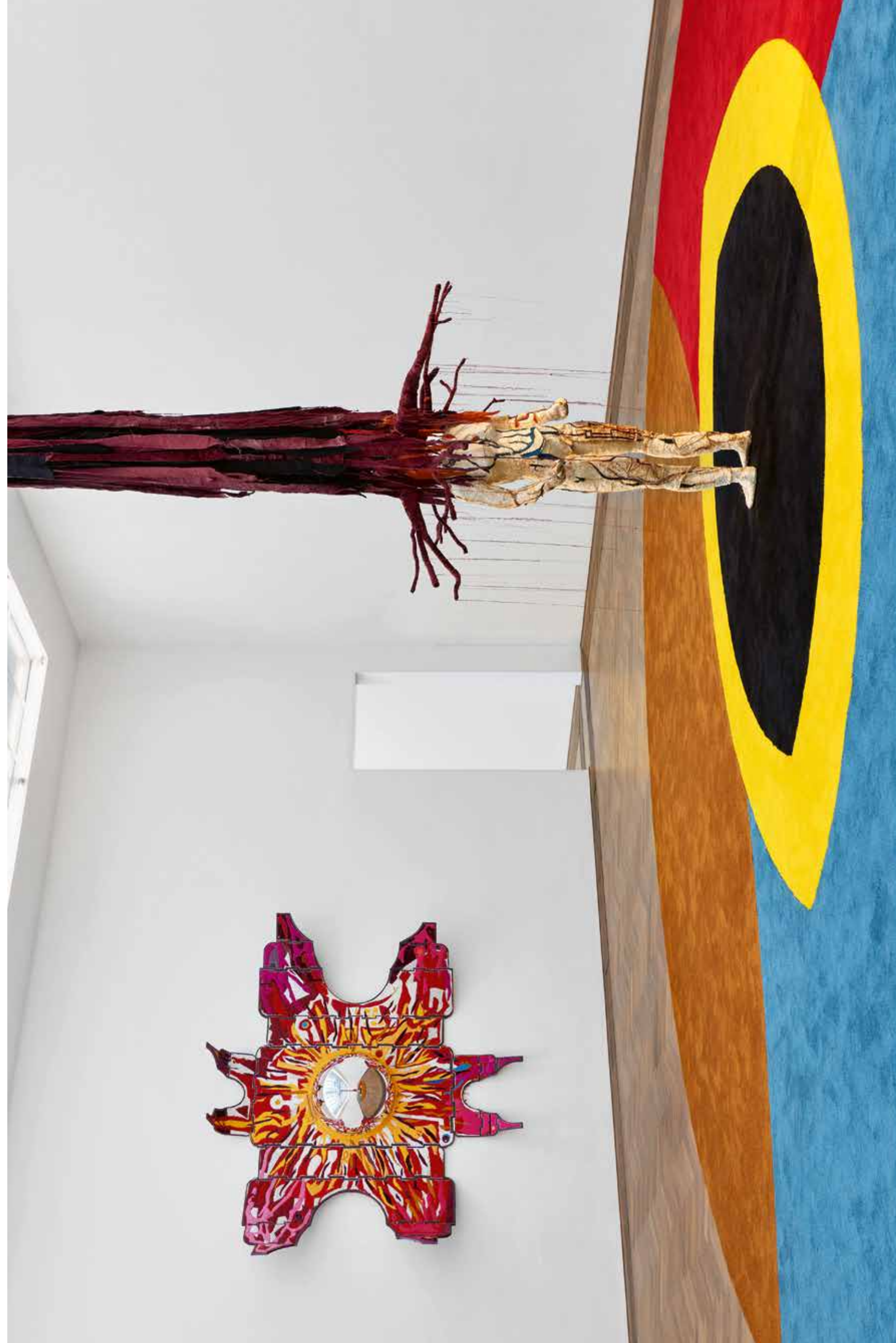
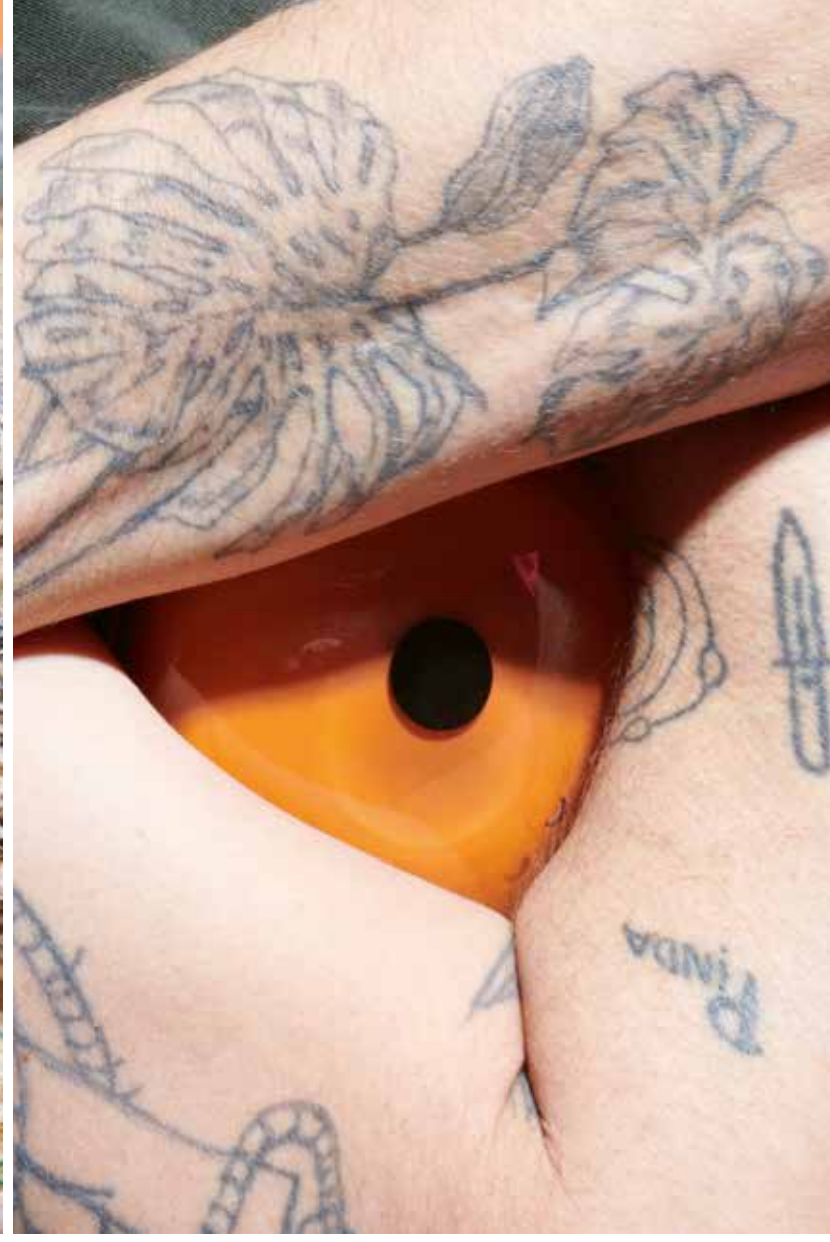


