nara roesler

not vital

not vital

b. 1948, Sent, Switzerland
lives and works *in Situ*

Not Vital is best known for having developed a practice that is based on intense contact with nature and a nomadic lifestyle. His work seeks to provoke unusual experiences or viewpoints, either by displacing purely natural forms, or by extracting elements from remote regions, and re-contextualizing them into an artistic framework, often altering their scale or materials. Since the beginning of the 1980s, Not Vital has repeatedly collaborated with artisans in an endeavour to intertwine sculpture and the construction of space, frequently diluting the limits between art and architecture, and establishing an intimate relationship with the local cultural context. Indeed, his pieces work to alter our perception of the environment that they inhabit, either through their reflexive physicality or their unusual architectural structure.

Vital has also produced paintings and works on paper, which converse with the matters he addresses in his sculptures and architectural propositions. For these pieces, the artist employs a varied palette of materials that go from the simple and perishable—coffee, salt, eggs—to the most valuable and resistant—marble, silver and gold. Since the end of the 1990s, Not Vital has erected permanent installations in numerous locations, including Agadez (Niger), Chilean Patagonia (Chile) and Paraná do Mamori (Brazil). In addition, he has also built so-called habitats, such as the *House to Watch the Sunset*, amongst other schools, bridges or tunnels.

click to see full cv

selected solo exhibitions

- *Tirando Onda,* Museu de Arte Contemporânea de Niterói (MAC-Niterói), Niterói, Brazil (2025)
- *Not Vital: A Vida é um Detalhe,* Nara Roesler, São Paulo, Brazil (2022)
- *Not Vital: Scarch,* Abbazia di San Giorgio, Venice, Italy (2021)
- *Scarch*, Hauser & Wirth, Somerset, United Kingdom (2020)
- *Let One Hundred Flowers Bloom*, Galerie Andrea Caratsch, St. Mortiz, Switzerland (2019); Ateneum, Helsiki, Finland (2018)
- *Saudade*, Nara Roesler, São Paulo, Brazil (2018)
- Yorkshire Sculpture Park, Wakefield, United Kingdom (2016)

selected group exhibitions

- *Mães*: Not Vital & Richard Long, Nara Roesler, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (2024)
- 17th Venice Architecture Biennale, Italy (2021)
- *Passion: Bilder von der Jagd*, Bündner Kunstmuseum Chur, Chur, Switzerland (2019)
- *Surrealism Switzerland*, Aargauer Kunsthaus, Aarau, Switzerland (2018)
- *Illumination*, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebæk, Denmark (2016)
- *Simple Forms: Contemplating Beauty*, Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, Japan

selected collections

- Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, France
- Kunstmuseum Bern, Bern, Switzerland
- Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA
- Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, USA
- Toyota Municipal Museum of Art, Aichi, Japan

cover *NotOna*, 2009 [detail]

04 scarch
22 sculpture
49 paintings
61 works on paper

scarch

“Building has been my favorite occupation ever since I can remember. I must have been 2 years old when I tried to enter a pillow in order to transform it into a shelter. This happened on the veranda of the house in Sent. One year later, in February, together with my brother Jon, I dug a tunnel under the snow in front of our house. The snow had fallen so high that winter that the fence of the garden had completely disappeared. We were digging in the snow for days. Even though it was dark in there, I could see light coming in from above. A blueish, cold light. The sound was damped. It was like being inside the belly of a large animal. My brother was at school in his first year & I could be inside the tunnel alone for most of the day, which I preferred. It was a sensation. The smell was also blue. From time to time I would eat some snow. I would eat my tunnel.”

NotOna, 2009
Patagonia, Chile

Not Vital's relationship with architecture stems from his childhood in Engadin, one of the highest populated regions in the Alps. At this early stage, we can see appears twice how his experience with architecture was already embedded in the landscape. In this account of the artist's memory, we can see here some of the elements that would structure his practice. One of them is the use of natural materials, from the place, creating in situ propositions that dialog not only with the topography of the space, but also with the materials offered by the context, in this case, snow.

