

Roof and Walls

Augustas Serapinas

13 May – 25 June 2022

Emalin is pleased to present *Roof and Walls*, a solo exhibition of new works by Lithuanian artist Augustas Serapinas. This is the artist's third exhibition with the gallery.

Over the past three years, Augustas Serapinas acquired several sites of historic vernacular architecture across Lithuania. Increasingly disused over time, these century-old structures are threatened by decomposition due to abandonment or destruction for use as firewood. For *Roof and Walls*, Serapinas obtained a dilapidated wooden house located in the southeastern village of Rūdninkai. In past bodies of work Serapinas focused on the walls and windows of agricultural sheds in rural Lithuania, here his attention turns towards the shingled pine roof of a residential house. Detached and removed from the building, Serapinas sectioned the roof into segments and exposed them to fire. The ashes produced in the process of charring the shingles were then burnt into glass panes, recirculating the material transformations of the Rūdninkai house. In the centre of the exhibition space is a sculpture constructed of its dismantled walls, which have been turned into shingles themselves. After the exhibition closes, these will be used to cover a new roof in Lithuania.

Serapinas takes apart and reassembles the materials which give form to our life and reenacts the processes that shape them. Through his interventions into the circuits of exchange, he makes visible the infrastructures which organise our bodies and condition our encounters.

The exhibition is accompanied by an essay written by Anders Kreuger. On the occasion of the exhibition, Emalin will publish the artist's first book, *House from Rūdninkai*, which will be launched in June 2022.

Repurposing Rūdninkai by Anders Kreuger

The village of Rūdninkai in south-eastern Lithuania, not far from the Belarusian border, takes its name from iron ore (rūda in Lithuanian, derived from a word that means red, i.e. rusty) and is an old centre for small-scale mining and iron making. This part of Lithuania was never well-off. Governed by Poland before the Second World War, it was not touched by the agrarian reforms of independent Lithuania that abolished large estates and displaced rural populations from traditional, densely built villages to smaller separate farmsteads.

For the Kaunas Biennale of 2021 Augustas Serapinas transferred an entire bathhouse from Rūdninkai to a lawn outside the House of Lithuanian Basketball in Kaunas's somewhat dispersed Old Town, near the confluence of Lithuania's main rivers, the Nemunas and the Neris. Through such strategic displacement of traditional use objects, artists make themselves vulnerable to accusations of cultural appropriation or colonisation of a common heritage. Using the bathhouse as a ready-made sculpture, Serapinas bends it to his artistic purposes and presents it under his own name. It may be argued that he is exploiting the creative skills of the anonymous 'ordinary people' who were the structure's first authors.

Yet when he absorbs their understated utilitarian aesthetic into his practice he is also rendering homage and acknowledging debt on a fundamental, infra-structural level. He opens the work, as process and result, up to collective identification (if not ownership; his artefacts based on vernacular architecture are purposely saleable, collectable) and enhances its dependence on the same kind of shared, unspoken knowledge that Plato refers to with his notion of the idea: the 'mental blueprint' of a chair that every Greek carpenter would consult before making the actual object.

In Serapinas's new solo exhibition at Emalin, the awkward ambiguity of facing a complete rural building in a completely urban context is refined into an abstract 'language of form' – I will never understand why English chooses to deprive itself of the versatile German words *Formsprache* and *Gestaltung* – that allows the remains of discarded houses from Rūdninkai to become the structural equivalents of paintings, sculptures and (in an extended interpretation of the term) photographs. After serving the families that built them for several generations, often more than a century, some wooden houses are dismantled when the logs start to rot and sold on popular trading websites such as skelbiu.lt, where Serapinas – and anyone else – can pick them up for the price of firewood.

This time he started from the roof, or rather, the idea of the roof. First he cut squares measuring 180 × 190 cm out of the shingled wooden roof that used to cover one of these discarded houses from Rūdninkai. Then he blackened them with fire, a traditional method for making the wood resilient to the weather and eradicate pests. These are the 'paintings' in the exhibition. Next, he cut some of the pine logs from the house's walls into thin planks to be used as a new set of shingles, well

aware that pinewood is usually considered too soft and vulnerable for this purpose. The as yet unblackened planks may rather be understood as representing the idea of shingles. Yet they still need to dry properly, and that is how they are displayed here, bundled together with little splinters of wood inserted between them to circulate the air. Together they form the 'sculpture'. Finally Serapinas collected soot and other dust from the process of turning the roof cut-outs into black monochromes and used it for etching cloud-like non-images into window panes reclaimed from the same house through yet another process of burning. These ghostly glass negatives are the 'photographs'.

