command of technique.

Nonetheless, they soon began to forge a unique individual style, predicated on the transformation of marble into a vital and sensual reality, rejecting the widely held convention that views this material as rigid and static. For this reason, their work can be situated within the orbit of organic sculpture, whose most notable precedents include Constantin Brancusi, Jean (Hans) Arp and Louise Bourgeois.

To understand how their style developed, we could recover a statement they made to Marc Wellmann some years ago: “The beings became more complex, until they eventually came into being through the addition of folds.” This gave birth to what they call creatures (the most famous being *smörfs*, though not forgetting *gumpfoten*, *myzoten* and *helotrophén*), a series of playful invertebrate specimens without visible faces or limbs, which “convey the fluid elasticity of an organic material.”

The results speak for themselves: they look like living organisms, thanks to their biomorphic character and a painstaking sculpting technique that softens the surface of the pieces and lends them a dynamic appearance. The sensation is so vivid that they have never looked on them as objects but rather as fellow companions.

At the same time, they have also developed an installation-based vocation, which they understand as *Eingriff*, a term that can be translated as “intervention,” “intrusion,” “corrective action or measure,” “disruption” or “incursion” and which, for them, “refers both to public space and to the body.”

In addition, they combine their marble sculptures with other elements, such as automobiles, ensuring that the intervention is developed in contexts that contrast with the settings conventionally associated with marble, thereby offloading much of its historical weight.

From this perspective, they aspire to landscape-like compositions, demonstrating a desire for integration with the space and interaction with the viewer, as fundamental components of the overall *mise-en-scène*. Good proof can be seen in *Autoeater* (2017) in Atlanta and particularly in *Eclosión en Valencia* (2014), with a special mention for the relationship established between the organic—with marble as the medium—and the urban.

From Valencia to primordial nature

Their successive sojourns in Valencia give a good account of the evolution of their concept of art while at once introducing us to new characters in their universes. The aforementioned intervention from 2014 was undoubtedly a happy “invasion” of the city, but there are also a stock of memories of other more private interventions like the *smörfs* and the *myzoten* (creatures with suction pads that latch onto walls and people, watching over the spectator) that emerge from the very bowels of the emblematic building located

at number 5 calle Cabillers for the project *Inventar el espacio 2020. Intimidades colectivas*.

And now they are back to Valencia again with *Origins*, a project that continues to cultivate those forms somewhere between organic and artificial, though it is also true that one can discern a certain shift in the way they present their *smörfs*, shaped by the framework they have conceived for them.

To understand it better, one ought to bear in mind the above quote from Cioran, in which the mineral kingdom adumbrates a possible path to the primordial. This point of view can be traced back to Julia Venske's artist residency in Galicia, a region whose forests, and stones, have served as a source of inspiration for the artists, to the extent of feeling immersed in a setting that encourages us to think about our origins.

As a result of this quasi-mystical experience, they felt the urge to demarcate the works in the gallery by means of two natural environments: the first, unsurprisingly, is a forest from Galicia, the source of a natural element, and the second is a desert landscape full of rocks, as if they were the extremes of the same reality.

They thus engender a new landscape within the fictional space of the gallery, a landscape strewn with *smörfs* and a strange field of "eggs" that poses the age-old paradoxical question of which came first: the egg or the creature.

And so, the whole scene is shrouded in the aura of this primordial landscape, which seeps out beyond the walls of the gallery, perhaps entering into contact with some original truth, albeit without being dragged down by the pull of any strong physical or symbolic gravity, thanks, as always, to the sense of humour that always underpins their work.

The layout of this artistic intervention could even be linked to various works on display at the Venice Biennale in 2025, largely characterized by a wish to learn from “natural intelligence,” championed as a source of inspiration for innovative solutions and forms.

In *Origins* this intention is presented as a thought-provoking metaphor that could well be understood in line with the questions Roland Barthes posed in his lectures at Collège de France: “How to Live Together” (1977). This question invites a rethinking of contemporaneity, because we are living “at the same time” as other people.

In response, Barthes explored the manifold dynamics between the individual and life in community, documenting various practices that endeavour to escape from society. Venske and Spänle, like Henry D. Thoreau before them, are also tempted to escape into nature, keenly aware of the loss of these primordial forests at the hands of a colonized nature. That being said, this does not mean a flight into nostalgia, but rather a desire to leave behind the differences between *bios* (human life) and *zoe* (nonhuman life), in the continuum between nature and culture advocated by Rosi Braidotti.

From this perspective, we can espy another horizon that shelters us from the elements, opening up the possibility of negotiating a pathway to a new day. Being aware of it enables the reappearance of clemency in our time and the joyful experience of nature, as we await the radiant epiphany of a new bond with our environment.