Another aspect is the conjunction between the artificial, the constructed and the organic, given both by the materials used, such as straw, wood and earth, and by the effect of inhabiting, less an impersonal architecture and much more something living. Also noteworthy is the contemplative nature of the building, the light filtered by the snow at that inaugural

NotOna, 2009
Patagonia, Chile

moment, in which he sheltered, isolated, in silence, for most of the day.
Even the idea of eating architecture will guide his production. “When I say ‘eating architecture’, I mean doing something as simple as eating when you’re hungry (if you have something to eat), or sleeping when you’re tired,” the artist once said. More than a logical or practical architecture, Vital invests in projects that cause sensations.

SCARCH is the name given by Vital to the set of constructions he has made around the world and which arises from the intertwining of the languages of sculpture and architecture. In fact, the name Scarch is a contraction of two English terms - sculpture and architecture. The term allows for a freer approach to the architectural field, given that the artist has no training in the area. “In other words”, says architect Tilla Theus,

Josujo

these constructions ‘are neither practical nor utilitarian, but intensely poetic’.
Over the years Vital has created houses with the most diverse materials and also with different poetic proposals. At the same time as they are real buildings, they bring with them dreamlike and fantastical elements. They include *NotOna* (Chilean Patagonia, 2009); *House to Watch the 3 Volcanoes* (Indonesia, 2017); *Marble Tower* (Belgium, 2009); *Bridge* (Switzerland, 2014); *House to Watch the Sunset* (Niger, 2005); *Makaranta School* (Niger, 2005); *House to Watch the Sunset* (Brazilian Amazonia, 2011); *House to Watch the Sunset* (Switzerland, 2018). “The constructions that Vital brings together under [Scarch’s] esseneologism are formalist and exist mainly to fulfill a single purpose - usually poetic and transcendental - such as the contemplation of the sunset or the night sky. What is fundamental in his structures is not the comfort of the home or the way they enable us to look at the world: Vital conceives of his monumental sculptures as windows onto the world. His houses yearn to see; for them, having is the same as seeing. When we are inside them, looking through their windows, crawling out of them, or lying on them, holding our breath, then we can see.” says curator and writer Giorgia von Albertini.

Board House

exhibition view
Venice Biennale of
Architecture, 2021
Venice, Italy

In fact, more than shelters, based on the assumption that architecture separates man from nature, protecting him from the threats of the world, Vital's projects are aimed at contemplating natural phenomena. Perhaps one of the most expressive examples of this is the House to Watch the Sunset, a project the artist has been working on since 2005. Always keeping the same dimensions and construction principles, the House to Watch the Sunset is made up of four rooms, one per floor. Each one has the same measurements (3 x 3 x 3 m). They are cubes with a door, a window, a bed, a table and a chair. The main difference lies in the material used in the construction. In each continent where the building is constructed, the artist makes use of the material, technical and labor resources available. The first, in Aladdab, Niger, was made with earth from the region; the second, in Brazil, in the Paraná do Mamori region, was made with wood typical of the Amazonia; and the third, in Switzerland, was made of concrete using sand from the Inn river.