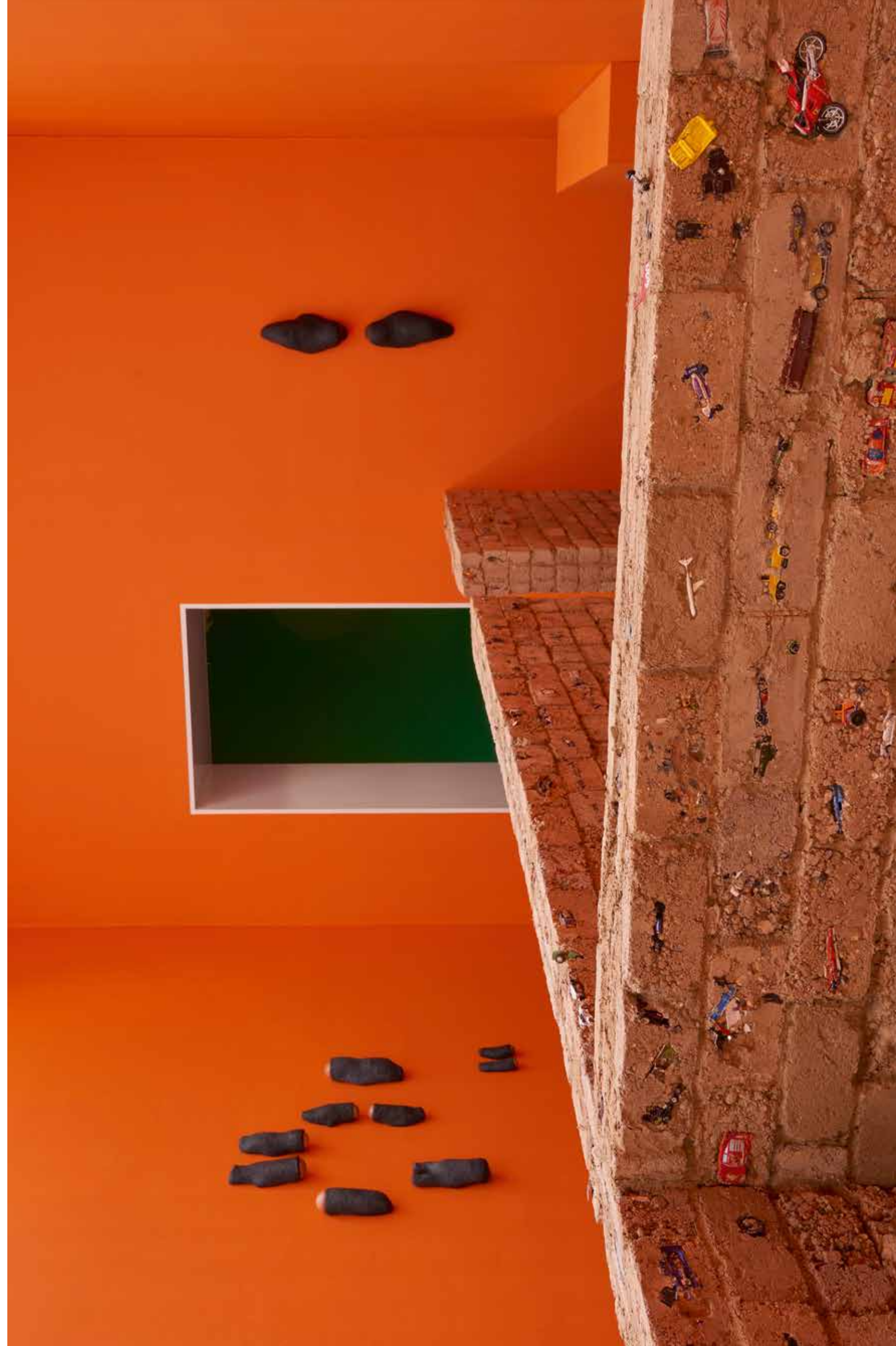
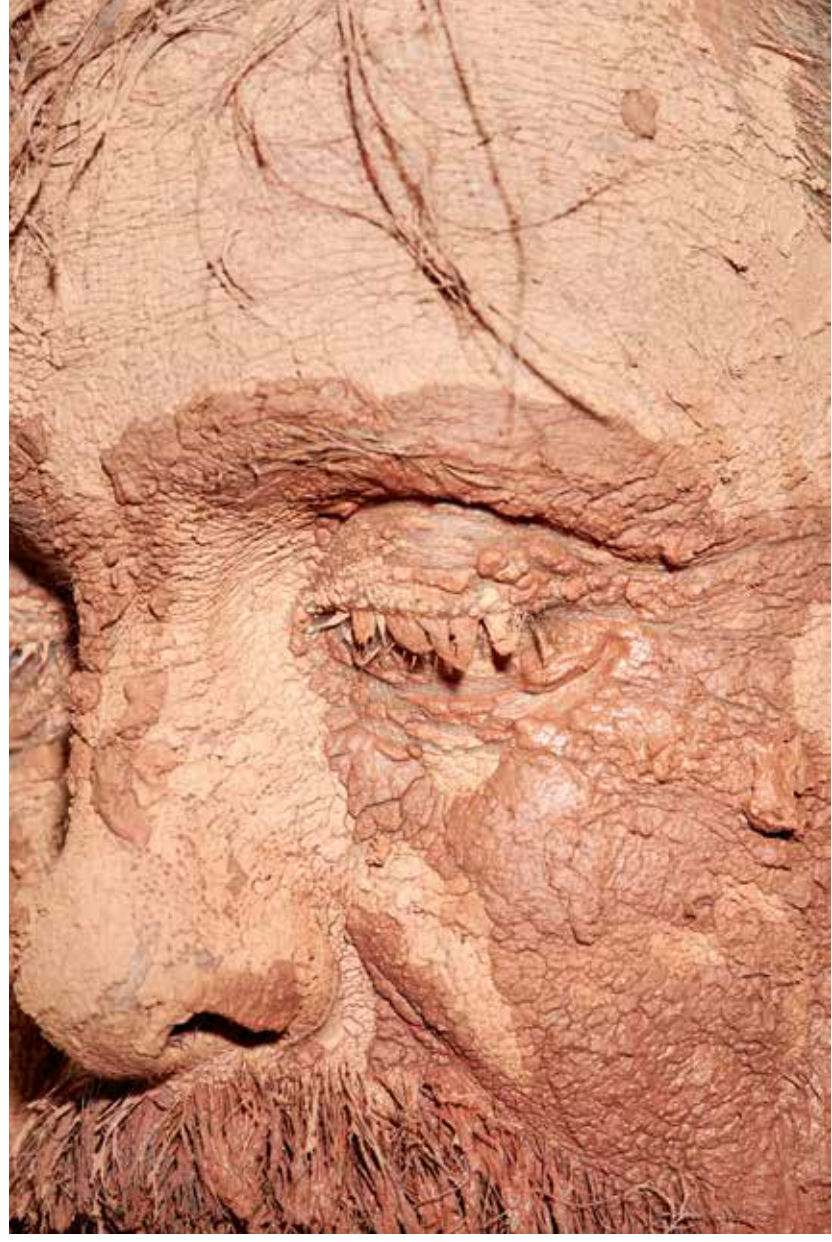
*Samuel Leuenberger* in conversation with *Pedro Wirz*  
Photography by *Dominik Hodel*

