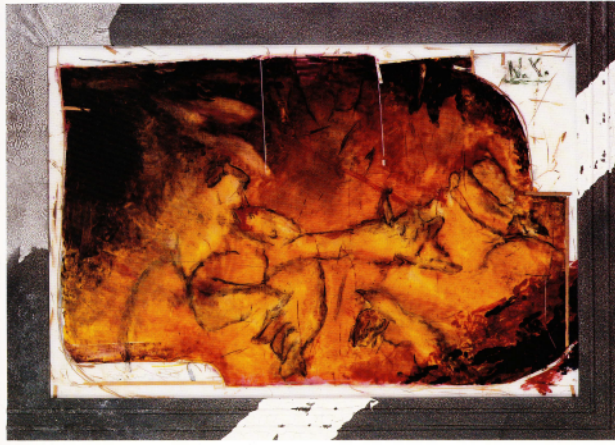


CATALOGUE ESSAYS



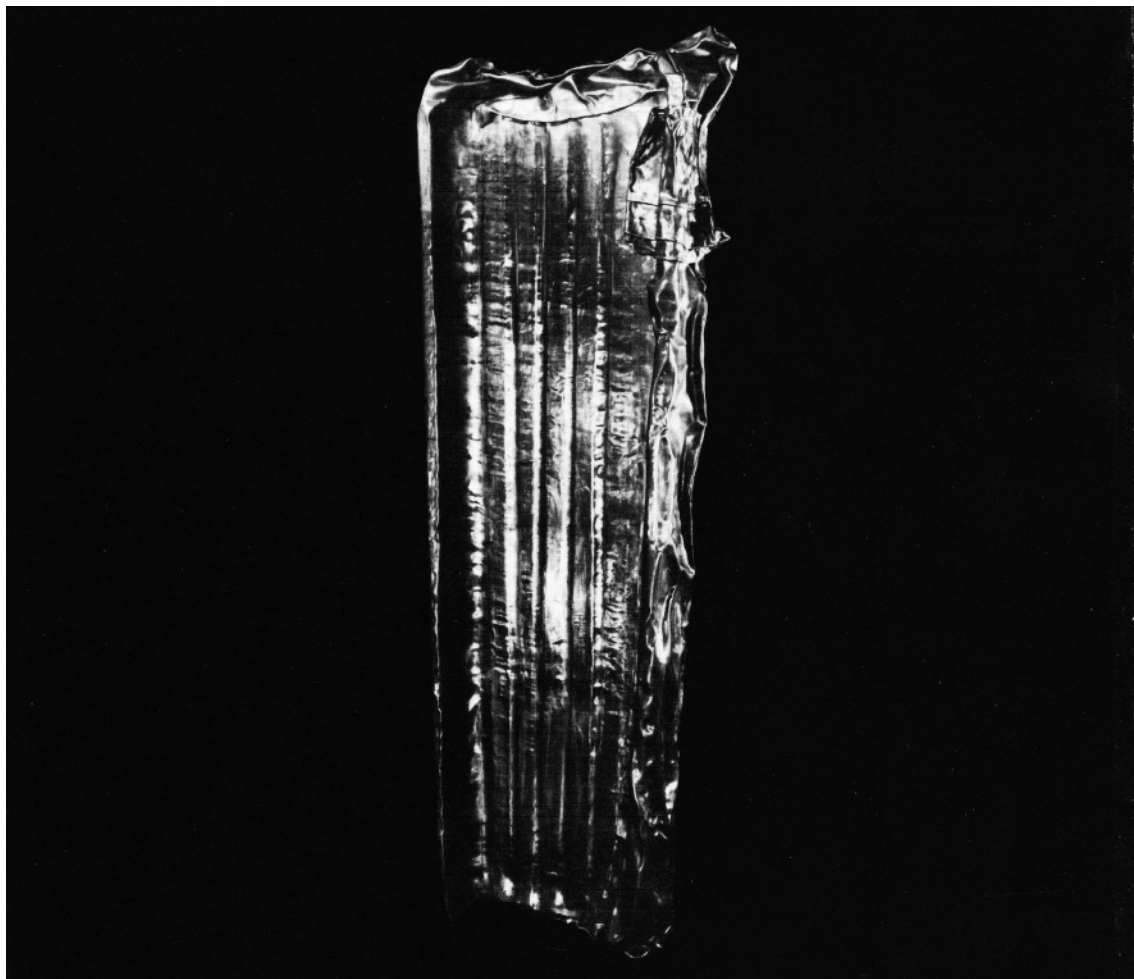
KRAUS

THE NEW WORK OF PAVEL KRAUS confronts the viewer with an unexpected mixture of European romanticism and traditional 'salon' vehicles, and a distinctly American pragmatic wit and need to invent. For Kraus, even the normally tenuous proposition of collaboration with another artist (of disparate style, no less), results in a showcase balancing act of humor, grace and taste.

Whether the palette is explosive and saturated or turbid and brooding, it is constantly electrified to fever pitch by a nervous, incisive line characteristic to Kraus. The playfulness and charm of these paintings belies the unforgiving nature of his chosen materials. Working on plexiglass, Kraus builds the paintings in reverse, working from linear foreground detail to background masses of texture and color dyes, a difficult and demanding technique that resolves in the highly sophisticated and unusual surface qualities these works possess. Combined with his further development of "boundary devices," which serve to limit the flow of the picture/ground activity, internal structures focus the energy within the perimeter of the picture surface—enhancing the textures and colors with eccentric juxtapositions of materials and techniques.

Fluid forms, amorphous shapes and representational images all exhibit an organic sensibility and a "hands-on" feel that throw into relief the high-tech look and seductive impact of non-traditional materials, against the personal iconography and broad eclecticism of Kraus' interest. Building on a visual style and program of pictorial boldness exemplified by the Art Institute of Chicago School and groups like the 'Hairy Who' in the late 60's, Kraus, in a twenty year odyssey of re-invention of the possibilities for picture making continues to amaze.

Joseph Karoly



Object of Desire 67" x 23" x 7" Lead 1993

The sculpture of Pavel Kraus presents a logical extension of the sensibility one finds in the artist's paintings. They do not attempt to transgress boundaries or point out disjunctive features normally set up to distinguish contradictory modes of expression. They reside in the gaps between painting and sculpture, gesture and precision, science and primitivism, figuration and abstraction. These works strive to confound our expectations, evidencing a melancholic humor that subverts logical systems as well as metaphysical longings. Precise definitions would neither enhance nor detract from personal evaluation of issues of dichotomies in form and content. The artist is perhaps asking us to consider the point

that paintings aspire, objects are.

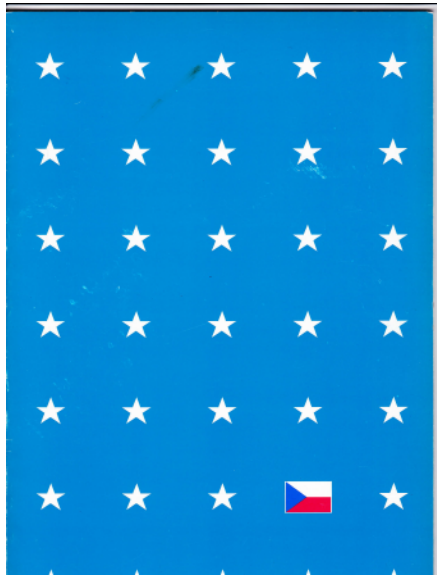
We are confronted with objects which seem to engender themselves, nascent in a logic encoded in their type rather than an overtly conscientious creative matrix imposed by the artist. The materials seem to have a self-determined quality, a physical muscularity not about nuance of testing the limits of materials, but conveying a sensual vitality. They possess an innate charge of longing, yielding to a will-to-form and yet hinting at a secret life hidden by the outer mantle of their skins. They allude to traditional areas of sculptural concern but resist any formal program or overriding esthetic. Their formal properties are ancillary to some deeper mystery...



Gates of Hell 53" x 42" x 5" Lead 1993

...Though often resembling objects at the periphery of our memory, they employ a vocabulary of object and ritual only to give us riddles when measured against our experience. As objects they are ambivalent, and remain mute to any analytic questioning. Referent though usually non-literal, they reveal a history of use veiled in symbolic purpose. Though they invite a response toward recognition attempts at analysis

prove futile and we remain confounded by an unsettling taxonomic indeterminacy. They retain an iconic charge of power, though one of abandonment or de-consecration. Like fetishes for rituals now out of favor, these objects have been drained of their "ichor", rendered passive, no longer replete with signification, but somehow maintaining an aura of power no longer under our control...



tance of the void, and the dematerialization of the monumental object. With lightness comes the suggestion of translucency and the exploration of the usage of light as a compositional element is assuming more and more prominence in Opočenský's work.

Like Opočenský in sculpture, Pavel Kraus is seeking innovation in painting. As Joseph Karoly observed in the 1989 catalogue essay: "Kraus confronts the viewer with an unexpected mixture of European romanticism and a distinctly American pragmatic wit and need to invent. Whether the palette is explosive and saturated or turbid and brooding, it is constantly electrified by a nervous, incisive line. The playfulness and charm of these paintings belies the unforgiving nature of his chosen materials. Working on acrylic panels Plexiglass, Kraus builds the paintings in reverse, working from linear foreground detail to background masses of texture and color dyes, a difficult and demanding technique that resolves the highly sophisticated and unusual surface qualities these works possess. Fluid forms, amorphous shapes and representational images all exhibit an organic sensibility and a "hands-on" feel that throw into relief the high-tech look and seductive impact on non-traditional materials, against the personal iconography and broad eclecticism of Kraus' interest". The need for technical experiment and ability to incorporate mundane imagery from varied sources, positions Kraus in the group of the most unconventional artists, exemplified best by German Sigmar Polke.