As we can see, Serapinas has meant all three categories of work in this exhibition to be both self-contained aesthetic objects (assuming referential functions within a western-centric system of modern and contemporary art) and contingent side-effects of a work process (and work ethic) belonging to a system of subsistence and survival that has formed over many centuries in a part of north-eastern Central Europe only tangentially impacted by the empires of antiquity. In Rūdninkai, written history remains a shallower layer of time than in the Roman city of London. Serapinas's new works are simultaneously part of recent art history and recent prehistory, as it were. Both these readings are substantiated by the works themselves, which are made to speak with their own voices but also to contradict themselves.

Yet, why aestheticise the life-hacks of anonymous authors in a context where they are already being convincingly repurposed as articulations of a system parallel to western high art? Should we even consider folk building traditions as a form of art? The original meaning of architecture was 'something higher than ordinary building', so perhaps we ought to speak of the house from Rūdninkai as 'tecture' rather than architecture? (Just as we, whenever possible, ought to speak of important people rather than Very Important People.)

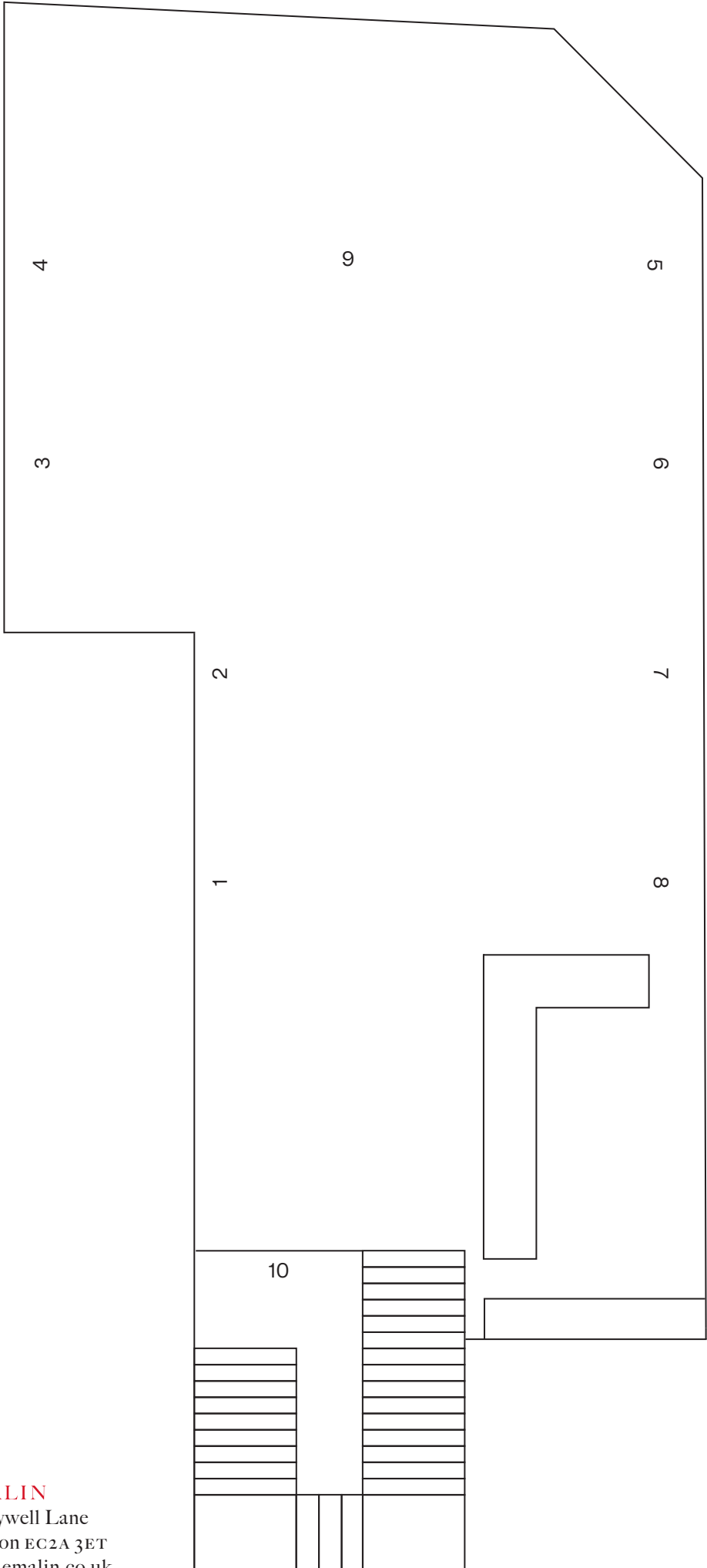
This brings complication to the path that Serapinas is encouraging his viewers to choose, hoping it will bring them to a point where they can face a black monochrome without the urge to judge it as either painting or building, cosmopolitan or vernacular, contemporary or transhistorical. By reminding us of where the elements of the new works come from, they also risk undermining our immediate visual understanding of them as works – and as the outcome of a work ethic that remains ethical even when tweaked to fit into an art-world framework. Serapinas has built this and other complications into a display that otherwise threatened to become just a bit too tight, too deadpan. These very New York adjectives can never be the benchmark for a practice that remains in meaningful touch with Rūdninkai. Augustas Serapinas knows that better than anyone.