*Pedro Wirz*, Swiss-Brazilian artist based in Zurich met independent curator Samuel Leuenberger at the Rhine River in Basel for an intimate chat. Parked in the car while gazing onto the water flowing downstream, as old friends do who haven't seen each other for a long time, they reflect on creativity, family-life, past struggles and future hopes. A surprising recurrence in his exhibition currently on view at Kunsthalle Basel is how he stuffs (literally) all his research and ideas into an eclectic range of peculiar objects, which become his landscape of stitched and glued surfaces, tales of skins which are sinkholes as much as they are comfort zones. But once you penetrate these bumpy, leathery and stapled-together stories, one quickly realises there is a lot more to it than meets the eye.





Installation view, Pedro Wirz, *Environmental Hangover*, Kunsthalle Basel, 2022  
View on *Flor Satélite*, 2022 (left), *Chapéu Telúrico*, 2022 (right), *Ovo Espacial*, 2022 (floor)



Installation view, Pedro Wirz, *Environmental Hangover*, Kunsthalle Basel, 2022  
View on *Our cities* were built to be destroyed, 2016-2022 (front) and the series *Sour Ground*, 2022 (back)

Photo: Philipp Hänger / Kunsthalle Basel



SAMUEL LEUENBERGER

Hi Pedro, it's good to speak with you after seeing your fantastic show at Kunsthalle Basel, titled *Environmental Hangover*. You've done this show in the craziest of times. When a lot of artists had theirs cancelled or postponed or moved five times, you pulled off this immersive exhibition while having a growing family at home.

Besides *Environmental Hangover*, can you tell me a little bit about your family dynamics and the support you got from home in preparation for the show?

PEDRO WIRZ

I am a person who believes in collectivity and the strength of working together, thinking together – of course there will always be a tool or a final catalyst. It's my name there, the show goes under my name. But I strongly push and always want to talk about the people involved in the production of the show. I really don't believe in the concept of an artistic genius. I'm not afraid to talk about those things because, as I mentioned, in the end, you always need a medium or a motivator to make the whole thing happen and I'm assuming this position with pleasure. But back to the question you asked – and here we are not talking about studio assistants or producers and so forth: Here, I want to talk about family, as you put it. I am together with my partner Leonie, she is the mother of our kids, my very good friend and a probably my biggest supporter. She was so strongly involved in the production of the show at Kunsthalle Basel, indirectly in the very conceptualisation of it as well as its cognitive prediction. You can't avoid having those conversations with the people you love and you live with. It's this fixed loop, this very rich chain of repetition and routine that you end up having as someone who, by the end of the day, goes home to his or her family. And once you're there and you've fulfilled all the obligations within the family, your redemption is the possibility to engage in conversations that are very powerful, that end up being the catalyst of bigger images and stronger ideas. To talk about dreams with someone who loves you and (mostly) always has the patience to talk about those dreams before they become crystallised will always allow them to become as strong and as sharp as possible, and that's what good art work needs: to be straight forward and sharp.

So your partner Leonie saw from the outset what the opportunity and the challenge was simultaneously?

100%. I mean, Leonie is a visionary. Really, she can just predict the future through clear facts and the amount of work, efforts and passion you put into something. She did after all work as a futurologist when we met! But, after we got together and she became pregnant with our first child – I was living in Porto at the time and then came back to Switzerland – she never said, 'Okay, stop everything you're doing, because you are not earning enough money – now we have a family!' And I would have stopped everything to support my new family. But no,

she was like, 'You know what? It's pretty good what you are doing, so take care of the household and once that's done go to the studio and work.'

Exactly. So many times, when I called you, you told me over the phone, I'm just putting my kids to bed, then I'm heading over to the studio from 8 in the evening until midnight or early morning hours. And then I go home. And every Friday morning, you take your son to your grandparents in another city and head back to the studio in the suburbs of Zurich. And this you did as long as I remember, this strong support came from the family, and family alone!

I worked every single moment I could. Because having kids also means that whenever you are not with them someone else is doing that job for you. Someone is brave enough or strong enough and supportive enough to take that place. While Leonie was pregnant and preparing to become a mother, I was privileged to receive this amazing prize called "Junge Akademie der Künste" and I ended up in Berlin for three months. First, I said 'I'll cancel it!' and Leonie insisted, 'No, you go there, but don't you dare going out to dance, not even one night out. Use that last three months you have not being a parent to work in overdrive. You just stay in the studio and work, work, work.' And that's exactly what I did. It was amazing because so many things came out of that time. I met Christian Nagel and Saskia Draxler, they came to visit the studio and we ended up working together. Ok, I did go out one night after all: I did go to Berghain, but they didn't let me in, so I went back to the studio instead. Haha.

You and Leonie both work full-time. You really are doing what a lot of modern couples attempt to do: taking care of the kids together, having a career together and supporting each other. What was the hardest thing in the last twelve months running up to the show?

Sometimes the things you do turn out so big that you always want to talk about it when you come home. But you have to find this very particular place and time where you're not starting to hurt or even bore the other person because you overshare things. I always had so much on my mind. And I had to keep many things in my mind in order not to keep coming to her with all the: What do you think? - What do you like or dislike? - questions. I learned a lot through working on this show about how I like to do things; taking clearer decisions, making stronger moves.

So now that Leonie gave you all this space and time to face this very important challenge, exhibiting in one of the most respected institutions in Switzerland even Europe, it marked a very important moment in time obviously. After more than ten years working professionally as an artist, starting a family and just opening your biggest show to date, I guess it's your turn to give back. What are you doing from your side?

We do contracts, actually. Yeah, real contracts, when it comes to time management at least. We agree on something together, put it on paper and sign it. We do our best, but I have to be honest, I missed some of the deadlines and promises. But it's funny because when I came back to Switzerland, we had this clear, five-year agreement, that after that time, we would modify the amount of work that she or I were bringing to the table; and as a matter of fact, the Kunsthalle show marks this five-year point. So now we're discussing how it should continue. I should slow down what I actually want to do, but it's complicated because once you finish something this big, you're basically starting to make things on a bigger scale from thereon in – that is when it starts. This shows also marks the ten years of working as professional artist having graduated from art-school. This ten-year threshold is a funny thing. It's like you work your ass off for ten years just to be able to start for real...