In contrast, the large paintings by Mila Macek address a more established painterly tradition. In them there is a balance between the emotional charge of the surface and the inner discipline of the compositional scheme. The high energy of the repeated brushstroke is tempered by its own repetition, conveying a sense of predetermined concept. Brilliant colors are layered to create a feeling of textural depth. These works attest to the renewed vitality of painting in times when this medium is taking a back seat. The New Yorker review in 1992 praised Macek's pieces for their inventiveness: "The works bring an attractive and spirited twist to the old stripe painting—they're reminiscent of Sean Scully; where Scully is monumental, however, Macek is animated". Thus, as so many times previously, painting is renewing itself, and it is the work of its steadfast practitioners, such as Macek, who are actively participating in its successful comeback.

Addressing various human and artistic issues these five artists speak with the formal language which synthesizes the sensibilities of two continents. After experiencing the works in the site of their physical creation it is a rewarding experience to be able to contemplate them in the place of their spiritual origin.

Charlotta Kotik
Curator of Contemporary Art
The Brooklyn Museum, New York.

Pavel Kraus



Hearts' and Minds'

THE ART OF PAVEL KRAUS

Pavel Kraus is an artist of many talents. His paintings are witty, oscillating between dreamlike rendering of reality and lyrical abstraction, commanding both modes of painting masterfully. His sense of color is assured, the hues are used wisely to serve the artist's intentions. However painting seems to be an occupation of the past for this multifaceted artist, who left Czechoslovakia after 1968, studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago where he graduated in 1977, and who have made a name for himself in New York City where he resides and works. He spends only part of his working time in New York - the other part is spend working in the spacious studios of his sprawling farm in the bucolic Vermont countryside. The large spaces enable him the forays into monumentality - his attention is now focused on sculpture and large installation projects.

While there was an occasional rendition of figure in Kraus's paintings in the past, the sculpture is largely nonrepresentational. It is nevertheless always evocative of the ideas which brought it into existence pointing to the underlying concepts in the works. One such concept is the pairing of the opposites and exploring the contradicting properties of the matter. In numerous pieces the pliable softness of the bees' wax or lightness of the feather is counteracted by the density of lead or heaviness of bricks. The combining of the opposites creates a tension within the piece of which we are not immediately aware but by which we are truly affected.

Kraus's work with space is equally inventive. By propping the long and slender beams of lead against the stark walls as he did in the installation in Klatovy in 1995 he points up the fragility of seemingly stable elements. Observing the work at this point makes us realize the great imagination of the artist whose future efforts will bring many unexpected but welcome surprises.

CHARLOTTA KOTIK
Curator
New York City, September 1996

Pavel Kraus



Hearts' and Minds'

Any evaluation of the disciplines of painting and sculpture soon reveal the problematic issues defined by their individual concerns. Comparison will readily bring out the semantic and ideologic claims to identity that are peculiar to each and will always emerge when claims of correspondence are attempted. These agendas are often antithetical, and rarely produce a template of operative procedures that encompass both disciplines.

In Kraus' work, sculpture and painting begin to exchange or share qualities. The paintings take on aspects of inferences of objecthood, such as density, weight and volume. Sculptural forms assume attributes more closely associated with painting by employing color, drawing, and other surface oriented treatments. His approach to these disciplines is dialogic, and does not compromise the autonomy each claims.

Though the works share a taxonomic relationship, they can be placed according to three distinct areas of identity. First, there are flat wall-mounted pieces that exploit qualities inherent in surface textures found in beeswax, lead or dyes. The second classification includes, free standing or wall-related objects that are overtly sculptural and possess the qualities of artifacts or implements of ambiguous usage or provenance. Third are individual or serial units that become specifically identifiable as bricks, columns, posts, walls, and other forms that are more properly related to construction practices and architecture. A brick has identity as a basic unit with a formal integrity inherent in its shape. It also contains an additional identity when combined with other bricks to form a structure which relies on a serial or modular grouping. Kraus is interested in the relationships between floor or wall as well as floor to wall, in the sense that these objects demarcate architectural structures that activate internal and external space.

Kraus' painted surfaces effectively mask or mimic visual weight and volume through the mediation of color. By utilizing layers of monochromatic skins, pale tints and patinas, a surface hierarchy asserts itself even though the works remain primarily sculptural in their weight and perceptual volume. Neither denying nor re-enforcing the organizational didacticism of the rectangle, the same shapes become monolithic or contemplative with merely an alteration of scale or subtle shifts in nuance of the more decorative elements. Wall pieces become low reliefs, architectural facades and friezes; their formed frontal planarity limits the point of view and implies a pictorial reading. Reminiscent of both ready-mades and Arte Povera, these works have the look of found objects yet are deliberately construc-

Pavel Kraus



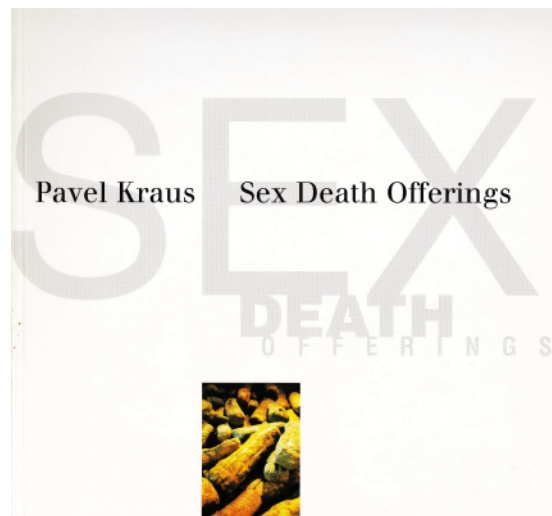
Hearts' and Minds'

ted. While alluding to certain modernist dictates and practices Kraus does not actually adhere to its programs nor to the confines of either post-minimal or representational agendas. His sensibility comprises a curious hybrid of practices that could be poetically labeled Gothic-Minimal. He strives to avoid any predetermined guidelines, instead espousing an individual response at the time of engagement with the materials at hand. This allows for a zone of aesthetic freedom which excludes hierarchic claims to authority or canonical formulas. This approach encourages improbable interdisciplinary or stylistic splicings, combinations and references. The works are invested with whimsical and unusual juxtapositions, resulting in an appearance of casual elegance that acts in opposition to the industrial associations of the materials. In observing these objects that could be abandoned or used up, experience does not serve us in an effort to ascertain their purpose.

There is an inherent rupture in the naming/identifying game. We may assume that if we could only recall the name of these objects we could also succeed in knowing their function. Kraus' confounds us by designing works that are allusive yet elusive. These works are infused with contradictions and dichotomies which allow for unexpected readings: the „industrial“ vs. the hand-made, the optically hard/soft vs. the physically hard/soft, structural integrity vs. structural improbability and overt stylistic schisms. Tensions between the absurd and the sublime are revealed in Kraus' improvisations, spontaneous associations and treatments. The works are artifacts that reveal not purpose, but the artist's response to materials that would seem to deny or evade ready expressions. The gestures and traces of Kraus' physical intervention and manipulation become imprinted in the objects malleable surfaces literally revealing evidence of the artists hand. Even a seam or blotched stain becomes an expressive item. Inherent in their making, these objects possess a theatricality that suggests narrative, a suggestion that constantly evaporates with each attempt at certain identification and retrieval. The result is a disruption of conventional expectation of what sculpture and painting can be and a challenge to our experience of what objects mean.

By: JOSEPH KAROLY

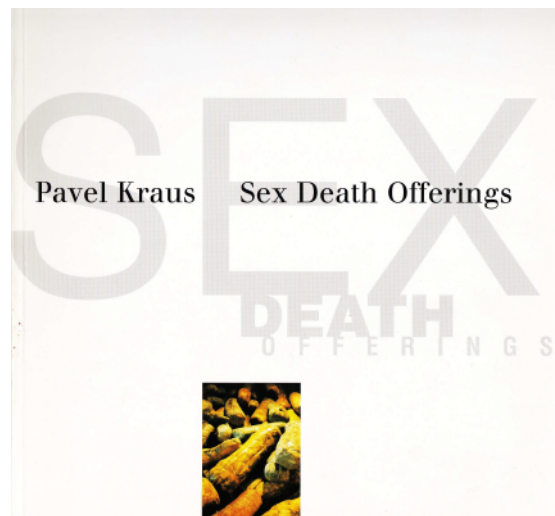
Joseph Karoly is a New York artist who on occasion writes about art.



the viewer's physical involvement, and, in that very process of involvement, raises questions of transience and permanence: what decays and what remains. Bláha's restless need to layer up a substance and, if need be, cut it away to the naked layers below, presents the viewer with stark images symbolising the ebb and flow of human consciousness: accumulated everyday experiences and, on the contrary, penetrative awareness seeking what, in existential or socio-historical terms, lies "beneath".

