

ANDRA URȘUȚA
WHITES
4.9. – 1.11.2015

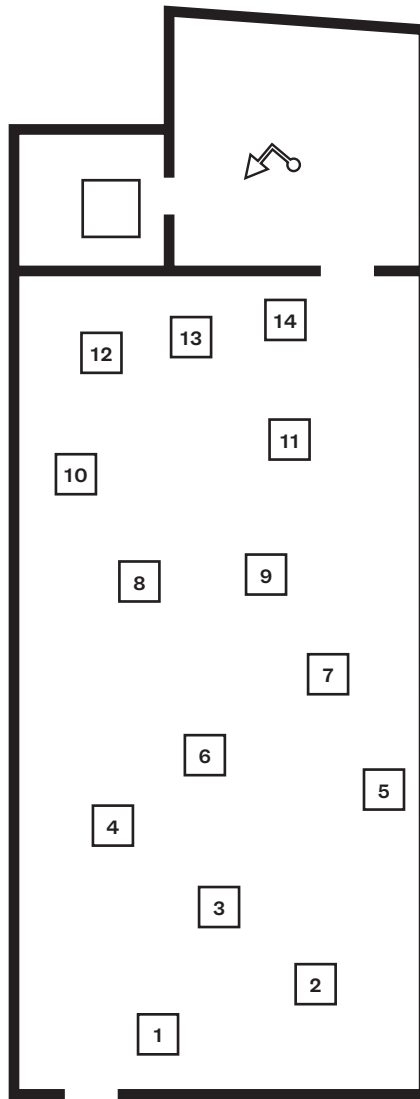
EN
Andra Ursuța makes haunting works wrought with a mix of darkness, melancholy, and nostalgia. She frequently uses common materials such as concrete, plaster, marble, and wax, and she references prosaic objects—a swing set, stools, a batting cage, a hairdressing parlor—yet a tinge of apocalyptic doom sits at the heart of her oeuvre. Born in Salonta, Romania, in 1979, Ursuța came to New York to study art in 1997. Ever since, her work has found its roots in her own upbringing in a small town under a Communist dictatorship, in the traditional art education she received in Romania, in random photographs and outlandish news stories she finds on the Internet, and in the critical theory-based curriculum she was immersed in while studying contemporary art at Columbia University in New York.

For her exhibition *Whites*, her first solo presentation in Switzerland, Ursuța has developed a series of new sculptures that draw from a piece she first made in 2013 entitled *Broken Obelisk*. That sculpture was based, as its title implies, on Barnett Newman's eponymous monument, made over the years between 1963 and 1969, which is in turn a reference to the nineteenth-century monument commemorating George Washington, the first U.S. president, which for its part was formally appropriated from the pyramidion-topped pillars that stand at the entrances to temples in ancient Egypt. Each member of Ursuța's new family of figures is slightly different and has a vaguely anthropomorphic form, with eye sockets or nostrils cast from human skulls sunk into a smooth surface; sometimes they have rodents' teeth or cast skeletal elements added to signal makeshift mouths or legs, turning any semblance of a commemorative monument into a deformed, seemingly hooded figure, almost Ku Klux Klan-ish in appearance. The sculptures' smooth casings and clean modernist geometries contrast with their gaping orifices and skeletal protrusions, suggesting cool modernism infected with a macabre bodily abjection. Instead of pedestals, the figures rest on old kitchen chairs, secondhand office furnishings, modernist design classics, and cast transparent resin bases, some embedded with fake vegetable slices.

KUNSTHALLE
BASEL



Untitled, 2015
Matches, plywood, steel
142×125.5×175 cm



Untitled, 2015
Aqua resin
36.83×62.23×27.94 cm

1

Untitled, 2015
Aqua resin, metal, wood
162×61×59.5 cm

2

Untitled, 2015
Aqua resin, urethane plastic,
wood
139×48.2×50.8 cm

3

Untitled, 2015
Aqua resin, metal, wood
166.5×61×70 cm

4

Untitled, 2015
Aqua resin, teeth,
urethane plastic, wood
138×36.5×36.5 cm

5

Untitled, 2015
Aqua resin, metal, wood
146.5×48.5×49.5 cm

6

Untitled, 2015
Aqua resin, concrete, metal
59.39×88.9×73.66 cm

7

Untitled, 2015
Aqua resin, metal, wood
111×62×69.5 cm

8

Untitled, 2015
Aqua resin, metal, wood
135×61×53.3 cm

9

Untitled, 2015
Aqua resin, metal, wood
141×44.5×50 cm

10

Untitled, 2015
Aqua resin, wood
120.5×36.5×98 cm

11

Untitled, 2015
Aqua resin, metal, urethane plastic
142×58.4×50 cm

12

Untitled, 2015
Aqua resin, metal, wood
147.5×59.8×51.5 cm

13

Untitled, 2015
Aqua resin, metal, wood
167×48.2×61 cm

14

Untitled, 2015
Aqua resin, iron, wood
158×75×42.5 cm

Courtesy Andra Ursuța;
Massimo De Carlo, Milan/London;
Ramiken Crucible, New York