Yeah, absolutely! It's really interesting, what you said about standing above the idea of the artistic genius, that you very much believe in collaborating and working on projects mutually with other people especially if the project is in your name. Maybe this stance is not clearly visible anymore in your current show but when we met 11 or 12 years ago, your entire working method was very much about extending, dictating, instructing, inviting other people to finish a work of yours, to elaborate on it. Your early works were very much based on this ideology and the problem back then was, that it was sometimes hard to define your artistic style, you let so many outside voices into your practice. Do you remember in the last few years, the moment at which your collaborative practice merged with a visual spirit that informed your own language?

When I left Brazil to come to Europe, I had no real background in the arts. I came to Switzerland to learn what this could mean. And basically, now looking back, I understand that these first moments in my practice were also how I was trying to modulate or understand what the thing is that I prefer. So, I have to investigate all these different opinions or see the work of all these different people to understand what I want to do, and that way of working brought me to comprehend and also to create the language I am using now - visually and conceptually. But also, all the geographical shifts were a big part of it. The last ten years I have been to so many different places through residences and the like. And every time I had no money, I would go back to Brazil to stay with my parents. And then I started to look at everything I was “used to” much differently. The basis of my childhood and teenage years, visually speaking, as a potential for my practice as an adult (artist).

Yes, I totally see what you mean. I don't know, maybe you can help me with this one.

There is a particular time and I'm wondering

if you remember the year, you had been working in Switzerland for quite a while already and you did all these residences. At one time you came back to Switzerland, you had a circle of friends, a strong entourage, but you were still trying to figure out exactly how to formulate some of your ideas and your visual language. Then there was this one specific moment in which it became clear that you had to return once again to where you grew up with your parents, to the countryside of Brazil, outside of Sao Paulo where you could connect to the earth. It felt almost like a journey to self-discovery. I don't know much time you spent there, but when you came back from that trip, your art had changed good.

It was 2013 actually, which was not long after I graduated from art school. I went back to Brazil because I got a prize to do a show there. And I went back to the land that my father has, he has a house in the countryside – pretty much in the middle of what remains of the “Mata Atlantica” – and spent two months there, just working. The connection with the materials that I use today forged itself there because I could not go to the art store. I just brought some stuff with me and stayed there. And after doing that show in São Paulo, called *New Friends*, I understood that the material language was what I wanted to focus on and what I also could do specifically. Several years later, after digesting this new knowledge, I came back to Brazil to prepare myself for the residency at the Swiss Institute in Rome. As I knew I had the stipend, I went back to the same area to be alone and work. So that by the time I went to Rome, I could simply continue with what I had already been doing. Continuing to work with those types of materials. In Rome, I started to work with stuff I could find in the garden. And soon after, my first solo show with Kai Matsumiya Gallery in 2016 presented itself.

And it was at that moment that I decided what shapes and what kinds of materials I wanted to use and what I wanted to discuss with and through the work. This show marked this *Aha!* moment. The feedback from people was very different to whatever else I had done previously. In addition, the Isa Genzken show at MOMA in 2014 was very important to me. To see how wild and free she would ambulate within her practice and her visual language. That gave me the courage to simply change what I was doing and believe in a different way of doing and thinking through things.

Back to Brazil! This was also a time in which you worked a lot with ceramics. I remember you also had a couple shows in Brazil at the time for which you did some pretty crazy full-on installs, with lots of little, different objects inside them, right?

Yes. In the *New Friends* show, I presented a lot of ceramics. I have been working with this material since my time at school. I did some objects during the time in Basel that

related to my home place in Brazil. I come from the Paraíba Valley (Vale do Paraíba) where we have so much beautiful art produced in clay, like the *Figureiras de Taubaté*. A league of artisans produces those beautiful little sculptures, which reflect on legends and myths, manifestations of very specific cultural expressions of that Valley and its people, and they use this unburned and hand-painted clay. I mean, clay is the first material of when we think about sculptures, right? When we think about the beginnings, expressing something in three dimensions, expression in form both of and through an object. One has to go back to the soil, forming it. Only later we arrived at subtraction, thinking of stone sculpting, etc. right? It goes like this: clay, stone, wood and so forth; and then there's only the polymers to come – adding and gluing shit together. Ceramics have always been there and that's why I also really wanted to have ceramics in the show at Kunsthalle Basel. I wanted to have what people like to call naive materiality (literally) mutilated by the brutal axe of contemporary art making.

Tell me more about the ceramics. We are talking about the fourth room in the Kunsthalle, where you present a series of completely new ceramic works, three of them based on animals that are about to go extinct in the Amazon, and a couple of figures that relate back to mythic figures, tales from the region. Tell me more about this work because I have to say this was to me the biggest surprise in the show. I just didn't see it coming, in this finished form.