Chasa Barca

House to Watch the Night Skies

House against Heat and Sandstorms

House to Watch the 3 Volcanoes, 2017

House with No Doors

Roof House

Marble Tower, 2009
Belgium

Bridge, 2008
Switzerland

House to Watch the Sunset, 2005
Aladab, Niger

House to Watch the Sunset Aladab, 2005

House to Watch the Sunset Amazonia, 2011

House to Watch the Sunset
Switzerland, 2018

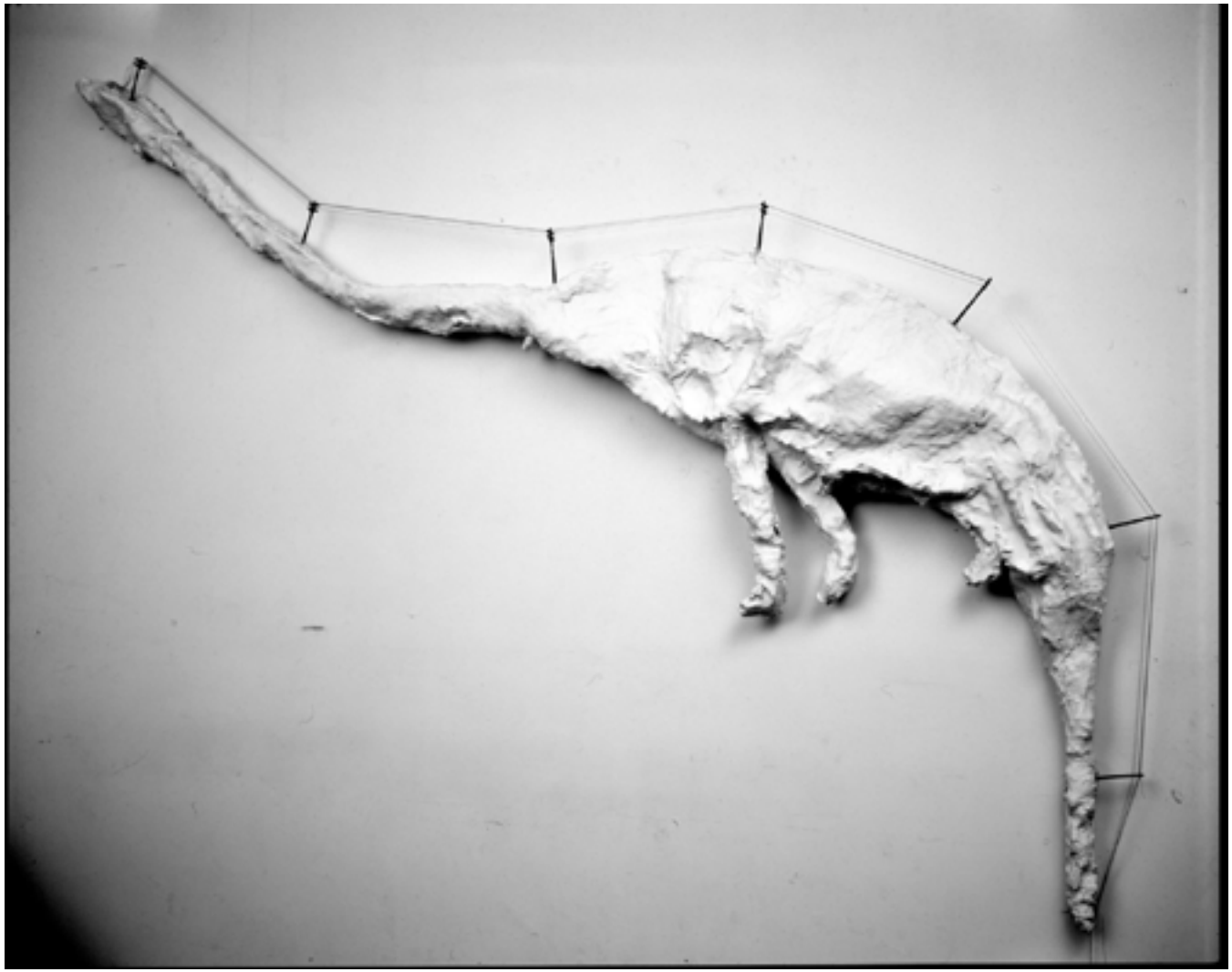
sculpture

"For almost fifteen years, counting from the beginning of his artistic training, Vital has undertaken a personal investigation into sculpture. It was only in 1980 that he worked with plaster for the first time, and his first bronze dates from 1983. These two materials have predominated in his work ever since. In 1982 he deliberately resumed his practice, which coincided with the adoption of the animal theme in his work. *World-Animal*, *Wheel-Animal* and *Pole-Animal*, all from 1982, began his practice of treating objects as something to be displayed on a pole, or tied up. To this day, his works have their height determined by vertical rods, like those used in the Alps to mark the depth of the snow. Horns, quartz crystals and camels rest on the almost inaccessible tips of these poles, like ancient figures or hunting trophies." Wrote Thomas Kellein, German art historian and curator.

