Pavel Kraus Enigma

Curated by David Ebony



Inside Front Cover

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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.

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. 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



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

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 threedimensional 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



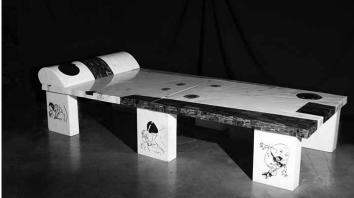
Installation view of the Sex Death Offerings exhibition at the Konsthall Manes, Prague, 1999

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."² 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 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 evergreater 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)



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, 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 foundbrick 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)



Altar, 1994 Japanese antique porcelain figures, canvas, lead, quilt, raw beeswax, and wood. 35 ½ x 18 x 44 ½ in. (90.1 x 45.7 x 113 cm) overall; figures: each approx. 5-6 ½ in. (12.7-16.5 cm) high





Archaeology/Excavation, 2007 Encaustic on wood panel 60 x 30 x 2 in. (152.4 x 76.2 x 5 cm)

Monuments, 2014 Brick with organic resin Five pieces: each approx. 11 x 3 ½ x 4 in. (28 x 8.8 x 10.1 cm)

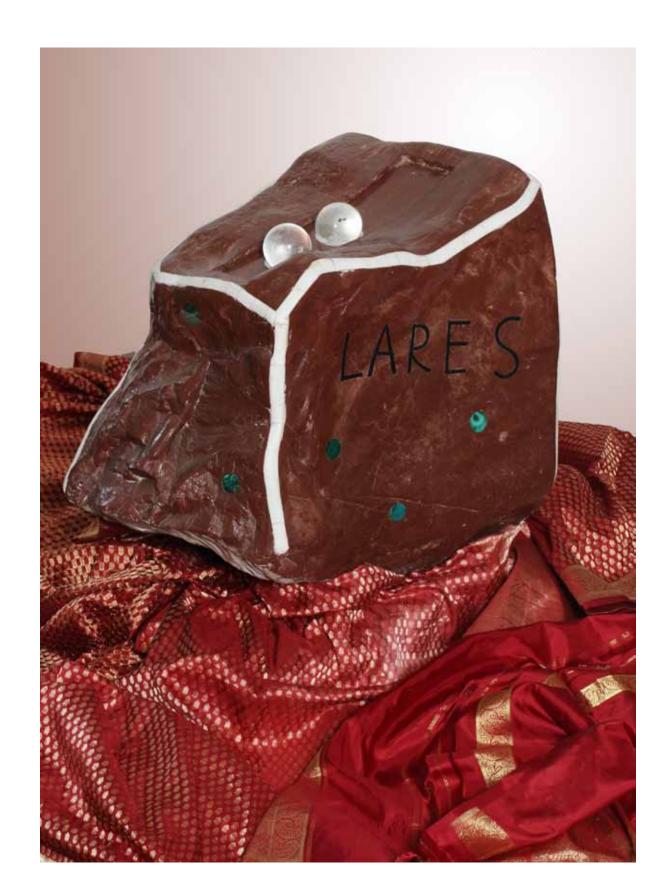




Heavy Distance, 1996 Marble, lead, and encaustic 23 x 5 ½ x 2 in. (58.4 x 14 x 5 cm) Private collection

Pacific, 2011 Encaustic on wood panel 42 x 42 x 2 in. (106.6 x 106.6 x 5 cm)

Roman Wedding/Lares and Penates, 2007-13 Pietre dure marble inlay, alabaster, crystal, semi-precious stones, and silk 22 x 13 ½ x 17 in. (55.8 x 34.2 x 43.1 cm)























Offering/Redemption, White, 2006 Pietre dure marble inlay, lapis lazuli, and tigereye 14 x 11 x 11 in. (35.5 x 28 x 28 cm)

Roman Wedding/Laurels (I-IX), 2012-13 Encaustic on wood panel Nine panels: each 12 x 12 x 4 in. (30.4 x 30.4 x 10.1 cm)





Roman Wedding/Marble Ships Carrying Indigo, 2012-13 Encaustic and marble 18 x 5 x 4 in. (45.7 x 12.7 x 10.1 cm) overall

Roman Wedding/Indigo Laurel, 2013 Encaustic on wood panel 24 x 18 x 3 in. (61 x 45.7 x 7.6 cm)



Electric Candies, 2012-13 Mylar with alcohol-based pigments and LED lights Approx. 98 x 104 x 24 in. (249 x 264.1 x 68.5 cm) [dimensions variable]

Levitation, 2014 Glass with neon tubing 23 x 48 x 14 in. (58.4 x 122 x 35.5 cm)

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

The checklist is arranged chronologically by individual works and then by series. Dimensions are given in inches and centimeters; height, width, depth.

Altar, 1994 Japanese antique porcelain figures, canvas, lead, quilt, raw beeswax, and wood. 35 ½ x 18 x 44 ½ in. (90.1 x 45.7 x 113 cm) overall; figures: approx. 5-6 ½ in. (12.7-16.5 cm) high

Three Beeswax Offerings, 1994-97 Canvas, organic fibers, quilt, and raw beeswax Three elements: 17 x 24 x 8 in. (43.1 x 61 x 20.3 cm); 9 x 22 x 23 in. (22.8 x 55.8 x 58.4 cm); 17 x 24 x 8 in. (43.1 x 61 x 20.3 cm)

Heavy Distance, 1996 Marble, lead, and encaustic 23 x 5 ½ x 2 in. (58.4 x 14 x 5 cm) Private collection

No Trade, 1998 Encaustic on wood panel 20 x 14 in. (50.8 x 35.5 cm)

