

Nomadic artist Not Vital's treehouse giants take root in a British park

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As an artist whose methods have embraced sculpture, painting, architecture, and design, Not Vital has quietly been carving an extraordinary mark across the world.

Born in Switzerland in 1948, Vital has consistently redefined himself, with work that includes tongues sculpted in bronze, portraits of Mao Zedong in panel-beaten silver boxes, camel heads and cow dung cast in aluminum and silver.

His architectural projects reflect his nomadic lifestyle and include a house in Tschlin, near the Swiss border with Austria and Italy; a school in Niger; and his personal island abode, NotOna Island in Chile.

For Vital's first major UK solo exhibition, Yorkshire Sculpture Park (YSP) has brought together a collection of the artist's diverse practice, including paintings and works on paper, indoor pieces made from plaster, silver, gold, marble, glass and coal, and outdoor sculptures in stainless steel and bronze.



Not Vital in the Underground Gallery at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park Credit: Jonty Wilde

What can you tell us about the curation process for the exhibition?

Well it's the first time time I've shown such large pieces of sculpture outside. One sculpture, which is about 100 meters long and called "Let 100 Flowers Bloom" -- it's named after an essay by Mao from the 1950s -- has been shown in five different locations but this is the first time it's been placed outside.

Of course if you place (sculptures) outside in nature, you're always going to be a loser because when a sculpture that is seven meters tall is set against a tree that is thirteen (meters tall), the sculpture is always going to lose. So this is the main challenge for me, being in this landscape.



"Pelvis" (2008) by Not Vital Credit: Photo Oak Taylor-Smith. Courtesy Not Vital Studio

Have you created specific pieces for the YSP show?

Yes, there are a few, but I'm still working on creating a bridge that will be installed on one side of the park. It's still in the making in Beijing but it will arrive around a month after the opening of the show.

About eight years ago I made seven models for a sculpture of a bridge but so far I've only realized one -- this will be the second. Of course it takes a long time to realize a piece such as the bridge, we've been working on it for the last six months.

How has the process of house building and the way you've traveled fed into your creative process?

Well I've been building houses -- tree houses -- since I was a child in Switzerland because we had so much time off school, so that became a very important moment in my life.

I've always wanted to get back to that sensation, that initial passion I got from building habitats in the trees. When I went to Africa I continued to do that. I call it Scart, which is sculptural architecture that also has a social aspect.

But all these houses have no real infrastructure, they're more like sculptures. They can be lived in but they have a very specific purpose.

Of course it depends on what landscape and environment you're in but that is always the first impulse when approaching a subject like that.

When did you decide to spend half the year in China and how has that affected your work?

I'd spent quite a lot of time in New York and during the late 90s I was traveling more and more and so decided to give up my space there.

I needed another studio so I went to Beijing which is actually very similar to living in New York in the 80s. You have the space, a great community of artists and fantastic workers -- I've always said my assistants are technically much better than me.

I was able to build a wonderful studio so it's really a wonderful environment in which to create. But also, you simply stay in your studio and work because outside is not always particularly inviting -- sometimes there is not even air outside -- so you just stay inside and work.

It's just perfect for me to spend at least four months a year in China and in those four months you produce so much more work than you would elsewhere, maybe as much as I would in three years in Switzerland.

There I live in a valley where it's almost too beautiful to work. I built a studio that has no windows because you just become distracted and you end up doing nothing.

KAWS and his army of cartoon giants land in the UK

What have been the philosophical or technological changes in the way you approach your art over the years?

Well that's quite complex. About two months ago I was in Laos, walking along the Mekong River, where I met an old woman making paper and I began to make it with her. An hour before I had never done this.

I believe that if you keep yourself open to these kinds of situations, you can embrace so many different things. This was one of them.

In two days I made 40 pieces of paper (that are being shown here in the gallery) and ever since I've been traveling I've always found something new. I take all the possibilities that are given to me.

This interview was edited for length and clarity. Not Vital's first major UK exhibition will be on display at Yorkshire Sculpture Park in the UK from May 21 to January 2, 2017.