



QUOTE CELESTI

NOVEMBER 12 – DECEMBER 31, 2023



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—Charles Ray

I wondered why that carpet is there. It is for grounding. Each story has its own landscape, each and every one of us needs its own place—call it ngayah, serendipity or freedom

—Michele Bertolino

KAYU

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Kayu – Lucie Fontaine branch in Bali – in collaboration with the House of Masks and Puppets Setia Darma, is delighted to present its fourteenth project, “Quote Celesti,” a solo exhibition by Italian artist Maurizio Vetrugno on display at the House of Masks and Puppets Setia Darma in Bali, Indonesia.

This exhibition is part of the cycle of solo exhibitions, which began in 2015 with Luigi Ontani, and continued with Radu Comşa, Ashley Bickerton, Arahmaiani, Sally Smart and Jonathan Hagard. This program investigates the peripheral state, whether of an artist or of an artwork, of being *altrove* [elsewhere], in a continuous strategy of exchange and collaboration between the invited artists and Lucie Fontaine’s employee in Bali, who is an artist himself and whose practice refers to heritage, local culture and traditional techniques. Another important aspect of this project is the desire to investigate the relationship between host and guest, blending these two terms in order to generate conversations between tradition and contemporaneity, community and individual, between our ‘given’ identity and our own “self-generated” identity. Here, artworks become unique tools, triggering awareness of one’s position in reality.

“Quote Celesti” is Maurizio Vetrugno’s first solo exhibition in Asia after thirty years of traveling between Bali, Laos, Thailand and Europe. The Italian title of the exhibition can be translated both as “Celestial Altitudes,” as well as “Baby Blue Quotas.” The exhibition at Kayu includes, among other works, 30 masks that are part of the “Quote Celesti” series – made in collaboration with masters in the traditional Balinese practice of mask-making masters of long Balinese tradition – an hand-made carpet made in Jakarta and entitled *Carpet Diem*, and six hand-made silk embroideries made by artisans in Laos. The exhibition continues Vetrugno’s investigations of Western and Eastern practices through what he calls “stream of image consciousness and words cut-ups.” Like an orchestra conductor, the artist directs elements, archaic techniques and objects from different cultures in order to create artworks that suggest new meanings and values. “Quote Celesti” is accompanied by an email exchange between Vetrugno and fellow artist Charles Ray and an extract from the text *Our Crumbles Rest Among Trees of Lust, Rivers of Tears, Flowers of Memories* written by Italian curator Michele Bertolino upon the invitation of Kayu’s employee.

The exhibition is open every day from 9:00 AM to 04:00 PM, at the House of Masks and Puppets Setia Darma, Jalan Tegal Bingin Mas, Ubud, Bali. For more

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information, please contact Lucie Fontaine's employee in Bali
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ABOUT KAYU

Kayu is Lucie Fontaine's branch in Bali and it is an extension of Bali-based Italian artist Marco Cassani's artistic practice. It is conceived as a "social sculpture" in the form of exhibitions and performances, reflecting on the concept of art as a tool to socialize and re-evaluate the territory, the population and society at large. Hosted by the House of Masks and Puppets Setia Darma and Project Etere #1 (PE #1) both in Bali, Kayu's program embrace interactions between historical positions and contemporary conditions in Bali and in Indonesia; it fosters new ways to work with living artists, facilitating meaningful exchanges that often materialize into new ways of exhibiting contemporary art. Following this perspective, Kayu wishes to contribute in the development and awareness of an international discourse on contemporary art in Indonesia.

Since 2021, Kayu has developed Domesticity – Residency Program, a site-specific residency program that offers the opportunity to reflect on the concept of the domestic and to investigate the relationship – or lack thereof – between contemporary art and domestic spaces. Domesticity – Residency Program is located at PE #1 – Contemporary Artisanal Studio Apartment that was carefully designed by PE through the reconfiguration of an existing, disused building nestled within a traditional Balinese compound, owned by a Balinese family that has been living on the land for generations.