I wanted that room to have a different impact because you have to walk through all these coloured spaces before with all this installation work and then you come to this very dry, and almost medical room. I wanted people to first experience the works as these colourful, beautiful things and then find that the longer you stay facing them, the better you comprehend that the room actually celebrates death and the end of things. And from this idea came... what was the question again?

How this work came about...?

I wanted to talk about abstraction. Right – abstraction and abstract images, but through mutilation, through a violent gesture, maybe so to say through “culturalization”, right! So those figures, they were sliced apart, like a filet, and you can therefore see quite clearly that it could be a steak. I mean, I also wanted to talk about abstraction through consumption or the way we abstract things through our existence. Like, you buy a cup of milk without understanding what that is. Is there an animal behind it? It is this kind of distance from the source material that poses one of our biggest problems nowadays. It's like we don't understand how to access to things anymore, where things come from, how they got there, how they find their way before our eyes and hands.

I wanted to have this very violent image on the wall. They are trophies really. We're celebrating what we have been doing all along. The show is not saying, “Let's communicate better messages, let's do better

as humans.” No! It's just about the consequences, the messages, and then about understanding these messages and their consequences, and after that we move forward. Probably not anymore in the ways we know – but that's how it is: things break and living things die – since forever. There is no such a thing as eternity.

What I also found interesting was your transition from smaller objects to larger ones. A lot of things have started on a table or been crafted on potter's wheel with your hands. And I don't think this just has something to do with the bigger budgets available. There simply came a shift, moving from smaller- to larger-than-life- sized proportions. How did this come about?

That's an amazing question. When I was in Rome, a good friend of mine, Thomas Jeppe, came to visit me and he looked around my studio and said: “Those are great things you are doing, but they all fit in your hands. You are talking about matters that are bigger than us, not only physically but also metaphorically.” That clicked in mind. If you look at the ocean, you feel afraid because it never ends or if you're in front of a mountain, you're afraid because you don't know if you can get over it. Here enters the question of dimension. Another good friend of mine, the painter Gabriel Lima, was always questioning me on how to think about dimensions, what this could bring about in the work, how the thinking about dimensions in the work could affect its impression to the audience. After that I had the show in Brazil, it was 2016 or 2017, an exhibition at Instituto Tomie Ohtake curated by Paulo Miyada, and that was the moment when I did one big piece because I wanted people to think about how nature or anything else that is not us causes fear. And I thought the dimensions could be a bridge for this thought, in the way that you stand in front of a piece that is bigger than you physically, and you can't control it. Another motivation comes through thinking and solving issues while producing something really big, technically speaking. For example, back to the show in Brazil, the Institution didn't wanted me to do the piece, a four-metre-high soil spiral/snake creature, because its weight was around a thousand kilos and they were afraid the floor would collapse. So, I had to solve this problem and find solutions for how to get around these technical problems. It helped me further as a sculptor, as a person who constructs objects.

It's interesting you mentioned the word fear, because you often work with cocoons or sorts of containers and vessels: all sorts of holes into which one can project something fearful, but they often have something to do with growth and birth and hope at the same time. If they are of human, natural or animal form, they always seem to circle back to this container shape, some sort of encasing for these imaginary creatures. You spend a lot of time cutting-out and making these dark places

where someone can slide in – both symbolically or physically speaking. Can you tell me more about this?

Fear is based on two clear things: The first one is that what you know is happening, what is real. So, for example, you know where your fear of knives come from. You know it can hurt or kill you. So, I'm afraid of that object because I know it could stop my existence. But fear can also be based on the unknown, and that would be the second thing that produces fear. I don't know what is coming to me. I don't know what's going to happen, and I am afraid of that. I think this is what I try to do or at least my fantasy imagines: That people look at those orifices or cocoons. The dark moments in the work are possibilities for the unknown. I want people to project fear or to think about fear, but also to think about resilience, and what comes after that hole, what comes after the end of things as we know them? What sort of feelings do I project into this hole? The holes are like places to project the unknown into the work. They are about projections, mostly about the future and the unpredictable.

I like this a lot. And this is why I think that the title of the show is so fitting: *Environmental Hangover*. It is, of course, directly linked to fear. We know we're doing bad things to our planet and we know it's going to come back to us somehow, and we all have good reasons to be afraid of that. And we're not totally sure yet what the repercussions will be, even though we sort of know. This fear can be transferred symbolically onto all kinds of things. People assume that once you've done a big show in a place like the Kunsthalle, that afterwards you jump from one show to the next. But on the contrary, I'm sure this fear stays with you, since the next unknown is right here in front of you, where to go next, where to exhibit next. It's an existential fear-circle.

Oh my god, yes. Definitely. Especially because of the situation I'm in right now. I did the show. Now I have a family and you put a statement out there and you're always going to be judged. There's no other way around it, in society in general. You're always going to be judged and then you have to be able to grow from this judgment. And back to your question, and back to the main subject matter of the show: I can only dream. I can keep on dreaming and crystallising things as I want to, because basically there was this fantastic photographer. My brother was his assistant – Otto Stupakoff. He always said: 'Everything you want, the gods will give you. Just be ready for it.' So, basically there's no such a thing as luck. You woke up early. You were there. The people came and gave you the money because you were there! The only thing I can do after this big act is to go back to the studio and work to become even better – not for the audience but for me. Virtuosity is a beautiful thing.