LIST OF WORKS

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|----|---|-----|---|
| 1. | Augustas Serapinas
<i>Roof from Rūdninkai,
Segment 1, 2022</i>
charred reclaimed wood, nails
182 × 191 × 12 cm
71 5/8 × 75 1/4 × 4 3/4 inches | 6. | Augustas Serapinas
<i>Roof from Rūdninkai,
Segment 6, 2022</i>
charred reclaimed wood, nails
184.5 × 187.6 × 12.1 cm
72 5/8 × 73 7/8 × 4 3/4 inches |
| 2. | Augustas Serapinas
<i>Roof from Rūdninkai,
Segment 2, 2022</i>
charred reclaimed wood, nails
179 × 180 × 8 cm
70 1/2 × 70 7/8 × 3 1/8 inches | 7. | Augustas Serapinas
<i>Roof from Rūdninkai,
Segment 7, 2022</i>
charred reclaimed wood, nails
184.5 × 194 × 12 cm
72 5/8 × 76 3/8 × 4 3/4 inches |
| 3. | Augustas Serapinas
<i>Roof from Rūdninkai,
Segment 3, 2022</i>
charred reclaimed wood, nails
188 × 186 × 7 cm
74 1/8 × 73 1/4 × 2 3/4 inches | 8. | Augustas Serapinas
<i>Roof from Rūdninkai,
Segment 8, 2022</i>
charred reclaimed wood, nails
184.5 × 194 × 12 cm
72 5/8 × 76 3/8 × 4 3/4 inches |
| 4. | Augustas Serapinas
<i>Roof from Rūdninkai,
Segment 4, 2022</i>
charred reclaimed wood, nails
181 × 196 × 10 cm
71 1/4 × 77 1/8 × 4 inches | 9. | Augustas Serapinas
<i>Wood shingles made of the
house from Rūdninkai, 2022</i>
wooden roof tiles
dimensions variable |
| 5. | Augustas Serapinas
<i>Roof from Rūdninkai,
Segment 5, 2022</i>
charred reclaimed wood, nails
190.5 × 185 × 10.4 cm
75 × 72 7/8 × 4 1/8 inches | 10. | Augustas Serapinas
<i>Ashes from the house
in Rūdninkai, 2022</i>
glass, ash
in four parts:
91.4 × 162.5 × 0.8 cm
36 × 64 × 1/4 inches |

Augustas Serapinas (b. 1990, Vilnius, Lithuania) lives and works in Vilnius. He graduated with a BFA from the Vilnius Academy of Arts in 2013. Solo exhibitions include *Diana*, CCA Tel Aviv, IL (2021); *20 Apartments, P/////AKT*, Amsterdam, NL (2020); *February 13th*, Emalin, London, UK (2019); *Where is Luna*, CURA Basement, Rome, IT (2018); *Blue Pen*, David Dale, Glasgow International, UK (2018); and *Sigi*, Kunsthalle Wien, AT (2017). Selected group exhibitions include *Arcadia*, Oranjewoud, NL (2022); Toronto Biennial of Art, CA (2022); 13th Kaunas Biennial, LT (2021); 58th October Salon, Belgrade Biennial, RS (2021); CAC Contemporary Art Center, Vilnius, LT (2020); RIBOCA2: Riga International Biennial of Contemporary Art, LV (2020); 58th Venice Biennale, IT (2019); Baltic Triennial 13, Vilnius, LT (2018); and Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna, AT (2017), among others.

Upcoming exhibitions of his work will be held at the National Gallery of Art, Vilnius, LT; Galerie Tschudi, Zuoz, CH; Misk Art Institute, Riyadh, SA; MO Museum, Vilnius, LT; and steirischer herbst, Graz, AT (all 2022).



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