700 snowballs, 2015
700 blown glass pieces

exhibition view
Yorkshire Sculpture Park, 2016
Yorkshire, UK

Not Vital is, in fact, a sculptor. His work usually establishes a link between the organic and the inorganic, the human and the animal, the real and the fantastic. After beginning his artistic training in the late 1960s in Paris, where he studied with Alexander Calder and came into contact with the work of Alberto Giacometti, who made a great impression on him, Vital moved to New York in the mid-1970s. In the 1980s, a prolific period of experimentation with materials, Vital went to Italy, to Pietrasanta, where he came across the possibilities of bronze and marble for sculptural practice.



Tarasp Castle
Scuol, Switzerland

At this time, works emerged in which the theme of the animal, which had already been investigated, was extensively developed in works in which body fragments were enlarged (PawPow, 1984), or articulated with abstract elements (Wheel Animal, 1982), usually geometric elements, which widened the distance between the elements, often giving them a thematic character. According to curator Giorgia Von Albertini: “In Vital’s work, animal fragments, and later body fragments, are powerful elements that occupy the gray area between epic collective memory and active realist imagination. “On the one hand, what is recognizable invokes memory, but the formal disjunctions and articulations provoke our imagination.”
These hybrid creatures of Vital’s, as well as establishing relationships with procedures from surrealist sculpture, have their basis in fables from the artist’s childhood. In fact, several recurring themes in his production come from biographical events. Tongue, for example, comes from Vital’s encounter with an ox tongue in a butcher’s shop in Lucca, Italy. Often, the strangeness comes from the tension between the form and the material used in its execution.

Wheel Animal

exhibition view
Yorkshire Sculpture Park, 2016
Yorkshire, United Kingdom

Thorsten Sadowsky, director of the Museum of Modern Art in Salzburg, says: "Due to their reduced formal language and smooth, often reflective surfaces, Vital's works are characterized by impressive clarity and formal precision. Their archaic iconography, which cannot be clearly defined, gives them an enigmatic and poetic timelessness. Vital's works reveal their aesthetic effects mainly through the lively dialogue between rigor and formal elegance and the ambiguity of their content. The combination of minimalism and the highest technical perfection, on the one hand, and of found visual signs and surrealist symbols, on the other, condenses into an individual mythology, in which art becomes a practice of life."

Pole- Animal

exhibition view
Museum der
Moderne Salzburg, 2020
Salzburg, Austria

On the other hand, in *100 Architects* (2016), the artist creates irregular shapes from principles whose rationality has mystical foundations. In these works, art historian Philip Jodidio writes: “the masters of architecture become sculptures that are in no way figurative, even though their dimensions precisely reflect their dates of birth. The very substance of the history of architecture is sublimated into sculptural form - again, the idea is unexpected and radical, and yet it is based on the interpretation of a basic reality.” The granite blocks then refer to figures such as Leon Battista Alberti and Ludwig Mies Van der Rohe. The technique for creating abstract portraits was also used by the artist to create sculptures in homage to other cultural figures, using different materials.