In seating her “monuments,” Ursuța underscores their decrepit exhaustion. The clear hierarchy of sculpture and its base is undone (and who can forget her fellow Romanian Constantin Brancusi’s first nullification of the easy distinction between them?). If a commemorative monument is usually soaring and grandiose, implicating high-minded ideals and righteous values, Ursuța’s morose, dejected versions tell of the downfall of the Western modernist, idealist project. They remind us as well of the instability of the images we use to commemorate history—images that can be endlessly bent and adjusted to shifting political needs. A migrating, recycled form, the obelisk went from religious uses in ancient times to secular, patriotic uses in the nineteenth century, to supposedly “neutral” uses as a cool minimalistic sculpture (no matter that one of Newman’s series of *Broken Obelisk* sculptures was post-facto dedicated by its owner to Martin Luther King Jr.)—repeatedly cannibalized by its makers, owners, or users to stand for divergent messages, including sometimes what it might have originally meant to oppose or critique. Ursuța’s sculptures appropriate this already-recycled form to, in her case, create a marred version of its anonymous, perfect surface, which becomes both visceral and human in her hands. Spread across the expanse of the upstairs skylit gallery, and almost as if in conversation with each other, the ensemble temporarily refigures Kunsthalle Basel into what the artist refers to as a geriatric clinic for a spent vision of civilization.

Ursuța’s plural use of “whites” as her title acts as caustic shorthand for the clannish notions of purity and supremacy that have long driven Western culture. Kunsthalle Basel and its home country are not immune to its implications. The installation of her family of uncanny sculptures accompanies a provisional stand-in of a new piece that the artist originally wished to have in the show. In preparation for the exhibition, Ursuța created a highly labored sculpture built from thousands of ordinary matches, each laid on top of the other to form a red square with a white cross, connecting Switzerland’s national symbol to incendiary threat. Her tongue-in-cheek incarnation of Swiss

nationhood builds on a number of her earlier pieces that take different signs of hegemony as their subject. Most recently this has included her bloated, concrete version of the imperial eagle from the German flag, and her photogram rendition of the ring symbol of the Olympic Games. With bitter irony, the “match” piece was deemed too flammable to be transported and couldn’t make it to the exhibition. Thus here she includes instead a quickly made, unfinished attempt at reproduction of the original, which deliberately acts as a template waiting for completion. Like its model, it equally turns the Swiss flag’s central symbol into an upside-down Christian cross, a motif that also appears on her poster for the exhibition. This “stand-in” for her original piece is positioned in a fireproof container that is a sculpture in itself, including a built-in drawer for ashes, lending a frightening efficiency to the whole construction.

Taking forms that are benign in themselves but become filled with metaphorical meaning when adapted to different uses and agendas, Ursuța puts her finger on the inexorable connection between symbols and the nationalism, brutality, culture or history they sometimes come to represent. In the process she endows the commemorative forms that accompanied Western (white) civilization’s “modern” project with menacing resonance, extending the mordant wit, material intelligence, and critical incisiveness that is everywhere in her work.

Andra Ursuța was born in 1979 in Salonta, Romania; she lives and works in New York.

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GUIDED TOURS

6.9.2015, Sunday, at 3 pm
Public guided tour by curator Elena Filipovic of the current exhibitions by Maryam Jafri and Andra Ursuța in English

13.9.2015, Sunday, at 3 pm
Public guided tour of the current exhibitions by Maryam Jafri and Andra Ursuța in German

17.9.2015, Thursday, at 6.30 pm
Public guided tour of the current exhibitions by Maryam Jafri and Andra Ursuța in English

20.9.2015, Sunday, at 3 pm
Public guided tour of the current exhibitions by Maryam Jafri and Andra Ursuța in German

27.9.2015, Sunday, at 3 pm
Public guided tour of the current exhibitions by Maryam Jafri and Andra Ursuța in German