Do you think having had a family, having children, has changed your approach to art, changed the art itself or does it simply motivate you?

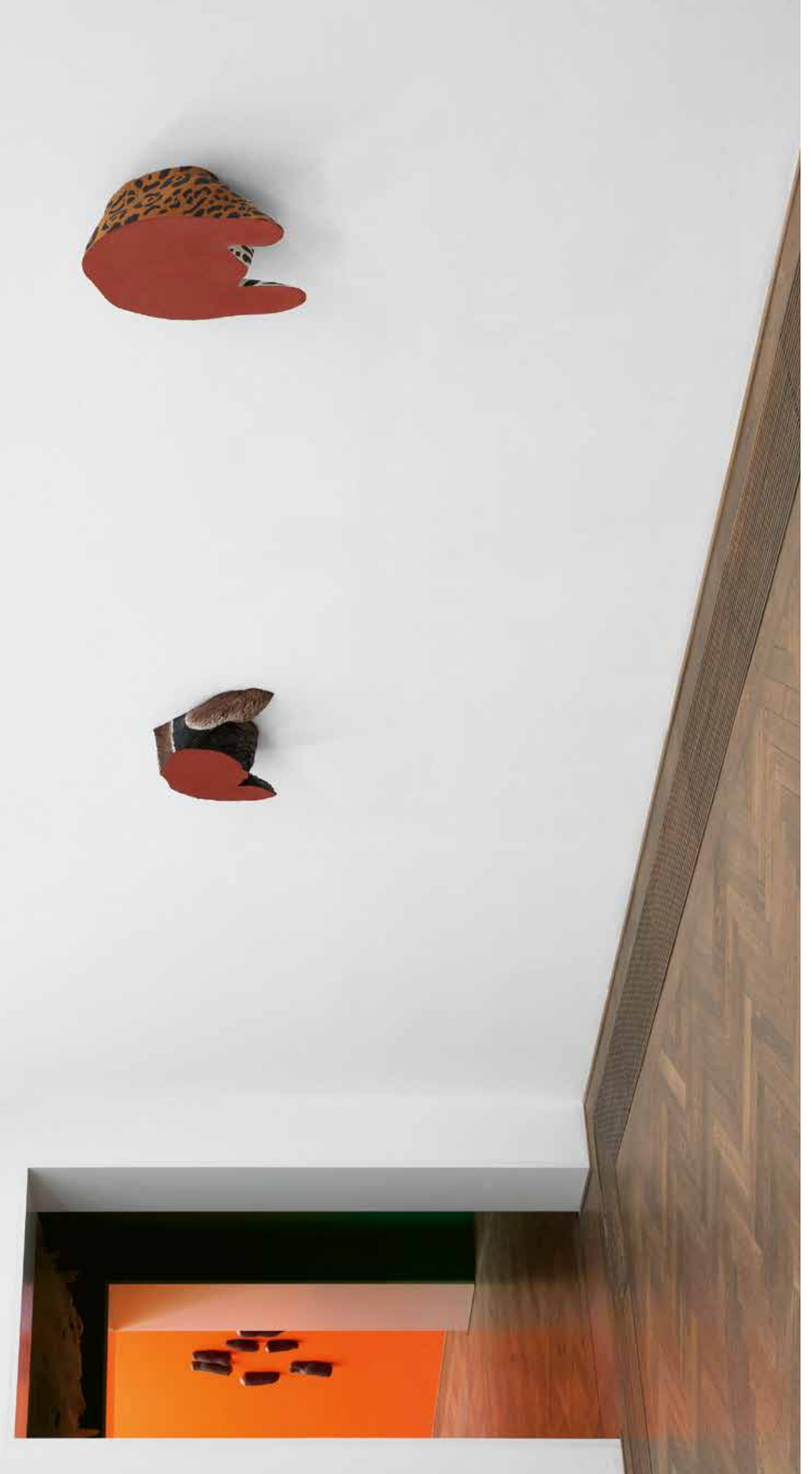
I think to have a family is also like to replace yourself. The self you have built up and moulded, the self you used to know and like so much. But a big part of this self is replaced with new meaning when you begin a family. Talking about dreams and the work of artists, you always have to think that you're not touching the floor. Because if you constantly think about reality, the war, coronavirus, you're just going to be down, right? And then you have to be able to imagine things. You can't be constantly inside reality. But family. The kids are going to be shitting and shit is real. You have to go clean that shit. Who is cleaning that shit? Is your wife cleaning that shit? I mean, it's me cleaning that shit. I think we're both cleaning it. To have a family closes the door to one world. But it opens another to another world. And yes, it motivates me to create a different one – one that allows me to be the person I want to be together with them. A completely new me. More efficient, precise, stronger and yet, also tired as shit and full of love.

