

Danh Vo

Massimo De Carlo, Milan 7 September – 30 October

Since 2019, Massimo De Carlo has been housed on the ground floor of Casa Corbellini-Wassermann, an iconic Milanese building designed by architect Piero Portaluppi in the early 1930s. Considered a prime example of rationalist architecture, its spacious interior is bedecked in an astonishing variety of marble, which runs as a linear thread throughout the gallery's rooms along the skirting boards, floors and doorframes. When Danh Vo first saw the space in preparation for his solo show at the gallery, he thought it was incredible. 'When they give you a space, you have to analyse it: you can decide to work against it, or together, or play with it,' the Danish-Vietnamese artist said in a recent interview. 'I wanted to accentuate the marble, which is everywhere here, but not refined marble like this one, I wanted the scraps.' These scraps come in the form of antiques sourced by Vo in Europe – he is an avid collector of all manner of objects that may or may not be of use in his art – and marble pieces recovered from dismantled graves and a quarry in Bolzano. Disfigured by time, they are relics from a distant past that act as a humble counterpoint to the opulent rooms they now inhabit.

They invite close attention. In one of the smaller rooms, a salt-and-pepper granite bench lies in front of an exquisite fireplace made of three different types of marble that frame an interwoven surface of copper alloy strips. The bench fits in so aptly that you would be excused for mistaking it for the original furnishing. A small sculpture has been carefully placed on the bench, balanced without glue, screws or nails. It is made up of three elements: a slightly

yellowed Carrara-marble lion head that could have been a corbel in a past life; an H-shaped wood structure into which the upper ledge of the lion's head has been slotted; and, on it, a sleeping bronze human head, recognisable as such only once you walk around the sculpture and discern it in the back. The features seem to intimate this could be Jesus Christ, or perhaps it's some other sleeping, historical bearded man. Something about the two antique elements hints at sea wreckage, or simply the sea itself – perhaps because of the softness of the erosion and the nature of the discolouration. The title – *Untitled*, like most of the works in the show – certainly offers no clues.

This marine element appears to be hinted at in the adjacent room, at the heart of the gallery. Here, three sculptures lie on a low square platform or floor composed of nine white Carrara and Lasa sheets. One of the 'readymade' sculptures is made up of a single stone leg, flanked by a fierce sea creature on one side, and a fragment of a foot on the other. The room also contains the latest version of Vo's signature item in exhibitions: the farewell letter the French Catholic missionary Jean-Théophane Vénard wrote to his father in 1861, while calmly awaiting execution by beheading in Vietnam (2.2.1861, 2009). Vo's father, Phung Vo, who is Catholic and does not speak French, has been faithfully reproducing the letter in beautiful calligraphy for over a decade, and will do so for as long as he is capable. Even for those who are familiar with the letter, it remains an astonishing example of human resilience and faith: 'A light cut of a saber will separate my head

[from my body], like the gardener cuts a spring flower for his pleasure. We are all flowers planted on this earth that God reaps in His due time, some earlier, some later. May it be the purple rose, the maiden lily, or the humble violet.'

Flowers take on a newfound meaning here, via a new photographic series. Since moving to the countryside outside Berlin, Vo has been dedicating his time to nature, growing a new garden around his studio and challenging himself to get to know, nurture and recognise the names of flowers. Each flower is captured in a quietly satisfying photograph, like something from an old botanical textbook, and labelled with its Latin name by his father. They are grouped together in two separate rooms, offering both a delightful lesson in phytology as well as injecting the only bright colour into an otherwise stone-coloured show. Anyone who has taken a stab at growing plants will recognise the feeling of freedom, unpredictability, wonder and frustration that such a project can engender. In Vo's case, it suggests a symbolic liberation in the creative process, overcoming all the traditional boundaries of the definition of art.

Vo installed all the works in situ, interlocking them in a careful balancing act, without glue or nails. Ever the collector of histories as well as objects, he offers here an elegiac and humble homage to Italy, where marble and relics inevitably become imbued with the context of the country's often imperious historical and artistic past. Offering no explanation, simply themselves, Vo's works quietly testify to the passing of time and the frailty of everything, even stone. *Ana Vukadin*



untitled, 2021, pencil on paper and c-print, writing by Phung Vo, 45 × 32 × 4 cm (framed)



untitled, 2021, Carrara and Lasa marble, wood, 78 × 400 × 400 cm.

both images Photo: Nicholas Ash. Courtesy Massimo De Carlo