Image: Maurizio Vetrugno, *3D Anaglyph Series "Betty Page Apsara"*, 2007. Silk thread hand-made embroidery on canvas, 92 × 90 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

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EMAIL EXCHANGE

By Charles Ray (R) and Maurizio Vetrugno (V)

R / 7 August 2022 at 1:21PM:

Dear Maurizio,

Thank you for sending me jpegs of your masks. I really enjoy looking at them. I don't know a lot about masks and their cultural and aesthetic function. As a westerner, or rather as a western artist, they fascinate me. My fabricator in Japan, the master woodcarver Yuboku, who made 'Hinoki', told me that he once made a Noh mask for an actor friend. His friend was really pleased but then returned the mask after a month or two. Yuboku, not knowing enough about Noh theater, neglected to carve out the nostrils. The eyes and mouth were open, but the nostrils had been left shut. It seems a Noh actor finds his footing and placement on the stage by looking down through the nostrils. The story held a kind of magical sculptural energy for me. I can't really articulate why.

When I was in Paris last winter, I was at the Guimet looking at masks. I'm going to send you jpegs of two of them, but neither is the one I was looking for. I can't find it online. It was more beat up than the two I'm sending, bronze, corded at the edges, it felt ragged. Not understanding the mask, its meaning, and deeper embedment in Japanese theater and culture, I saw it like a David Smith, particularly one of the flat, open Hudson River sculptures. These sculptures of Smith seemed like spatial armatures, space, like clay, clings to them. If you turn one of these sculptures, the entire Hudson River Valley turns with it. The mask I was looking at was open through the mouth, nostrils, and eyes. Space really flowed through it. This river of space went in but also came out and totally embedded the mask, not in my mind, the world of theater, but the world of humans. I was wondering if somebody was wearing it, an actor, or even me, if David Smith's space could be substituted for a kind of fluid culture. Could the mask be stitched to a human psyche? What thread would flow in the mouth, back out the nostrils and into the eyes? These ideas of course have nothing to do with the original intent of the mask but are my own modern, post-modern, and pre-modern ideas as I grapple with these objects on the wall of the museum. I'll send you two not-so-good images, and as I said, neither mask is the one that I was looking for. What struck me about the masks that you sent to me and what I really enjoyed about them is that it seems that the eyes and mouths remain carved to the manifold of the mask. The definition of a hole is an object that cannot be shrunk to a point. While I can't access the depth of the nostrils from your photographs, it seems that some of the mouths are open, yet

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it feels that if you went into a mouth, you would go into a carved interior of a painted sculpture. I feel the tongue, throat, thorax, stomach, large and small intestine, I don't know if I would come out the other end. But the interiors of these masks also seem like an artifact. A painted or constructed figure. From my vantage, which lacks a clear understanding, I see the entirety of the interior of a constructed individual. A magic person. If I wore David Bowie's mask, I'd feel like a snake. I would have to swallow everything behind it, an entire figure. Anyway, from the photographs, this is how I feel. I would love to see them in person. I wasn't quite sure if the straps were necessary to really tie them on my head. I would love to see them on the wall. But perhaps the straps are right, and they would be interesting for people to wear. But if people were wearing them, I think the power and the magic would be from the people looking at them.

Thanks for sending me all these. And I was lightly wondering if the howling monkey is really the dead dog named Leo. I hope to see you soon

xcharley

V / 9 October 2023 at 1:14AM:

Dear Charley,

It took me ages to come back to you with some considerations that sparked since your first mail. As first thing I didn't know the mask's nostrils are used during performance and ceremony to find footing on the stage and thanks for that. As a matter of facts in Bali they referred to as 'the second eyes'. This of course it seems perfectly logic according to the proportion of the mask, (the Balinese ones are always slightly smaller than the face).

I tried my best to keep the information about ceremonies and rituals to the minimum too, otherwise I would be drifting too far in the ocean of notions and vibrations. I didn't want to add too much content on the characters in traditional sense, relying more on the singularity of each of them and the formal union of sculpted and painted quality.

The first thing that attracted me when approaching the subject were some of the formal aspects, for example a quality between the liquid and the buttery of the paint on the multi-layered paint on the wood.

Plus the nostrils (always painted on the inside) have their edges painted with a thin black line. Perhaps a highly formalized way of underlining the limit where

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the breath should stop on the way in and the way out in correct breathing, and therefore the subtle relationship between an inside and an outside. As mentioned above the masks are traditionally slightly smaller than the average oval of a human face. This allows the nostrils to work as 'second eyes' and what I call the 'liquidity' of the mask to come alive and fully express its potential once worn.

Truth is, that depending on who wears it, the mask changes completely, it changes skin taking on some of the characteristics of the actor / officiant. And this I have been able to experience directly first hand. The same thing, for example, did not happen with the masks made for the Italian Commedia dell'Arte, they are larger and in a way they are fixed forever on a single expression and to a lesser extent not even with the masks for the Japanese Noh theater. Never as in this case the mask reveals much more than what it hides.