Paw Pow

exhibition view
Yorkshire Sculpture Park, 2016
Yorkshire, United Kingdom

Tongue, 2010
stainless steel

100 Architects, 2016
black granite

100 Architects, 2016
black granite

exhibition view
Yorkshire Sculpture Park, 2016
Yorkshire, United Kingdom

Double Lotus, 2010
stainless steel and varnish

A Plane, a Boat, a Car, a Sled, 2009
stainless steel

exhibition view
Yorkshire Sculpture Park, 2016
Yorkshire, United Kingdom

Camel, 2008
bronze

Stair, 2022
water lily quartzite

exhibition view
a vida é um detalhe, 2022
Nara Roesler, São Paulo, Brazil

Right ear, 2022
black quartzite

Herd, 1990
bronze

exhibition view
Yorkshire Sculpture Park, 2016
Yorkshire, United Kingdom

Moon, 2004
white marble

exhibition view
Yorkshire Sculpture Park, 2016
Yorkshire, United Kingdom

Lótus, 2011
stainless steel

paintings

Not Vital's pictorial practice focuses mainly on two genres, landscape and portrait, a reflection of his interest in the human and the natural, the individual and space. The group of portraits is based on two strands: the representation of others and of oneself, by the author-portrait. The latter derives from the artist's continuous effort to represent himself, which he defines as "something so complicated that it could be a lifelong project." Despite focusing on the face, the portraits painted by Vital do not aim to be a faithful representation of the subject, but rather seek to reveal the intimate, that which requires attention and concentration to be seen.
These paintings appeared in 2009, when the artist was living and working in China. His first paintings came from meetings between the artist and his models, usually people he was close to or lived with. In long sessions, the artist would sit in front of the still model in an attempt to connect with him in depth. In this sense, the portraits bring only hints of the faces represented, inviting us to sharpen our gaze, concentrating on the figures, inviting us to contemplate what is not normally seen.

Self-portrait, 2022
oil paint on canvas
80 x 60,7 x 3,3 cm
31.5 x 23.9 x 1.3 in

The landscapes, like the portraits, are also based on chromatic and formal economy. Many of these works emerge from the artist's childhood experience in Engadin, where he grew up in an atmosphere of contemplative silence.His paintings evoke these scenes and often through elements of the landscape. Ice Paintings, for example, are monochrome paintings in which the artist revisits the snow-soaked heights of his homeland. According to the artist, "painting is the best way for me to see, feel and smell light". In fact, in these works, light takes center stage, even though it manifests itself in the subtleties of the passages and shadows of different shades of white.

My father, 2022
oil paint on canvas
140,5 x 100 x 3,3 cm
55.3 x 39.4 x 1.3 in

exhibition view
a vida é um detalhe, 2022
Nara Roesler, São Paulo, Brazil

Two heads in a snowstorm, 2022
oil paint on canvas
150 x 120 x 3,3 cm
59.1 x 47.2 x 1.3 in

exhibition view
Venice Biennale of
Architecture, 2021
Venice, Italy

2 Self-Portraits, 2023
oil paint on canvas
160 x 20 x 3 cm
63 x 47.2 x 1.2 in

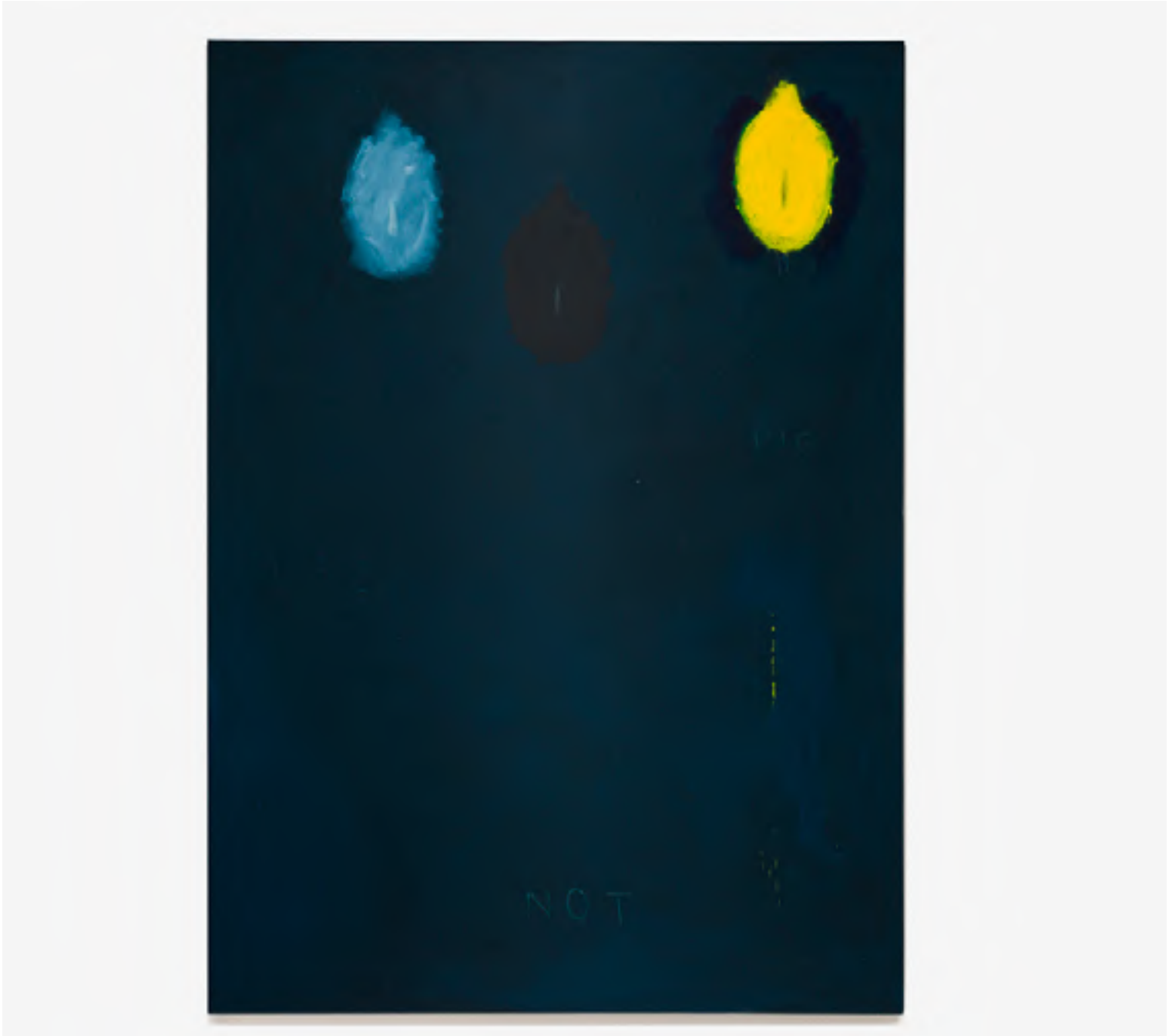
Self Portrait as a Rice Farmer, 2010
oil paint on canvas