Jiří Beránek's site-specific installation *Inevitable Presence* is based on the monumental form of a sculpted tree trunk. Wood has featured regularly in Beránek's works as a material which not only bears the physical memory of annual growth rings within it, but also serves as a symbol of man's age-old need to define his presence in a place - either as a practical structure, a refuge or dwelling with which man inhabits a place, or as a totemic, ritualistic presence embodying his most essential daily processes of construction and regeneration. In this sense, the creation and subsequent organic destruction of Beránek's works possibly bear more meaning than the ephemeral presence of the completed works themselves. Beránek does not assure the viewer with the definitive nature of an artefact, but instills the powerful realisation that we are inextricably bound up with the timeless creative - and destructive - powers of collective experience. In their confrontation with being, his works feature certain fundamental issues raised by the Czech artist and writer Josef Čapek in his book *The Art of First Nations*: "When did art begin? To be sure, I don't know the date. This fact made me perceive its origin in the magic that arises out of primordial fear; if we take it from its very core, however, it must lie even deeper, even further back, possibly even in the fight for life itself. *Together with the first human implements.*"

If Beránek's ritualised archaeology is focused on symbolically embodying the timeless processes of habitation, then Pavel Kraus, the counterpoint participant in this show, leads the viewer into a world filled with indeterminably archaic symbols suggestive of the timeless processes of birth, desire, procreation and death. Kraus, a Czech-born contemporary of the core members of the 12/15 group who has lived almost thirty years in the United States, prepared two site-specific installations for the Skidmore stage of the show: *Books of the Keeper / Chapel* for the indoor space, and *Excavation / Archaeology* for the outdoor space. In these works, Kraus follows on from his recent exhibition shown at the Mánes Gallery, Prague, in March 1999, creating a monument that serves as an altar around which an unexplained ceremony of movement takes place. As with the fertile material symbolism of his Mánes installation,



with its organic beeswax the residue of life and the inorganic lead a forbidding vessel of death, his choice of white marble for the Skidmore installation carries with it a rich spectrum of possible allusions. Perhaps the first connection to spring to mind is that of Greek marble: the famous Pentelic marble quarried by the ancient Greeks and used for the Parthenon and the Elgin marbles, and also the coarser-grained Parian marble used for the celebrated Mausoleum, the tomb of King Mausolos of Caria. Then, of course, the Carrara marble of ancient Rome used for the Pantheon and Trajan's column. These references bring with them a series of indefinable but deeply resonant notions of man's ageless attempts to step beyond his immediate temporal sphere into a dimension transcending life and death. The outdoor piece is accompanied by an object-chronicle located indoors which serves to record the erratic white marble pieces, a kind of holy book containing the enigmatic wisdom of forces beyond our comprehension. Kraus does not "excavate" to liberate truths sealed in the past; his archaeological progeny emerges out of the invisible, possibly even more complex, strata of the present day - truly the remains of the future.

Although modest in scale, the 6+1 project brings together the work of several of the finest Czech artists of recent decades. Their story is highly representative of the issues faced by modern Czech art as a whole: those of the creative individual standing at the crossroads of past and present, East and West, freedom and non-freedom. The consistency of their beliefs, the authenticity of their involvement and courage to actively confront a seemingly endless series of human uncertainties echo Graham Greene's conviction that "I would rather have blood on my hands than water like Pilate."

Richard Drury



Kraus - Mánes 1999

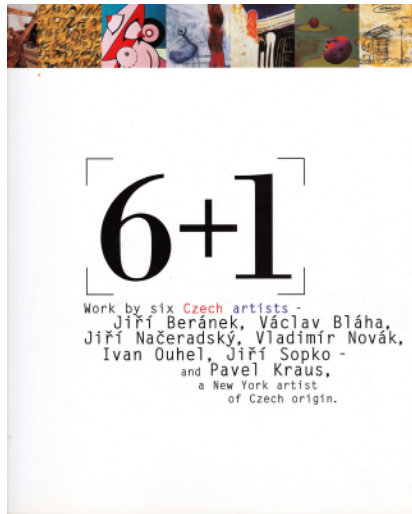
Certain types of contemporary artistic practices fall under the broad rubric of post-modernism. This avenue of investigation most commonly employs some form of appropriation of extant images or objects as signs placed in a situational context which exposes elements or attributes of these objects differing from their original context. One area of post-modern concern involves the confounding of commodity/exchange values, pointing out the vicissitudes of objects designed for the fine art marketplace and those designed for consumer culture. Practitioners of this strategy state that these markets have become one and the same, and fabricate works which exemplify a position of cultural nihilism.

Pavel Kraus is not explicitly involved in a program of neutralizing distinctions between the aesthetically elevated and the popularly debased, but he does practice a strategy of 'rehabilitation' of devalued object-types and their associative values. Kraus attempts to bridge aesthetic gaps between fabrication, production and expression by playing these descriptive categories against each other. The viewer is invited to participate in this rehabilitative process through open semiotic interpretation, with the artist providing a type of work that is sufficiently suggestive of archetypal narrative models.

Kraus' project is in some ways related to that of Joseph Beuys, who fabricated works which had links to found objects or entities whose utilitarian purposes were mysterious and arcane, and could only be surmised in the vaguest of terms. Though no overt political sensibility underlies Kraus' work as it does Beuys', they do share a position in which the art marketplace of commodity exchange is not a determining factor in their production strategy. Where Beuys sought an equity between the artistic and the quotidian in an overt humanist politic of the anti-aesthetic, Kraus promotes a position supporting an aesthetic status for his seemingly debased or impoverished objects.

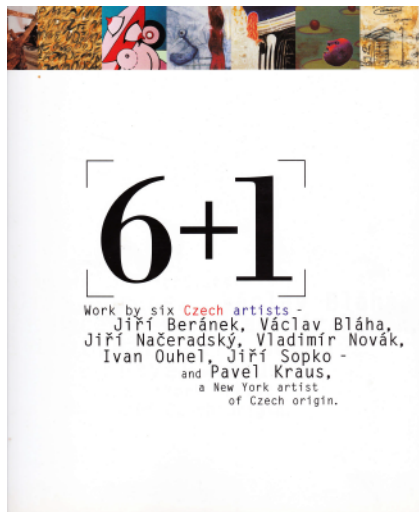
Kraus assumes the nominal definitions of painting and sculpture to be too narrowly restrictive, and opts for an informal rapprochement of their individual qualities and concerns. In this sense he is responding to Minimalism's call for the crafting of objects that are neither painting nor sculpture. According to this program, one's attention is focused on the production of objects that are formally rigorous in a dialectical investigation of issues pertaining to their inherent objective identity. For the post-Minimalist, the severe strictures of this interpretive agenda are relaxed to allow a dissolution of purely formal issues into a position favorable to a more personal narrative context. This relaxation of





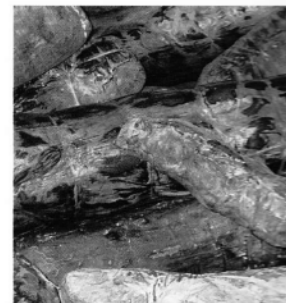
restrictions allowed for gestural elements and whimsical approaches to non-traditional materials to create something like a 'Baroque-Minimal' look which informed much process art and Arte Povera. This return to a more personal, hand-made approach to materials also re-animated connections to certain surrealist precursors. Kraus seems to follow an evolutionary line from Eva Hesse rather than Richard Serra or Carl Andre. Hesse's post-minimal agenda allowed for materials to transgress their pure applications in favor of a more personal, idiosyncratic sensibility. Such works are informal, but not unregulated. Like Hesse, Kraus' use of replication and seriality are not linked to industrial fabrication and issues of uniformity. Groupings of related items highlight differences rather than similarity. Reiteration solicits inquisitive conjecture rather than propositional statement, and the works address responsiveness of materials rather than facts or their literalness. This more personal approach to the treatment of materials recalls a surrealist notion of a fracture of rational meaning where a mysterious 'jamais vu' imparts an aura of mutability to common associations and perceptions. Often employing the qualities of aleatory procedures redolent of a type of post-apocalyptic 'ready-made', many of Kraus' works hint at forms which are domesticated and familiar. Dressers, altars, chairs, carpets, utensils: all are objects which index notions of the body in the work. Often objects seem to actually stand in for the body, where surface textures and patinas convey an anthropomorphic sense of corporeality, age and decay. They register, like meta-texts, a palimpsest of memory and concupiscence. Furniture-like objects have little to offer in terms of ergonomics or comfort. They are, instead, a type of 'mental furniture', suggesting a place to display or store reified constructs. A type of visual portmanteau, they could be alternately or simultaneously reliquary or refuse, divine or detritus, sacrosanct or servile. The use and contrast of extreme differences in scale is another unusual feature of this work. Objects which are intimate and for the hand convey a sense of weight and textural affinity with works of an overt architectural nature. Even monumental constructions which evoke a public sphere of architectural theatricality reveal themselves to be ultimately private and introspective.