Again, intrigued by your inputs, I discovered Balinese Theater and Japanese Noh are not that far apart as I imagined. They come from the same source, that is the shadowplay, and thanks also for focusing my interest toward David Smith, the elastic notion of silhouette I will investigate further with so much pleasure.

fondly,

x maurizio

P.S.

maybe I should try to carve a Leo mask, a funerary one by memory perhaps?

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***OUR CRUMBLES REST AMONG TREES OF LUST, RIVER OF TEARS,
FLOWERS OF MEMORIES***

By Michele Bertolino

[...] I met with Maurizio Vetrugno, the day after I arrived in Bali, at the mask craftsman in the outskirts of Ubud. I knew about the new body of work for a few months: Drawing from the Balinese tradition of the masks, Vetrugno is composing a social theater of singularities, where Antonio Gramsci meets with Grace Jones, Quentin Crisp, Laura Nyro, Steve Strange, Jordan and many others. I knew little about Balinese masks, and Vetrugno made clear his interests: liquidity, holes, changeability.

[...] They don't stand for something, yet they are present, they happened. Keeping Deleuze in mind, singular is the event, which is one. As it is, it cannot mean for something, but it merely records an occurrence. They are their own story, warily built as a myth—one you cannot retell as a quantity of accomplishments, rather as an intensity, as a universe which can only be perceived as so. Therefore, again, through the body. Yet, how did Vetrugno choose? How can one compose such a theater of *luminaires*?

I speak because others spoke before me—Vetrugno said once: I can act because they acted, thus we belong. Likewise, he chooses. As a collector—of singularities—*luminaires*, Vetrugno composes his own taxonomy: a selection that assigns roles to things, constituting lineages. Out of the scientific taxonomic process, he rests on genealogy as a criterion, conceiving it as an impertinent attitude. It is not about searching for origins, but is a process of retracing accidents and contingencies, showing the plurality and contradiction of time—in each singularity rests a possible path made of discontinuities and interruptions, bonds and affections, each singularity is one and unique (*eventful*) yet each entails an interconnection. Vetrugno's genealogy—reading Foucault's—breaks with the linearity of time it studies, being a counter-memory: the subject cannot find itself in a continuum, it is therefore disintegrated by the gaps and accidents thus uncovered. Genealogy is a rambling path among interrupted actions but it constitutes a community. If Vetrugno *speaks because others spoke before him*, taxonomy and genealogy—a.k.a. a very personal casting—feed the content and shape the form in outlining a space of belonging—a.k.a. the artwork. A conceptual strategy to make art.

[...] I read in a book that the Balinese society is the result of a fall, the dissolution of an original unity into a growing diversity. Their story does not

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talk of a relentless progress toward *the* good society, *the* perfection, instead it is a gradual fading from that perfection conceived as one unity. It is multiplicity—and acceptance of that. It is a story of gaps and downfalls, yet it is colorful and full of joy: it is not about how we can improve, rather it is about dwelling in there, making a dance out of the falling. The same book—*Negara. The Theater State in Nineteenth-Century Bali* (1981)—points at performativity as the source and goal of Balinese power structure. Foremost, the state is a *representation* of how reality is arranged (taxonomy): the ceremonies, the spectacles (choreographies, *wayang kulit*—the puppet-shadow play) display a drama which constitutes the form and content of Balinese culture and power. In other words: *power serves pomp, not pomp power.*

This dynamics titillates my guts: a fall transfigured into a dance.

Vetrugno's works pose in a similar way. *Quote Celesti* hosts around thirty masks performing a choreography of dispersed identities, which hints at a collective genealogy and reveals our fall: we are together in this. They act their mute gazes, leaving space for imagination: how would I be if I would wear any of those subjectivities? Merciless, they are born out of a failing quest, asserting that a genealogy is always incomplete, therefore false. Yet, they tempt us with their shiny skin. Betty Page—portrayed in the embroideries—invites us, showing a naked shoulder: let's get rid of yourself / sink in the pool with me. *We are alike.*

If we fall, then we would dance.

At the core, both physical and conceptual, of *Quote Celesti*, a carpet depicts an aerial view of the area around Casablanca, Morocco. Vetrugno took a picture years ago, he first made a small embroidery then realized a much bigger carpet (about 3x4 meters). I wondered why that carpet is there. It is for grounding. Each story has its own landscape, each and every one of us needs its own place—call it *ngayah*, serendipity or freedom.

Togetherness.