

Thea Djordjadze in the Gropius Bau

Contemporary Archaeology

Thea Djordjadze's art avoids all triumphalism and is characterized by precise lightness. Now the sculptor is playing with the order of things at the Gropius Bau in Berlin.

Gold, silver, copper, iron – very few materials worked by humans are more durable than metal, which retains its form for millennia. This is how the amateur archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann was able to excavate 8,000 objects in Asia Minor at the end of the 19th century, objects that were over 4,000 years old. Schliemann presented this supposed “Treasure of Priam” in Berlin from 1881 onwards, in what was then the Museum of Decorative Arts. Today, this building is called the Gropius Bau, and the treasure is located in Moscow. The Schliemann Hall, however, still exists and is used for temporary exhibitions – starting in September, by Thea Djordjadze.

Exactly 140 years after the pompous presentation of the finds, the Georgian artist is exhibiting her installation works in six rooms of the late 19th-century building, works that are devoid of any triumphalism. Djordjadze studied in Tbilisi, Amsterdam, and at the Düsseldorf Art Academy, where she was a master student of Rosemarie Trockel. Her work is characterized by its precise lightness and apparent casualness; the pieces, made of materials such as fabric, plaster, rubber, or papier-mâché, create the impression of a precarious balance.

No pressure to engage in a discourse:

Djordjadze is not one for the conventions of museum presentation. Thus, there will be no wall texts in her exhibition, and the display cases she frequently uses will not contain any writings or books, as the trend toward information-saturated exhibitions might suggest. Visitors are not forced to engage in discourses for which the artworks act as representatives. The objects themselves are the discourse, or rather, their interplay. This also means that the placement of the works is determined very late in the process.

For her international exhibitions, the artist says, she visits the spaces in person and then continues working with the memory of them in her Berlin studio – depending on the distance, a visit is often only possible once or twice. Not so in Berlin, where she has lived since 2009. “In the Gropius Bau,” she says, “I can always go back and look at the space in different states.” This includes the changing daylight, which Djordjadze prefers and of which there is plenty in the high-ceilinged rooms.

Djordjadze's art subverts hierarchies. Displays, vitrines, shelves, or pedestals – usually perceived as supportive and functional – come into their own as objects in her installations, becoming comprehensible in their own right. They still have a function, the artist explains, “as a support. But I try to use their actual function as minimally as possible and also consider the displays as works of art. There is a tension between what is on them and the display itself. I cannot separate display, space and object, it's all connected.”

The canvases are also sculptures.

Painting is also part of Djordjadze's practice, and there, too, frame and canvas merge, quite literally. Her canvases, she says, are actually sculptures – plaster is poured into specially made frames and then painted, like a fresco.

How does one arrive at such forms? Djordjadze doesn't work with obvious autobiographical references. However, she does reveal one. During her childhood in Tbilisi, Georgia, she frequently visited the Simon Janashia Museum, which houses the country's most important archaeological finds. For these objects, some of which are gilded, the anthropologist Alexander Javakhishvili, together with the painter Avto Varazi, created display cases, showcases, and walls in the 1950s, which were still in use until the 1990s.

Since there was no spotlighting, the archaeological objects were highlighted with hand-painted jute, creating an intimate, minimalist, and tasteful presentation of things that are usually displayed with pomp and circumstance. Which brings us back to Schliemann's Priam's Treasure. And to the realization that how something is exhibited can be just as important as what is exhibited. The dialogue between Thea Djordjadze's anti-monumental art and the Gründerzeit architecture of the Gropius Bau is certainly something to look forward to.