Kraus has chosen a set of materials already loaded with references and associations; gold leaf, lead, wax, marble, straw, and feathers. Deployed individually or in combinations, the permutations offer a flexible vocabulary which allows a wide range of play and nuance. Rectangles of wax and lead, comprising a loose grid dissolve notions of uniformity and uninflected mass production by the quirky and organic treatment of their fabrications and arrangement. The differences in each panel while adhering to their overriding structural order, create a gently articulated surface, seductive in its decorative qualities. Each re-configuration of the same elements will result in a slightly different take on the identity of the grouping as a whole. Whether wall mounted friezes or isolated three dimensional shapes the works are predominantly frontal in their presentation. This emphatic frontality and situational framing stresses the dominance of surface over spatial displacement and mass one would normally expect in sculptural applications. Not so much constructed or

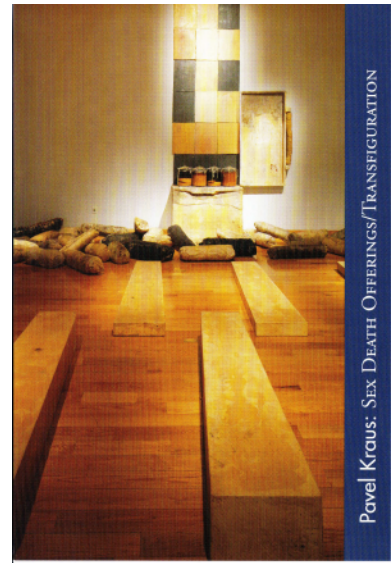
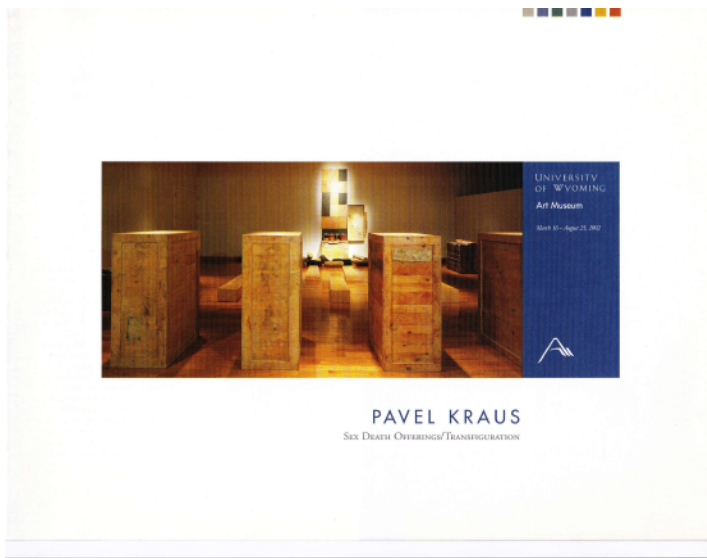


built as covered, the works' surface treatments are distinctly the provenance of painting. This painterly though not pictorial treatment of planes conveys a gestural sense playfully at odds with sculptural objecthood. This gestural articulation is at times quite spontaneous in appearance, contrasting itself with the geometry of the shapes it covers. Nacreous patinas suggest twin modifiers of aged veneration as well as the decadence of decay. These painted skins evince haptic qualities rivaling their visual attributes. This tension between opposites is a favored device for Kraus. Through his eccentric entities he proposes manifold conflicting notions of the beautiful and the repellent, where these contraries are not only juxtaposed but are frequently exchanged for each other as equals. Where one set of circumstances contrive to tip in favor of materials and process, they may tip toward psychological narrative in another. These hybrid contradictory constructions seem to be representations of objects at the time they are being presented as objects, as if they were a type of metaphor for themselves. Theatrical props function in a similar way, as specific object significance depending on the presentational contexts as real or emblematic of the real, as if they were their meaning and not merely containers of meaning. This question forces a rupture in narrative discourse and requires one to cast about for applicable signification among a range of linguistically impoverished metaphors. The viewer is called on to act as arbiter in the meditation of meaning within these shifting contexts.

One is not directed by a sense of philosophical continuity or systematic program. Instead the works are informed by an unrestrained flood of associations and connotations which encourage an almost random meaning and value. In this narrative juggling, the commonplace becomes mystic and the institutional becomes private. The exotic and the mundane are shown to be interchangeable, revealing a transparency of identity. The allure of his work is in its equivocation and mystery. They invite a subjective reading of the objective presence. Where one perceives an emotional broil under a veneer of dispassionate manners one could just as easily perceive a raging surface covering detached or vacated indifference. Kraus presents us with the accoutrements of an artificial myth rather than a culturally determined one. If certain works suggest allegorical connotations of primitive or tribal sensibility, equally Kafkaesque and Sadean, a culture for whom ironic humor and fatalistic despair are interchangeable articulations for describing the same experience. One is led toward experiences that emulate the theatricality of codified ritual or high Mannerist drama. One could read the processional walkways of lead plates between 'shrines' as literal paths of least resistance from one displaced metaphor to another. We are presented with ur-myths attendant to pseudo-objects for an age either bereft or cured of metaphysical angst. Kraus seems to locate his sensibility between the artificial comfort of the mythic and the pragmatic skepticism of the real. Thus bracketed between the sacred and the profane, concrete judgements of value are suspended in favor of an intangible archeology of desire.



JOSEPH KAROLY
New York, June 1998



“Transfiguration directs the visitor through the gallery, simultaneously balancing ideas about the earthbound human being and the spiritual elevation of higher consciousness.”

Pavel Kraus approaches art as a cultural archaeologist might explore a newly discovered excavation site, sifting through ideas about mythology, ritual, material, order, and contradiction to create his site-influenced installations. His materials are a counterpoint of organic and inorganic resources: beeswax, honey, natural fiber, wood, and lead. At one extreme is the aromatic, pliable, impressionable beeswax that Kraus uses to encase many of his large architectonic forms or minimalist objects. The results have visceral consequences, both as an almost human skin-like luminescent surface and as a powerful, sweet aroma that pervades the gallery. At the other extreme is lead, a heavy grey metallic element that is infused with alchemical associations and is physically and conceptually inert and impenetrable.

Sex Death Offerings / Transfiguration is one incarnation of Kraus' ongoing *Sex Death Offerings* series. (The smaller installation *Sex Death Offerings / Levitation* was on view at the Richard Pardo Gallery, New York City in the fall 2001, and a large installation is on view at the Czech Museum of Fine Arts in Prague during the fall 2002). For the installation at the University of Wyoming Art Museum, Kraus included a variety of his sculptural components. The relationship of these objects, relative to each other and within the gallery context, suggests Kraus' explorations of human culture and artifice.

Sex Death Offerings / Transfiguration incorporates several sections, each with its own title. Using imposing geometric order and theatrical artifice as the structure on which the overall installation is conceived and presented, *Library*, comprised of six large wooden boxes covered in beeswax, is presented in an imposing row at the entrance to the gallery. Each box is equidistant from the next, and altogether they form either a barrier or a series of passageways. The visitor must decide whether to enter or not. Conceptually, the human-scale of the boxes suggests that these crates contain the history of human consciousness, knowledge, and intellect. On the opposite wall, several works combine to create an altar. It might be a place of worship or sacrifice. *Remains of the Present* is a re-configured presentation from earlier installations. Here, the 18 square sections of lead or beeswax on wood rise up the gallery wall toward the ceiling. Suspended on the right is *Passage*; a rectangular form covered in beeswax with the slightest presence of red. The color's subtle appearance throughout the exhibition has implications of blood. One of the five *Altars* is placed beneath *Remains of the Present* and on which *Essence*, four glass jars of honey sealed with lead and string, is placed. *Offerings*, 43 bundles eerily reminiscent of decomposing bodies, are strewn along the floor.

Between these opposing elements lays *Transfiguration*. Comprised of eight geometric forms and placed in parallel and descending order on the gallery floor, this element is the transitional center of the gallery and the physical and conceptual center of the installation. *Transfiguration* directs the visitor through the gallery, simultaneously balancing ideas about the earthbound human being and the spiritual elevation of higher consciousness.

Along the gallery's peripheral walls are four additional *Altars*. Two are open, revealing what appear to be artifacts removed from their ancient archeological origins and carefully suspended in a crate as if for transportation, perhaps to a museum for future study. Artifacts are the sources that reveal our history and evolution. On the remaining *Altars* are the two books entitled *Books of the Keeper*. Presented closed and tied, we can only surmise that the contents within are written records of a personal journal or the record-keeping details of the pseudo-archeological dig within which we are standing. We can further surmise that the “keeper” is the artist, Pavel Kraus himself, who has made this post-modern ruin as a play on fundamental human curiosity and activity.

Susan B. Moldenhauer
Director and Chief Curator

Pavel Kraus

Enigma

Curated by David Ebony



ENIGMA: THE WORK OF PAVEL KRAUS

David Ebony

In the final analysis works of art are enigmatic not in terms of their composition, but in terms of the truth they contain. No longer do art works face the viewer's repetitive question, "What are you for?" Instead they are asked "Are you telling the truth?," which is a question concerning the absolute.

— Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*¹

Pavel Kraus's career, extending over four decades, should be considered as a journey toward the truth in art. Richly diverse in terms of technique, materials, and thematic concerns, his adventure encompasses an exploration of abstraction and figuration in paintings, sculptures, installations, and collaborative theater pieces. The enigmatic works he has produced over the years reflect an esoteric examination of personal truths as well as universal veracity, which spans the ages from prehistory and antiquity to the present day.