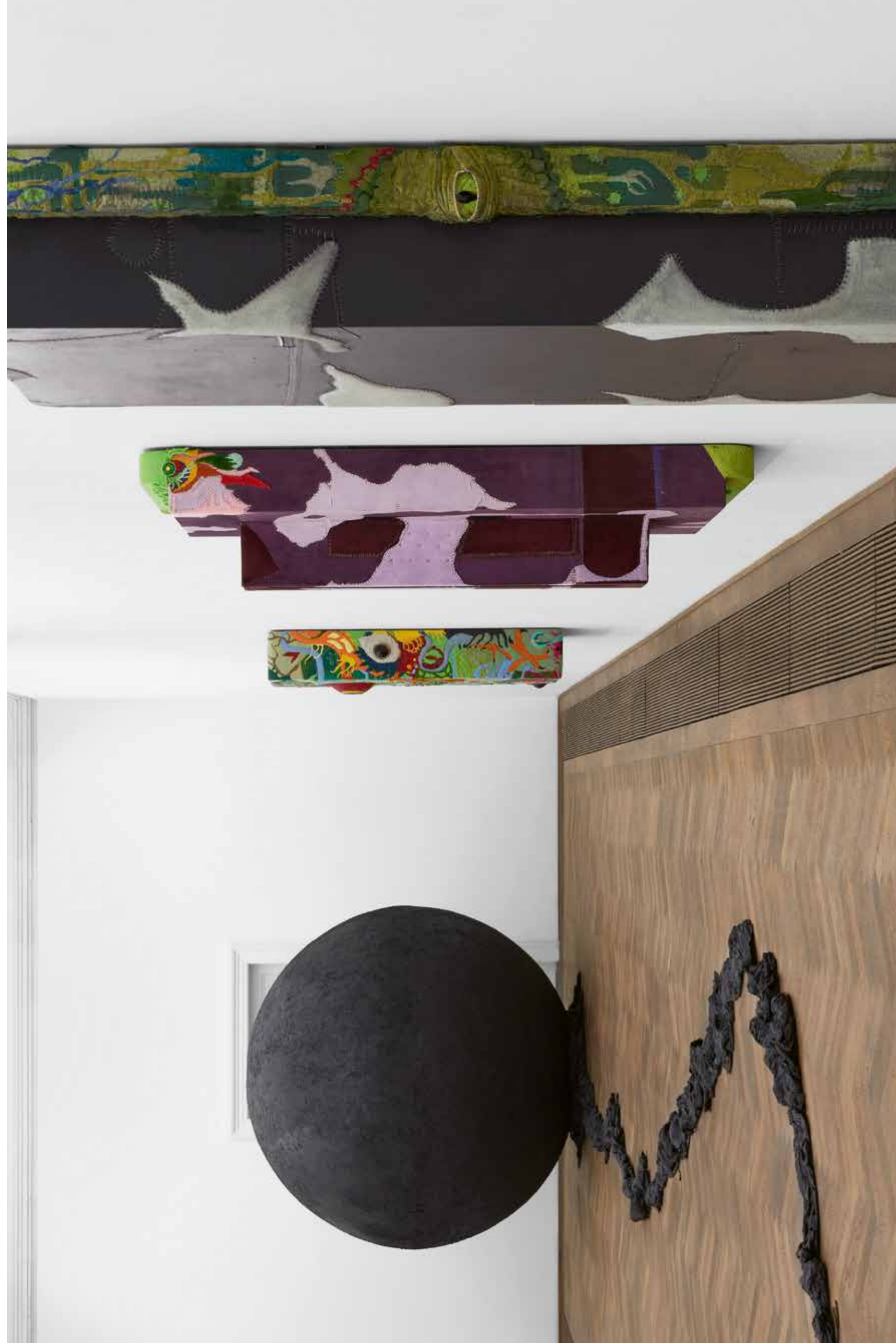
It's not just about the art. You're absolutely right. It is a privilege to create art but you also have to create a safe space that you enter as an artist.

Oh, yeah.

Especially right now, when there's a war raging, people are being killed for no good reason. At times it feels ridiculous to work on your own projects. Also for me, organising exhibitions; and for you making art, if you see it all relative to what's going on, it means very little in a way. How do you motivate yourself in the mornings, to keep doing what you're doing? Because in a way, in all actuality, we're supposed to just drop everything we're doing and, at the same time, we can't stop either, or can we? What should we be doing?

I am a person who believes we have to keep on doing what we do with the best intentions. That's all we can do, basically. And it's good. It's a very complex question, how to continue to keep on producing art. We're talking about this while people are dying. But I also want to reflect on it. That's one way to create, to document and to talk about this. So, within this work, this specific field of work, we have the privilege (as artists) to think about things and you have to understand this privilege. I also have a big problem with forgetting about this. And of course, I am part of a delicate system. I have galleries, I am part of the context from which I work from. The machine that allows me to produce is the same which also generates the images we are seeing now. Nevertheless, I keep saying this: If you have the opportunity to buy a gun, I would prefer to make an artwork out of it and hang it on the wall, than use it to kill people. You see my point? I am trying to find other possibilities for real things, to give the imagination other options.





Installation view, Pedro Wirz, *Environmental Hangover*, Kunsthalle Basel, 2022

View f.l.t.r. on *Exúvia*, 2022, Coro de Princesa (Sumaúma), 2022, Coro de Princesa (Seringa), 2022, Coro de Princesa (Envira Preta), 2022

Photo: Philipp Hänger / Kunsthalle Basel