

Press Release 13.07.2018

Exhibition

Petrit Halilaj – Mario Merz Prize

Shkrepëtima

20.07. – 19.08.18

Petrit Halilaj's exhibition at the Zentrum Paul Klee forms part of a series of interrelated projects and exhibitions in Runik (Kosovo), Bern and Turin, commissioned by the Fondazione Merz. In Albanian, *Shkrepëtima* means «spark», «lightning», or a sudden, intense feeling. Through video, drawing and sculpture, Halilaj explores national identity, questions geographic boundaries and asks how collective history is shaped. Petrit Halilaj is the winner of the 2nd edition of the Mario Merz Prize, an international award for outstanding artists established by the Merz Foundation in Turin.

The focal point of the exhibition at the Zentrum Paul Klee is the fact that Runik, where Halilaj resided with his family before fleeing to Albania in the wake of the Kosovo war, is situated at the location of one of the most significant Neolithic settlements in Southeast Europe. After the Kosovo war, many buildings were erected directly on top of the archaeological site, and for this reason, contemporary Runik bears no visible trace of its ancient history. However, villagers still discover pieces of pottery, ceremonial items or human figurines in the fields surrounding the village. The most significant finds however are stored at a museum in Belgrade, Serbia, where they are inaccessible to the Kosovar public. Halilaj's recent work poses the question what cultural and social role these historical artefacts play – or what role they could potentially play in the future.

The exhibition

In the absence of an «official» historical record, knowledge about the region's ancient past remains scarce among the locals of Runik. Instead, the artefacts found in the village have become objects of the popular imagination, and speculation about their origin is rife. By exploring the history of these objects and their everyday uses, Halilaj's video installation *The City Roofs Were So Near That Even A Sleepwalking Cat Could Pass Over Runik Without Ever Touching The Ground* (2017) offers a portrait of contemporary Runik, and, by extension, of Kosovo as a young nation yet uncertain about its history and identity.

The sculptures from the series *RU* (2017) are based on official archaeological records and exhibition catalogues of artefacts discovered in Runik between 1968 and 1982. Most of these finds were loaned to the Belgrade Museum but never returned to Kosovo due to the war. Halilaj recreated this lost collection of 505 objects from clay and transformed them into bird-like sculptures – by adding feet, legs, or feathers from brass wire. In the artist's imagination, the artefacts come to life anew as migratory birds that can travel, cross borders, populate new territories, and free themselves from the weight of recent history. The central architectural element of the exhibition at the Zentrum Paul Klee – a wooden structure reminiscent of a bird's nest, built on site using a range of natural materials – accommodates the sculptures.

In parallel to the exhibition, Halilaj has staged a major cultural event in the former cultural centre of Runik, now a ruin. The event took place on July 7, 2018, and was staged with the participation of numerous partners from the village and the region. Halilaj conceived the performative event as a spark – a *Shkrepëtima* – that he hopes will initiate the social and cultural development of the village. The event represents Halilaj's first major intervention in public space and testifies to his ambition to work with the community to leave a lasting impact. As part of the exhibition at the Zentrum Paul Klee, Halilaj is presenting a series of 40 drawings and conceptual studies that he has created on old documents found at the site of the House of Culture. The drawings function as a conceptual storyboard of the performance and as a visual narrative of the cultural history of the village.

Biography

Petrit Halilaj was born in 1986 in Kostërc (Kosovo). He currently lives and works in Germany, Kosovo and Italy. His works have been shown at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris (2018), the New Museum in New York (2017), the Kölnischer Kunstverein (2015), the Bundeskunsthalle in Bonn (2015) and the National Gallery in Pristina, among others. Halilaj was the first artist to represent Kosovo at the 55th Venice Biennale in 2013, and won the special mention of the jury at the 57th Venice Biennale in 2017.

Mario Merz Prize

The Mario Merz Prize is awarded bi-annually by the Fondazione Merz in Turin and promotes outstanding artists and musicians from all over the world who, despite adverse political, social or geographic circumstances, continue to pursue their artistic activity and have already achieved international critical acclaim.

Curator Leonardo Bigazzi

Coordination Martin Waldmeier, Curator Zentrum Paul Klee

Opening 19.07.2018, 18h00

Presentation: During the opening, Petrit Halilaj and Leonardo Bigazzi will discuss the process of developing the project and report from the public event in Runik that took place on July 7, 2018.

In collaboration with Fondazione Merz, Turin / Mario Merz Prize

With the generous support of Kanton Bern

Free entry

Upcoming

Shkrepetima will subsequently be shown at the Fondazione Merz in Turin (29 October 2018 – 3 February 2019) in expanded form.

Contact

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