Levitation, 2006; installed at the Whitehall Corporate Center, Charlotte, NC

Some works refer directly to the artist's own travels to exotic locales, others are imaginative expeditions that traverse great lengths of geographical distance as well as of time. In Kraus's spare, abstract sculptural language, *Roman Wedding/Marble Ships Carrying Indigo* (2012-13), for instance, suggests a fleet of four vessels bearing precious cargo. Made of small, white marble blocks topped with Indigo-colored encaustic, the work's simple elements conjure a Mediterranean voyage intended to bring gifts to a mythical wedding ceremony in ancient Rome—the core theme of Kraus's recent "Roman Wedding" series.

Pavel Kraus Enigma

Curated by David Ebony



An earlier piece, *Altar* (1994), features a large, beeswax-covered wood crate topped by a trio of antique porcelain figurines wearing kimonos, Edo Period costumes, and other traditional Japanese garb. Mass-produced as good-luck charms, the ceramic dolls were purchased by Kraus at a Tokyo flea market. The assemblage suggests a theme of international trade, and more specifically, a cultural exchange between East and West. Permanently sealed by the wax coating, the crate contains (according to the artist) mysterious cargo—a sculpture he made, and only he has seen, created as a ritual “offering” destined for an elusive recipient.

A series of large Mylar paintings titled “Fish” (1989) was inspired by a real-life voyage. Traveling with a small crew on a sixty-four-foot sailboat during a treacherous journey across the Atlantic in the early 1980s, Kraus served as a deckhand on a fishing expedition. Later in his New York studio, he produced these exuberant images painted on the reverse side of transparent Mylar. Each work depicts the tuna that the fishermen caught and then decapitated for grilling during the thirty-five day excursion. For years, these paintings graced the walls of the U.S. Embassy in Islamabad, Pakistan, where they were on extended loan, and have only recently made their way back to the artist’s studio.

The theme of travel and migration is not simply a metaphorical one for Kraus. It is also autobiographical. He was born in 1946 in Pilsen, Bohemia, a province of former Czechoslovakia, now the Czech Republic. His father was an engineer at a Škoda automobile factory, where his mother also worked for a time. Kraus earned a B.A. in engineering, but a passion for artistic pursuits drew him away. He fled to the U.S. in 1969, following the Soviet invasion of his homeland the year before. He stayed briefly with relatives in Chicago, and then set out on his own, eventually taking on a variety of jobs, including those as a commercial artist, children’s book illustrator, and film animator. (The Mylar paintings he produced throughout his career stem from the techniques he used in film animation.) He met his future wife-to-be, Bette Adaniya, in Chicago; the couple has been married since 1973. Kraus studied



View of *Remains of the Future*, 1995; a site-specific installation at the Czech Museum of Fine Arts, Prague

Pavel Kraus

Enigma

Curated by David Ebony



fine art at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where he earned an M.F.A. in 1977. After relocating to Washington, D.C. for several years, the Krauses settled permanently in New York in 1984.

The paintings Pavel Kraus produced early on in New York are neo-Expressionist in style—the “Fish” series and the three-dimensional works he made at the time correspond to works by European avant-garde artists like Joseph Beuys and Anselm Kiefer, as well as to Arte Povera practitioners such as Jannis Kounellis and Giuseppe Penone. By the mid-1990s, Kraus had turned almost exclusively to sculptures, installations, and relief paintings, comprising his ongoing series of “Sex Death Offerings,” from which the “Roman Wedding” works have evolved. Using unusual combinations of materials like lead, honey, beeswax, and straw, the “Sex Death Offerings” explore bodily processes and sometimes show images of human body parts made of wax, especially life-size sculptural renderings of the brain.

Over the years, Kraus’s work grew increasingly labor-intensive and obsessive, featuring monochrome surfaces made of countless layers of wax and pigment. *Three Beeswax Offerings* (1994-97), *No Trade* (1998), and *Enclosures* (1998) are striking examples of the “Sex Death Offerings” series. *Heavy Distance* (1996), a wall-hung sculpture made of white marble completely covered in malleable lead sheeting and painted in monochrome blue-green

encaustic, exemplifies a number of Kraus’s works from the period that appear as talismanic objects produced by an artist-shaman for some ritualistic purpose. The artist’s work of this decade has been described by critics as “Gothic Minimalism.”²²

The term is apt, as Kraus, throughout these works, has infused the spare vocabulary of American Minimalism with a touch of the arcane mysticism associated with alchemy in medieval Eastern Europe.

Kraus reconnected with his homeland in the early 1990s, soon after the fall of the Soviet Union, and for some years maintained a studio in Prague. There, he mounted a number of large-scale installations and museum exhibitions, which caused a stir and helped to energize the contemporary art scene emerging there. During



Installation view of the *Sex Death Offerings* exhibition at the Konsthall Manes, Prague, 1999

Pavel Kraus

Enigma

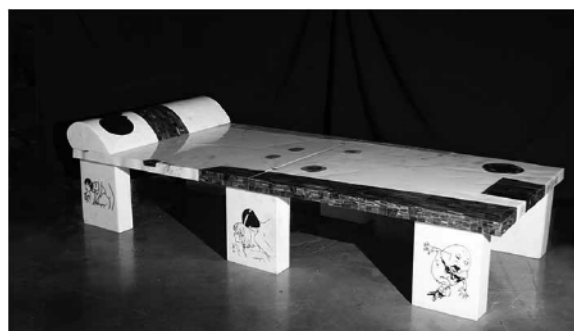
Curated by David Ebony



the late 1990s, Kraus's collaborations with curators Charlotta Kotik and Richard Drury, in a series of exhibitions and symposia, were instrumental in bringing to the attention of American audiences the work of Czech avant-garde artists, such as Jiri Baránek, Václav Bláha, and Jiri Sopko, who had been culturally and socially marginalized during the Soviet occupation.

In the new millennium, Kraus's work became increasingly dense and intense. He produced a series titled "Sacred Books" made of encaustic-covered wood, paperboards, and twine. While these volumes can never be opened or read, they nevertheless convey the essence of knowledge, enlightenment, and transcendence that many theological and scholastic texts promise to contain. He continued to develop his encaustic paintings to achieve lush palimpsests with ever-greater depth and luminosity. Works such as the voluptuous red monochrome *Archaeology/Excavation* (2007) and *Pacific* (2011), a mirror-like blue-gray composition inspired by a placid ocean view, appear as meditations on the act of painting itself.

During these years, Kraus spent extended periods of time in India, where he experimented with stone sculptures using the ancient *pietre dure* technique. Working with the local craftsmen of Udaipur in Rajasthan, where he eventually established a studio, Kraus created a series of polished marble objects inlaid with lapis lazuli, tigereye, malachite, carnelian, and other semi-precious stones. Many of these works feature a bifurcated egg shape in various dimensions. Collectively titled "Offering/Redemption," the pieces in this series are inlaid with abstract designs based on imaginative renderings of his DNA, while others show repeated circular forms that ostensibly symbolize cosmic unity and balance. The egg shapes also correspond to Kraus's lifelong study of motifs in ancient Classical art. The egg was an integral part of Greco-Roman sacrificial ceremonies; its outer form often symbolized the human head, and its interior held spiritual significance as an emblem of cosmological truths. As scholar George Hersey has noted with regard to the use of these shapes in Classical architecture, "Eggs, like fruit, were common sacrifices... Sometimes the eggs in egg-and-claw moldings are shown with shells split open. This reveals the 'soul' or yolk."³



Roman Wedding/Bed, 2011-13, pietre dure marble inlay, lapis lazuli, malachite, and tigereye, 20 x 81 x 36 in. (50.8 x 205.7 x 91.4 cm)

Pavel Kraus

Enigma

Curated by David Ebony



View of *Sex Death Offerings/Transfiguration*, 2002; a site-specific installation at the University of Wyoming Art Museum, Laramie, WY

Kraus produced several major works in India that are key to his “Roman Wedding” series. The large marble *Bed* (2011-13) features on its legs highly sexualized cartoon imagery. In preparation for this work, he created a suite of studies: ink-line drawings on silk, collectively titled “Until the End of Time.” The cartoonish “Humpty-Dumpty” figures he uses in the drawings hark back to his early days as an illustrator of children’s books. *Black Bench/Altar* (2007), a large interactive piece, can actually be used as a bench—although, made of marble and inlaid with semi-precious stones, it is definitely not of the standard park-bench variety.

Another major sculpture of the “Roman Wedding” series, *Lares and Penates* (2007-13) is a remarkable work that looks like a blocky chunk of brick-red rock with two small eye-like crystal balls at the top, which cover small hollows filled with incense and spices. Made of inlaid red marble, and displayed

with a swath of handmade deep red and woven gold Indian silk wrapped around the base, the composition is wholly abstract, although it convincingly represents the ancient household gods of protection referenced in the work’s title.

The “Roman Wedding” theme spawned a recent series of resplendent encaustic works centered on a laurel crown motif. As the laurel wreath emblemizes, the series is at once funereal and triumphant. Outstanding among these paintings, which appear more like sculptural reliefs, are *Roman Wedding/Indigo Laurel* (2013), with its intense bluish-violet hue, and *Roman Wedding/Sanguinary Celebration* (2011), featuring sensuous pools of blood-red, scarlet, and magenta.

