

JULY 2016 "THE BEST ART IN THE WORLD"

Paula Crown: Mount Analogue Squared



*The artist Paula Crown, Portrait by John Russo*

By **KURT MCVEY**, JUL. 2016

“What is above knows what is below. What is below does not know what is above.” So goes a quote from René Daumal’s *Mount Analogue: A Novel of Symbolically Authentic Non-Euclidean Adventures in Mountain Climbing*, which served as inspiration, not only for surrealist filmmaker Alejandro Jodorowsky’s enduring 1973 cult classic *The Holy Mountain*, but also the Neville Wakefield curated group art exhibition, also called *Mount Analogue*, which was produced by Meredith Darrow of Darrow Contemporary and opened on July 16th at Performance Ski, an artistically reimagined ski-shop in Aspen, Colorado.

Artist (fervently foremost) Paula Crown, a wearer of many hats including but not limited to advocate and entrepreneur, has a quiet but nevertheless remarkable bronze sculpture in the exhibit, “Mis-registration Spike,” which shares valuable space alongside the works of other contributing artists such as Ed Ruscha, Damien Hirst, Wendy White, Richard Prince and Gerard Richter to name a few. It can be a troubling proposition to single out one artist from a shining collection of twenty-six gifted creators, but even Mr. Wakefield would agree that Crown is a worthy mouth-piece for the exhibition, as both her artistic work and personal life embody the powerful thematic dualities inherent in *Mount Analogue*, the unfinished, posthumously published 1952 novel (Daumal died of Tuberculosis at 36 in Paris, most likely due to his experiments with psychotropic compounds such as carbon tetrachloride ) and the pataphysical art show in Aspen.



*Paula Crown Untitled, 2014. Bronze. 16 1/2 x 13 5/8 x 9 1/2*

“Paula is really interesting as an artist and also as a motivator,” says the dry, reliably congenial and equally multi-faceted Neville Wakefield - of MoMa PS1 and Frieze notoriety-over the telly while on a surprisingly sunny holiday in London. “She’s immersed in this fairly unique role where she has power that comes both through her art and other means. I’ve become aware of both sides and I think they’re equally important.”

A brief trip through Crown’s bio illustrates her ability to nimbly navigate the high-stakes business world, either as a former investment banker at Solomon Brothers in New York in the ‘80s (which should re-contextualize “boys club” for contemporary artists) or later as a principal at her family-owned investment firm, Henry Crown & Company. Besides overseeing multiple properties in Aspen, Crown is also an activist and philanthropic force in her hometown of Chicago, working hands-on with Illinois’ “financially disciplined” Governor Bruce Rauner and Chi-town’s mayor and former White House Chief of Staff, Rahm Emanuel, two men with somewhat disparate approaches to remedying the city’s infamously gratuitous gun violence and its clear correlation to gross economic disparity.

Crown’s relationship with Chicago’s mayor isn’t the artist’s only connection to our current Commander-In-Chief. In 2009, Crown was appointed to President Obama’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities. She is also a member of the board of trustees of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, heading up the Education Committee. Quite the load and that’s only a few organizations to which Crown lends her time and attention.

“What’s heavy for me is finding the space and the quiet,” says Crown, offering a bit of confessional clarity. “I am an introvert in a very extroverted situation.” Crown knew she was an artist at seven years old when she scratched up her parents’ classic vinyl records. “I got punished and wasn’t sure why. Especially because they’re worth some money now,” she adds with a melodious laugh. “It’s that natural instinct though; that thing you did before you knew anyone was looking. I’m always searching for that.”

In 2012 Crown graduated with an MFA in painting and drawing from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, effectively doubling down on her career as a professional artist. This decision was partially buoyed by Madeleine Grynsztej, Pritzker Director of the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago. Grynsztej provided Crown with some clarification at a MCA event several years ago regarding what exactly constitutes an introvert. “An introvert is someone who’s exhausted when they’re out in public. An extravert gets energized,” Crown, the once and certainly future socialite, reiterates. “Even though I could go out and enjoy myself, it was still draining. I knew I had to use that fuel more efficiently. I’m old enough now to know; this is me. It was the moment I realized my true self was someone who required space alone.”

Crown, the artist, seems to really be hitting her stride. She recently delivered *The Sublime and The Center: Dimensions of Landscape* at Marlborough’s New York gallery, where she is represented, back in early 2015. She also has a piece in Jack Shainman Gallery’s *For Freedoms*, a group exhibition running in tandem with the current presidential campaign. The show, featuring mostly good work based on exigent socio-political themes, is part of an ongoing curatorial series that simultaneously functions as an artist-run super PAC created by Eric Gottesman and Hank Willis Thomas. “It’s not popular to say, but social community arts engagement can’t be barn raising,” notes Crown. “It’s not about everyone getting together to do the same thing. It has to be enlightened and directed.”