Bullfighter and Bull, 2010
oil paint on canvas

Self Portrait in Snow Storm, 2022
oil paint on canvas

exhibition view
a vida é um detalhe, 2022
Nara Roesler, São Paulo, Brazil

Davi, 2022
oil paint on canvas



3 self portraits, 2023
oil paint on canvas

works on paper

The freedom that guides the artist's three-dimensional practice, especially in works that converge architecture and sculpture, can also be found in his works on paper. These drawings "both give vent to emotions and serve as a playground for experimentation." Vital usually draws during his travels, but his destinations don't usually have stores specializing in art materials, so he buys instruments for his drawings in pharmacies and hardware stores, producing works with whatever is available: adhesive tape, cotton buds, silicone patches and plastic bags. These surprising drawings, often three-dimensional, inevitably make us see both the language of drawing and its subject with new eyes," explains curator Giorgia von Albertini.

Study for Strange Fruit, 1985
acrylic, oil, graphite

The drawings evoke landscapes and construction, which does not mean that they should be understood as preparatory sketches for his projects. In reality, they are manifestations of another type of visual experimentation. In this group of works, the artist appropriates materials that are normally foreign to art and drawing, to create schematic images, minimalist compositions, but full of humor and fantasy. The playful nature of these works remains subversive precisely because of the way the artist articulates these unusual materials.

Everton, 2014
oil paint on canvas

Everton, 2014
oil paint on canvas

Getting Bold, 2003
mixed media on paper

Rio, 2022
aluminum tape and
silicone on paper

Ice, 2022
aluminum tape and
silicone on paper

Ice, 2022
silicone and pencil on paper

Nine Flowers, 2018
mixed media on paper

Ice, 2018
mixed media on paper

Ice, 2018
mixed media on paper

Ice, 2022
mixed media on paper

Ice, 2022
aluminum tape and
silicone on paper

nara roesler

são paulo
avenida europa 655,
jardim europa, 01449-001
são paulo, sp, brasil
t 55 (11) 2039 5454

rio de janeiro
rua redentor 241,
ipanema, 22421-030
rio de janeiro, rj, brasil
t 55 (21) 3591 0052

new york
511 west 21st street
new york, 10011 ny
usa
t 1 (212) 794 5038

info@nararoesler.art
www.nararoesler.art