Kraus’s attraction to the translucency of the encaustic medium corresponds in other works to his preference for glass and Mylar, which share similar properties of luminescence. In contrast with the sheer weight and gravity found in much of Kraus’s oeuvre, *Electric Candies* (2012-13) is a material opposite—a sequence of large, transparent and lightweight cone-shaped configurations of painted sheets of Mylar. Sometimes containing strings of LED lights, the work is all about light and air, soaring in seemingly effortless flight. *Levitation*, (2014), a series of glass constructions consisting of modular configurations of thick slabs of colored,

Pavel Kraus Enigma

Curated by David Ebony



frosted glass emanates an ethereal light with the help of neon tubing. This piece evokes Jean Baudrillard's comments about glass in his 1968 book *The System of Objects*. "Above all, though, glass is the most effective conceivable material expression of the fundamental ambiguity of 'atmosphere': the fact that it is at once proximity and distance, intimacy and the refusal of intimacy, communication and non-communication."⁴

Without hesitation, Kraus constantly alternates in his work between material density and near weightlessness. In metaphorical terms, he consistently relieves hard facts about reality with ethereal fantasy. A case in point is a recent group of found-brick works titled *Monuments*. An homage to Minimalism, and specifically referring to Carl Andre's 1998 "Isohedra" series of brick sculptures, *Monuments* features similar components. But Kraus has covered the upright side of each element with a topping of light, frothy-white organic resin. It is a jarring image, quite incongruous and unexpected. The artist's intent here is uncertain. One thing is sure, however, this work, like all of Kraus's output, is an enigma. His art reflects a firm belief in absolute purity of expression—in the sublime and in the transcendent possibilities of artistic pursuit. Yet Pavel Kraus always leaves it up to the viewer to find, to his or her satisfaction, the truth in art.

Endnotes

1. Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhardt (London/New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970/1984), p. 185.
2. Joseph Karoly quoted in the exhibition catalogue for *Pavel Kraus: Sex Death Offerings* (Prague: Konsthall Manes, 1999), p. 32.
3. George Hersey, *The Lost Meaning of Classical Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), p. 36.
4. Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, trans. James Benedict (London/New York: Verso, 1968/2005), p. 42.

David Ebony is currently a contributing editor of Art in America. He is also the author of a regular online feature for Yale University Press. He lives and works in New York.



Fish, 1989, mixed media on Mylar, one of four panels: each 80 x 40 in. (203.2 x 101.6 cm)

PAVEL KRAUS

RETROSPECTIVE 1976–2016



A Visit

When crossing over from nature to existence,
walls are rather unkind,
walls wet from the urine of talents, walls bespattered
by eunuchs revolting against the spirit, walls not diminished
even though they may not yet be born,
and still walls already rounding out the fruit of the womb...

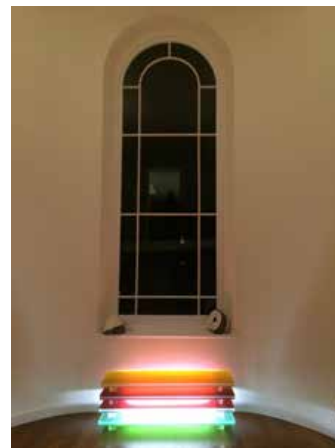
—Vladimír Holan, *A Night with Hamlet*

Inside Pavel Kraus's large and bright studio in Brooklyn, New York, three paintings lean against the wall near the entrance. They are placed back-to-back; little rectangular pieces of cardboard protect them from rubbing against each other. The paintings date to 1980, 1982, and 1983—the earliest from this series reaching back to the artist's studies at the School of The Art Institute of Chicago, from which he earned an MFA in 1977, and the latest to a year prior to his moving to New York in 1984. Shiny and bright, they look as if they were finished yesterday.

In *Game*, 1982, the title appears on top of the image inscribed in cheerful red, orange, and pale blue, hanging garland-style above a desk that calls to mind a slice of a frosted layer cake—red-orange-red-pink-red-orange-red—sharply tilting toward the viewer. A small diamond-shaped hole in the middle, a pen, and two little square objects that look like inkwells are arranged on the desk in such a way that the ensemble resembles a face belonging to a whimsical, jolly creature. It looks to me like a “transformed” Magritte (“This Is Not a Piece of Cake”) wearing the clothes of Douanier Rousseau's felicitous footballers.

PAVEL KRAUS

RETROSPECTIVE 1976–2016



To reach the middle of the studio, we pass by a Barcelona Couch. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe designed the prototype along with the famous Barcelona Chair, which was first introduced in the German Pavilion during the 1929 Universal Exposition in the Catalan capital. Kraus tells me he uses this couch as a bed for napping during breaks from working on his art.

A series of works from 2015–2016, entitled “Fresh Marble,” arranged in the middle of the long room, defies the linear chronology that would allow me to see Kraus’s works as a progressive continuity. The studio seems to revolve around these newest works: six sculptures made of narrow slabs of white marble and natural resin displayed on plywood pedestals painted white. Each piece looks like a large model of an ancient temple produced, however, with a total disregard for perfect proportions and classical standards of beauty. Together they form a miniature archeological site made of structures that are asymmetrical, fragile, and wobbly to the point that a careless move could cause them to tumble down. Small objects, cast in resin, sprout from their tops, some of which

look like half-melted ice cream twists or spills of chocolate fudge; others look like dabs of bright frosting covering the top of a slab. These colorful, “unrestrained” objects, some sexually explicit and some obscure, remind me of Paul McCarthy’s small “perverse” clay sculptures, modeled on animated cartoon characters with distorted features. Suddenly, the startling contrast between the white marble and the colorful resin forms in Kraus’s works makes me think of the mutual dependence of the eschatological and the erotic as a triangulation between death, sex, and food. And I smile to myself.

Another “bed” appears in front of us. Kraus’s *Bed*, 2011–2013, from the “Roman Wedding” series, is made of white marble inlaid with lapis lazuli, malachite, and Tiger’s eye by stone craftsmen in India using the ancient technique of *pietre dure*. The work has spot-like, circular configurations of the artist’s DNA inlaid on the marble surface of the bed and cartoonish, erotic drawings covering the legs graffiti-style. Looking at this sculpture, I feel as if the Barcelona Couch from the other side of the studio has metamorphosed into a fantastic

PAVEL KRAUS

RETROSPECTIVE 1976–2016



The artist installing *Remains of the Present*, 1997. Raw beeswax, lead, wood, and steel; at the Joyce Goldstein Gallery, New York, NY. Courtesy of the artist.

Opposite left: *Roman Wedding*, 2011–2013. Pietre dure marble inlay with lapis lazuli, malachite, and Tiger's eye. 20 × 81 × 36 inches (50.8 × 105.7 × 91.4 cm). Courtesy of the artist.

Opposite right: Installation view of *Levitation Glass*, 2016. Water white acid-washed laminated glass, neon tubes. 48 × 16 × 2 inches each (121.9 × 40.6 × 5.1 cm.). Private collection, London, England.



place for sleeping or, perhaps, even for final resting.

Scattered around on the floor next to *Bed* are pieces from the “Offering/Redemption” series, 2006–2009, executed in white marble and inlaid with a variety of semiprecious stones polished to perfection. These bifurcated egg-shaped objects of various sizes, which also carry fantastic images of the artist’s DNA, marry two cosmological symbols of the origins of life—one universal and one personal—while asserting the unity of the *sacrum* and the *profanum* as one of the fundamental conditions of life. They are visually stunning, dazzling with richness of their colors, and, at the same time, totally serene.

As we make our way toward the back of the studio, which ends by a large window, more works lie on the floor. Among them are several from the “Offerings” from 2006, of which, I wrote nearly a decade ago, “resemble small mummies, as if the tight bundles were cocooned figures.” I look at them again, and find the “cocooned figures” both humorous and horrifying, just as I did when I saw them the first time at OK Harris gallery in New York in 2006. “Il y a peu de chose qui sépare l’horrible du comique” (There is a little that separates the horrible from the comical), as Milan Kundera quoted

Eugène Ionesco in *L’art du roman*. Clearly, Kraus has been probing that “little” in such an original fashion. That is what attracted me to these works so forcefully back then, and what continues to attract me now.

Before I finish my visit, we sit at a table near the window to chat about the artist’s life. It has been marked by many extraordinary twists of fate, and produced the rich artistic output, which spans the last four decades, covered by his retrospective at Project: ARTspace. It all might have begun back in 1969, with Kraus’s leaving his native Czechoslovakia for the United States at the age of twenty-three after the tragic end of the Prague Spring. Carrying with him a heavy suitcase weighting forty-four pounds (twenty of which belonged to the weight of his books in Czech), he arrived in Chicago on July 16, the same day the Apollo Eleven was launched into space. As we know, four days later humans landed on the moon for the first time in history.

Marek Bartelik is a Polish-born and New York-based art critic, art historian, and poet. He has written for numerous publications in the United States and abroad, including *Artforum* (as a regular contributor), *Bookforum*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Art Journal*, *Art in America*, *Cultural Politics*, *DARE*, *Depart*, *Paletten*, and *Obieg*. He currently serves as the XVth President of AICA International, an association of art critics comprising 5,000 members globally in 63 national sections on 5 continents.

PAVEL KRAUS: POMPEII, A.D. 79

Art100, 1891 Project Space



Lead Vessel from Pompeii, 2017. Lead, burlap, wood, slate, alabaster, natural resins. 23 x 19 x 11 in.



ART100
555a West 25th st
New York, NY
art100gallery.com

Art100 is pleased to present *PAVEL KRAUS: POMPEII, A.D. 79*.