*Paula Crown Untitled, 2014. Bronze. 16 1/2 x 13 5/8 x 9 1/2 inches.*

Halfway through 2016, there seems to be an almost oppressive sense of urgency to push our artists to tackle our predominant socio-political issues, and in an almost absurdly literal sense. Take Zoë Buckman's, "Champ" for instance; a glowing, neon pink sculpture of a woman's reproductive organs, featured prominently in *For Freedoms*. The work is affixed with two real, gray boxing gloves where the ovaries should be. "We're still fighting for our own reproductive rights!" The work exclaims among other similar sentiments. It's an admittedly cool piece (though neon at this point feels a bit fatigued), in a very straightforward, moth-to-a-flame capacity. What makes *Mount Analogue* different, and not necessarily more ambitious, is the simple fact that it doesn't put its artists in a box, rather, it only

asks its artists to climb, to transcend, to look within, and perhaps more importantly, create entirely new dialogues.

“Activism can be activism without it being art. I’m not sure if it works the other way around,” says Mr. Wakefield, treading softly. “On the other hand, all art is thought made manifest. Artists are our social cartographers. We bring them into the germane presence of social issues that are changing our lives to help us make sense of them. The problem is, we live in an era of overly received wisdom. Breaking those paradigms is not only a good thing but a necessity.”

Crown’s “Mis-registration Spike,” a narrow, jagged, bronze, dust-covered, mini mountain, which stands untethered to an immediate cause, is free to glitch into new dimensions of thematic and aesthetic possibility, though seemingly not without being physically altered or damaged, depending on your perspective. This also gives the work, a “paradam” in Daumal’s world, a timeless quality, much like the recently discovered stalagmite sculptures in France, which were created by Neanderthals over 50,000 years ago and pre-date any known cave paintings, a subject that has occupied Crown’s interest for some time now. “The computer acted more human than machine. The router skipped and shook like a person. It expressed anxiety because it couldn’t complete its directive. In an evolutionary sense, it mutated. This lubed spike ended up being segmented. It lurched ahead on a weird angle and I thought that was perfect.”

With this show, Crown seems to enjoy playing more with the idea of serendipity, a relatively underused term, especially considering it currently has to shrink in the shadow of its much more popular sister, singularity. Though Crown’s piece certainly deconstructs the evolutionary relationship between “man” and his tools, in this modern case, robotics and artificial intelligence, it’s the artist’s willingness to embrace interior landscapes-the unforeseen-that breeds the most exciting artistic results (IRL).

“Alpinism is the art of climbing mountains by confronting the greatest dangers with the greatest prudence,” says Daumal in his strange book, whose thesis asserts, for better or worse, that one can only find knowledge when truly seeking it. “Art is

used here to mean the accomplishment of knowledge in action.” It might be perilous, especially at such a politically fraught time, to steer our greatest artists away from the somewhat tribal concerns of the worldly, frustrated mob, a righteous mass which includes human beings desperately looking to secure basic human rights as well as those looking to deny them, and back towards a shared, collective existentialism and humanity’s true goal, an inherent, universal pursuit of evolutionary transcendence. It’s possible that the former is an obvious prerequisite for the latter, but not necessarily. *Mount Analogue* offers a compelling argument to the contrary.

“Paula’s work is always dealing with dualities: the analogue and the digital, interior & exterior worlds, micro vs. macro, cause and effect. It’s this fractal thing, which embodies the themes in the show,” says Mr. Wakefield. “How do you do something like this, in these days especially, in which people are getting shot everyday in the news, in a way that doesn’t seem like your twiddling your thumbs while Rome burns?”

For what (sadly) feels more and more like a smaller faction of the human race, and therefore for an even smaller group of artists, the current partisan, dogmatic, archaic and often denominational squabbling over these issues looks more and more like the ruminations of a fretful mountaineering party, content to argue on and on at a low level base camp, while a brave minority ascends to more mysterious and sublime heights of thinking, living, breathing, and ultimately, making.

"Its summit must be inaccessible, but its base accessible to human beings as nature made them," says Daumal of the metaphysical mountains of the mind we all share but only a valiant few attempt to surmount, though these words could easily be applied to Crown’s powerful little sculpture in a ski-shop in Aspen, and that seems to be the point. “It must be unique and it must exist geographically. The door to the invisible must be visible." **WM**



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photo by Monet Lucki