The exhibition will be on view at Art100 during a special evening event for the Frank Institute @ CR10, June 8, 6-8 pm.

This special show highlights recent sculptures, paintings, and installations by the maverick Czech-born New York artist **Pavel Kraus**. At the core of *PAVEL KRAUS: POMPEII, A.D. 79* are new works centered on the artist's recurring theme of "futuristic archeology." In his vessel-like sculptures, made of lead, marble and resin; marble floor pieces; and encaustic paintings often inlaid with jewel-like bits of resin, Kraus melds the past, present and future.

Over the course of his forty-year career, Kraus has developed a distinct abstract visual language of richly nuanced color, texture and form. The works often have the look of archeological relics, or ancient artifacts; but they are unmistakably of the present day. Aside from his work's correspondence with contemporary avant-garde art, Kraus also taps into the anxiety of our age, and especially of the present moment. In these uncertain times, there is a built-in sense of anxious energy in the question, "What will tomorrow bring?"

The underlying premise of *PAVEL KRAUS: POMPEII, A.D. 79* is the date, August 23, A.D. 79, the day before the eruption of Mount Vesuvius. In ancient Roman times, Pompeii was a city of great wealth, prosperity and culture. It was completely buried in volcanic ash on August 24, A.D. 79. The city's destruction in antiquity ironically resulted in preservation for all time, as Pompeii today is again alive—with ghosts and legends, remnants of the past and present comingled. *PAVEL KRAUS: POMPEII, A.D. 79* encompasses great expanses of time, the ghosts of the past, the legends of the present, and hints of an exhilarating future.

An audio component complements the artworks in the Art100 space, as visitors to the exhibition will hear an original new composition by Dennis Báthory-Kitsz, *Requiem: for hard times*, that they come again no more, for chorus, string orchestra, and timpani.

—David Ebony, Contributing editor of *Art in America*

PRESS CLIPPINGS

Art in America

OCTOBER 1997

Pavel Kraus at Joyce Goldstein and the Czech Center

Two recent exhibitions featured large-scale freestanding sculptures and smaller objects by Pavel Kraus, a Czech-born painter and sculptor who resides in New York. Coinciding with several exhibitions in Prague, including one at the Czech Museum of Fine Arts, the New York shows presented a broad range of works, from human organs carefully modeled in beeswax to imposing architectural structures made of lead, wood, stone and wax, all produced over the past five years. Kraus's sculptures have an archeological feel, like unearthed artifacts and structures from some forgotten civilization. Kraus often juxtaposes seemingly incompatible materials for the purposes of metaphor. For instance, the organic beeswax seems to stand for vulnerability, which is in constant conflict with the impenetrability of lead.

Four large works, collectively titled "Remains of the Present," filled the space at Goldstein. Hanging low on the wall in the gallery's entrance hall was a nearly 6-foot-tall gray lead panel titled *Object of Desire*. In spite of its title, the rough-hewn work conveys a rather chilling sense of violence. Its rippled metal surface suggests the battered door of a dungeon. It also recalled for me the bullet-riddled metal door preserved in Trotsky's bedroom and study in Mexico City.

A mural-size corner wall relief made of wax and lead, titled *The Wall of There After*, dominated the gallery's main room. This striking work was composed of 45 abutted rectangles made of beeswax, each about 20 inches high, in soft, muted shades of pink and yellow. Most of the colors are natural, although in some panels, the artist added pigment to the molten wax. Arranged in a grid rising 100 inches from the floor, the wax panels adjoined a wall of similarly shaped lead panels. Approaching the corner,

visitors noticed a slightly acrid scent given off by the materials; surprisingly, it enhanced the work's evocativeness.

On the floor nearby was *Flat Earth, Liquid Sky*, consisting of a wheeled cart filled with lead-covered bricks topped with a thick slab of pale yellow wax. This odd vehicle lent portability to the extremely heavy objects, as if they were being transported to a construction site. Across the room a work titled *Monument*, a large wooden box covered in pale ocher beeswax, rested on a platform of thin lead plates. Its somber demeanor and sarcophaguslike shape hint at a funereal purpose.

The 12 smaller, mostly wall-hung pieces on view at the Czech Center, collectively titled "Remains of the Past," provided a more intimate demonstration of Kraus's sensitivity to materials and forms. A number of them directly involve the figure. A tall, slender sculpture made of wax-coated canvas panels and maple branches, titled *Crusades*, leaned against the wall like an exhausted soldier. Lying on the ground nearby, the life-size *Brain*, made of granite covered in yellowish beeswax streaked with blood-red paint, looked like still-vital human remains.

—David Ebony



Pavel Kraus: Installation view of "Remains of the Present," 1997; at Joyce Goldstein.

Art in America

NOVEMBER 1999

PRAGUE

Pavel Kraus at Mánes, Galerie Gema and Galerie Gambit

This recent three-part exhibition was the most ambitious project to date by Pavel Kraus, a Czech-born New York artist who in the past several years has gained attention for his own work as well as for his efforts to bring shows of contemporary Czech art to the U.S. On display in the various Prague venues, all located in the old town center, was a diverse group of Kraus's abstract sculptures and two-dimensional pieces ranging from intimate drawings made with charcoal and wax to architectural structures of lead and wood, including an environmental piece incorporating music and electronic sounds. Each presentation reflected the artist's ongoing explorations of minimalist forms, earthy materials and colors, and ritual aspects of the creative act.

The most challenging work on view was "Sex, Death, Offerings," a sprawling, multipart installation with sound that filled the two principal galleries of Mánes, a Kunsthalle situated on the banks of the Vltava River. Illuminated by skylights, the focal point of the installation, *Lead Monument*, is an approximately 10-foot-high, three-sided enclosure made of abutting wooden panels covered in sheets of lead, stretching 52½ feet on two sides and 26 feet on the third. The rigid impenetrability of the work's unadorned, silvery gray walls was relieved by a single opening, an approximately 4-by-8-inch eye-level shaft extending horizontally several feet into the interior. At the

other end of the shaft one could see a slab of pinkish yellow beeswax, whose warm glow sharply contrasted with the structure's forbidding exterior. On the gallery floor and along the base of the *Monument* were some 100 *Offerings*, irregularly shaped wax-covered cloth bundles, most about 3 feet long and about 1½ feet in diameter. Like enormous seed pods in deep shades of blue, green, red and ocher, they seemed to be randomly scattered about.

Following a walkway made of lead panels, visitors moved from the *Monument* to the *Book of the Keeper*, a large volume with lead-and-wax-covered pages, placed atop a wooden podium in the middle of a side gallery. Each day of the show, a gallery attendant turned a

sounds emanating from inside the *Monument*. The amplified tones were part of a music composition written for the installation by Dennis Báthory-Kitsz, a Vermont-based composer who has collaborated with Kraus on previous occasions.

At Gema, the artist presented a group of wall and floor pieces made of lead and wax panels that occupy an ambiguous realm belonging to neither painting nor sculpture. The inaugural exhibition at Gambit featured Kraus's *Remains of the Future*, a 7-by-8-foot wall made with lead-covered bricks. A gaping hole in the center appears to have been torn open by either an ancient cannonball or a nuclear blast.

—David Ebony



Pavel Kraus: Installation view of "Sex, Death, Offerings," 1999, mixed mediums with sound; at Mánes.

page of the book, which contained plans for a new arrangement of the *Offerings* around the *Monument*. He or she reconfigured them accordingly. Artist and critic Joseph Karoly, writing in the exhibition's catalogue, describes Kraus's art as "Gothic Minimalism," a term that could apply to this theatrical work, whose overall moodiness was enhanced by alternately humming and rumbling electronic

Art in America

APRIL 2000

Beránek and Bláha made their first visits to the U.S. to create site-specific installations for Skidmore. Beránek is sometimes referred to as the Richard Serra of the Czech Republic, but his spare and often playful abstract sculptures are more reminiscent of Brancusi. One of his country's first earthworks artists, he is acclaimed for enormous outdoor projects made of soil and wood. In one of his most famous installations he filled the elaborate, gold, chandelier-decorated Belvedere Pavilion in Prague with a towering, minimalist structure made of peat bricks and hay. His major work for Skidmore is *Inevitable Presence* (1999), a 30-foot-high totem made from a single red oak. Using electric carving tools, he shaped the log into a three-sided form, with spiky excrescences near the bottom and a stylized, life-size human head at the top. Leaning against the crux of two branches of a large, living white oak near the Schick Gallery entrance, the piece remains on permanent display.

Bláha's outdoor installation *Attempt to Move Central European Space to the USA* (1999) consisted of a row of four nearly 9-foot-tall, 7-foot-wide gateways made of stainless-steel architectural molding imported from Prague. These thick metal door frames were situated in the middle of a concrete walkway, which the artist covered with a "clay carpet" made from slabs of dried, but unfired, local clay. During the course of the show, as students strolled down the path, the earthen floor eventually crumbled to dust. Kraus, in his work, is similarly concerned with time and space. Like an ancient Greek monument, his installation *Books of the Keeper* (1999) incorporates tons of broken pieces of white marble, which surround a wooden pulpit bearing a wax-and-lead-covered book. It was intended as an outdoor sculpture, but organizers worried that the marble chunks might be carted off as souvenirs. They moved the work into the gallery, where it was displayed near the artist's *Excavation/Archaeology* (1999), a large wax-coated wood "sarcophagus" about 5 feet high. The top of this work was covered with a sheet of Plexiglas and slabs of white marble. Visible inside the box were a burlap-covered bundle and a number of lead bowls filled with honey, presumably providing sustenance to the deceased in the afterlife. Kraus's work, conversant as it is with Beuys and Kiefer, served in this context as a vital link between the avant-garde experiments of the West and Czech art of the 1970s and '80s, hitherto little known here. The achievements of the 12/15 artists, as exemplified by the works in the show, add an exciting new chapter to the story of late 20th-century European art.

—David Ebony

"6 + 1," curated by Richard Drury and accompanied by an illustrated catalogue with essays by Drury and Ivan Neumann, was on view at the Schick Art Gallery, Skidmore College [July 15-Sept. 26, 1999]. It appears at the Czech Embassy in London [May 15-June 24, 2000], and travels to Amsterdam, venue and dates to be announced; a modified version will appear in two installments at the Radio House Gallery in New York [Oct. 20-Nov. 17 and Nov. 24-Dec. 22].



Pavel Kraus's *Excavation/Archaeology* (on floor, at right), 1999, and *Books of the Keeper* (in back corner), 1999, with Václav Bláha's paintings from his "100 Messages for This Century" series (on wall, at left), 1997-99; in the "6 + 1" exhibition at Schick Art Gallery, Skidmore College. Photos Magdaléna Bláhová.



Overhead view of Kraus's *Excavation/Archaeology*, showing a burlap-wrapped object and several honey-filled lead bowls inside the marble-and-Plexiglas-covered "sarcophagus."

Art in America

DECEMBER 2005

Pavel Kraus at Bond

This recent exhibition featured six new shaped paintings, two sculptures and a group of works on paper by the Czech-born New York artist Pavel Kraus. Dominating the display were large paintings on transparent Mylar, collectively titled "Levitations" (all 2005). Each piece averages about 5 feet high, tapering from about 4 feet wide at the top to 2 feet wide at the bottom. They resemble cone-like wall sconces, and the colorful abstract shapes covering their surfaces appear to glow like stained glass windows. The installation, with the paintings spot-lit and lining both sides of the storefront gallery, evoked a medieval chapel. Adding to the show's ambience was a sound component, an almost ecclesiastical composition with several movements of altered voices by new-music composer and frequent Kraus collaborator Dennis Bathory-Kitsz.

Lyrical and abstract, the *Levitation* paintings result from a rather unusual painting process in which the artist starts by placing the sheets on the floor and applying fluid gestures of brightly colored, poured and splattered pigments that flow into each other. Reversing the usual method of priming a canvas, Kraus finishes with a top coat of white that functions as a background to the colorful abstract compositions, which appear to be embedded in the material and are visible only from the work's unpainted side.

Once dry, the sheets are partially rolled into half-cones and attached to the wall, with

the narrower opening at the bottom; they protrude from the wall more than a foot at the top. Some works, such as *Levitation, Untitled #3*, contain several nested cone shapes.

Known for large-scale sculptures in heavy substances such as lead and marble, Kraus developed the light and airy new works partly out of physical necessity, after a shoulder injury in the studio last year temporarily thwarted his use of weightier materials. Included in the show was one of Kraus's large-scale minimalist sculptures, *Untitled (2001-02)*, installed in a corridor leading to a rear gallery. Here, four large slab-like beams are made of wood covered in beeswax, each 8 feet high by about 2 feet wide and 8 inches thick. With two elements leaning against each wall, the piece has a heavy, somber architectural feel that served as an effective counterpoint to the seemingly weightless and light-filled paintings.

—Edward Leffingwell

View of Pavel Kraus's "Levitations," 2005, shaped paintings on Mylar; at Bond.



Art in America

FEBRUARY 2007

Pavel Kraus at OK Harris

If the concept of the original has been lost, as various postmodern theories propose, Pavel Kraus in his paintings, sculptures and installations both affirms and rejects such a notion. He "excavates" his images, presenting them as if they were artifacts—remnants of a sepulchral universe of his imagination, perhaps. At the same time, he endows them with an emotional charge that makes them unquestionably unique works of art. The Czech-born New York artist's efforts possess formal and thematic qualities that resist specific provenance but might be traced to his upbringing in Eastern Europe. The blend of seriousness and furtive humor that has developed in that region, perhaps because of its peculiar history, still lingers in the art that Kraus now produces in the U.S.

This recent exhibition featured 11 large encaustic paintings on wood panels overlaid in some areas with sheets of lead. Taken from the artist's 2003-04 "Archaeology/Excavation" series, these untitled, reductive abstractions in muted earth tones are uniform in size (72 by 48 by 3 inches). Although their installation was highly theatrical, the individual works are rather understated, but never to the point where they cease to be seductive. Dramatically leaning against the walls as if too heavy to be hung, the paintings at first appear to be relief fragments, segments of densely textured walls, and their milky wax surfaces have an almost skinlike feel. They also suggest a certain quality of menace, a traumatic condition both elusive and concrete. For example, in one work, a bright red spot appearing on a gently tinted dark-blue and grayish ground enhances the piece's visual aggressiveness like an open wound. In a press release, Kraus describes his works as shifting "between Minimalism's rhetorical factuality and narrative metaphors of inference," while "testing the limits of these metaphors," which brings to mind some aspects of Arte Povera.

Complementing the paintings, six sculptures made of white

marble or wax-coated black cloth, from his 2006 "Offerings" series, were placed here and there on the gallery floor. Fabricated with the help of stone craftsmen in India, the marble pieces were based on prototypes made of quilts, natural fibers and wood that had been hand stitched and sealed with organic beeswax. Varying in size from 21 to 30 inches in length and 12 to 18 inches in diameter, the works resemble small mummies, as if the tight bundles were cocooned figures. In this show, Kraus conveys a dynamic of contradictions by means of his spare forms and his surfaces of shiny marble or nuanced layerings of encaustic. The pieces appear at once artificial and organic, exterior and interior, object-based and process-bound.

—Marek Bartelik

Pavel Kraus: Sculptures (on floor) from the "Offering" series, 2006, and encaustic panels (rear) from the "Archaeology/Excavation" series, 2003-04; at OK Harris.



Art in America

ANNUAL • 2007-2008



9 Pavel Kraus (Charlotte)

9 **Pavel Kraus**

Levitation. Four slightly staggered 10-by-4-foot panels of 2-inch translucent green glass, at the American Asset Corporation's Whitehall Corporate Center.

Public Art
IN REVIEW

CHANDELIER by Pavel Kraus
(THE STUFF OF STARS)



Opinion

David Ebony's Top 10 New York Gallery Shows of 2016

David Ebony looks back at his favorite shows of the year.

David Ebony, December 24, 2016



Pavel Kraus, *Time Capsule*, 1992-2016.
Photo Thomas Wilson, Courtesy Project: ARTSpace.

8. **Pavel Kraus at Project: ARTSpace December 7, 2016–January 7, 2017**

The Czech-born, New York artist Pavel Kraus marks his 70th birthday with this handsome survey in an East Chelsea venue, featuring some twenty-four sculptures, and several major installations spanning 1976 to 2016. Kraus's primary concerns are with process and materials. Throughout his career he experimented with novel combinations of marble, wax, resin, lead, and glass in large-scale abstract sculptures. And he favors encaustic techniques in his richly nuanced abstract paintings, such as a recent series on view titled *Candies*. Among the earliest works here are figurative pieces on reverse-painted Mylar panels from the early 1980s, including a series of neo-expressionist "self portraits." In another group of Mylar works, with crisp, super-graphic designs, such as *Blade* (1980), a spare image of a safety razor blade, and the eponymous text piece, *Made in America* (1983), Kraus seems to have established his identity as an American artist.

Like many Czech artists and intellectuals of his generation, Kraus fled his homeland in 1969, at the end of the Prague Spring, and in the wake of the Russian invasion. He settled in Chicago, attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and eventually made his way to New York. There is a sense of urgent displacement, deconstruction and reconstruction in many of Kraus' works, including "Fresh Marbles," a series of loosely assembled structures on pedestals, made of numerous small bars of white marble topped here and there with layers of colorful resin.

There is also a feeling of great expanses of time in the work, as in the series "Offerings/Redemption." These bifurcated egg shapes of inlaid marble, which Kraus created in his studio in Rajasthan, India, appear as archaeological relics. Emblematic of the show, *Time Capsule* (1992–2016) consists of a large, vertical slab of white marble covered in lead and copper, which Kraus created in 1992, and "reactivated" recently by adding a white marble bar punctuated with a layering of colorful resin. Placed atop the main element, the addition could be regarded as either a rudimentary steering device or a futuristic time gauge.



Installation view at Project: ARTspace, 2016, Photo by Thomas Wilson



Levitation, 2004–2005. Water white acid-washed laminated glass and neon tubes. Each panel: 48 × 16 × 2 inches, Photo by Thomas Wilson



Candies, 1996–2016. Reclaimed wood, lead, quilts, slate, encaustic, raw beeswax, and natural resins.
Dimensions range from 12 × 2 × 7 inches to 67 × 4 × 5 inches



Offerings/Redemption, 2006. Pietre dure black marble inlay with lapis lazuli, Tiger's eye, and red marble. Photo by Thomas Wilson
Dimensions range from 12 × 8 ½ × 5 ½ inches to 14 × 14 ½ × 16 inches