Enclosures, 1998 Raw beeswax on canvas over wood panel Two pieces: $24 \times 17 \times 3$ in. ($61 \times 43.1 \times 7.6$ cm); $32 \frac{1}{2} \times 16 \frac{1}{2} \times 2$ in. ($82.5 \times 42 \times 5$ cm)

Sacred Books, 2003 Encaustic on wood panel, paperboards, and twine 48 x 12 ¹/₄ x 2 ¹/₄ in. (122 x 31.1 x 5.7 cm)

White Marble Offering, 2004 Marble 25 x 10 x 7 ½ in. (63.5 x 25.4 x 19 cm)

Black Bench/Altar, 2007 Pietre Dure marble inlay, carnelian, lapis lazuli, and tigereye 13 x 60 x 18 ½ in. (33 x 152.4 x 47 cm)

Archaeology/Excavation, 2007 Encaustic on wood panel 60 x 30 x 2 in. (152.4 x 76.2 x 5 cm)

Until the End of Time, 2010 Ink and pigment on silk Four panels: each 6 x 3 ¼ in. (15.2 x 9.5 cm) Pacific, 2011 Encaustic on wood panel 42 x 42 x 2 in. (106.6 x 106.6 x 5 cm) Electric Candies, 2012-13 Mylar with alcohol-based pigments and

Mylar with alcohol-based pigments and LED lights Approx. 98 x 104 x 24 in. (249 x 264.1 x 68.5 cm) [dimensions variable]

Levitation, 2014 Glass with neon tubing 23 x 48 x 14 in. (58.4 x 122 x 35.5 cm)

Monuments, 2014 Brick with organic resin Five pieces: each approx. 11 x 3 ½ x 4 in. (28 x 8.8 x 10.1 cm)

Enigma, 2014 48 x 24 x 2 in. (61 x 122 x 5 cm) Mixed media on wood panel 2014

The Fish Series

Fish, 1989 Mixed media on Mylar Four panels: each 80 x 40 in. (101.6 x 203.2 cm)

The Offering/Redemption Series

Offering/Redemption, White, 2006 Pietre dure marble inlay, lapis lazuli, and tigereye 14 x 11 x 11 in. (35.5 x 28 x 28 cm)

Offering/Redemption, Yellow, 2008-09 Pietre dure marble inlay and semi-precious stones 15 ³/₄ x 15 ¹/₂ x 15 ¹/₂ in. (40 x 39.3 x 39.3 cm)

Offering/Redemption, Black, 2008-09 Pietre dure marble inlay and semi-precious stones 13 ³/₄ x 16 x 13 ¹/₂ in. (35 x 40.6 x 34.2 cm)

The Roman Wedding Series

Roman Wedding/Lares and Penates, 2007-13 Pietre dure marble inlay, alabaster, crystal, semi-precious stones, and silk 22 x 13 ½ x 17 in. (55.8 x 34.2 x 43.1 cm)

Roman Wedding/Marble Ships Carrying Indigo, 2012-13 Encaustic and marble 18 x 5 x 4 in. (45.7 x 12.7 x 10.1 cm) overall

Roman Wedding/Laurels (I-IX), 2012-13 Encaustic on wood panel Nine panels: each 12 x 12 x 4 in. (30.4 x 30.4 x 10.1 cm)

Roman Wedding/Sanguinary Celebration, 2011 Encaustic on wood panel 48 x 24 x 2 in. (61 x 5 x 122 cm)

Roman Wedding/Indigo Laurel, 2013 Encaustic on wood panel 24 x 18 x 3 in. (61 x 45.7 x 7.6 cm)

Roman Wedding/Cassone Pink, 2014 Encaustic on wood panel 48 x 24 x 2 in. (61 x 5 x 122 cm)

Stage Design Video of Dennis Báthory-Kitsz's opera *Erzsébet: The Blood Countess Saga*, 2011; performed at Town Hall Theater, Middlebury, VT. Set designs by Pavel Kraus

PAVEL KRAUS

b. 1946, Pilsen, Czech Republic Lives and works in New York City

EDUCATION

M.F.A., The School of The Art Institute of Chicago, 1977 Graduate Studies, Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago, 1976 Masters Program, Brno University, Czech Republic, 1968 B.S., Institute of Technology, Plzen, Czech Republic, 1966

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2014 Pavel Kraus: Enigma, Stephen Romano Gallery, Brooklyn NY
- 2006 Archaeology/Excavation, OK Harris, New York, NY
- 2005 Levitation, Bond Gallery, New York, NY
- 2004 Archaeology 2004, OK Harris, New York, NY
- 2002 Sex Death Offerings/Transfiguration, University of Wyoming Art Museum, Laramie, WY
- 2001 Sex Death Offerings/Levitation, Robert Pardo Gallery, New York, NY Archaeology/Cathedral, Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, NY
- 2000 Archaeology, OK Harris, New York, NY
- 1999 Sex Death Offerings, Konsthall Manes, Prague, Czech Republic Books Of Lead and Honey, Joyce Goldstein Gallery, New York, NY
- 1998Remains of the Future II, Galerie Gambit, Prague, Czech Republic
Sex Death Offerings, Exquisite Corpse Gallery, Burlington, VT
- 1997 Monument, Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, NY
- 1995 Remains II, Embassy of Czech Republic, Washington, D.C. Remains of the Future, The Czech Museum of Fine Arts, Prague, Czech Republic Remains of the Present, Joyce Goldstein Gallery, New York, NY Remains of the Past, Czech Center New York [CCNY], NY
- 1994 Works of Lead, Galerie U Bileho Jednorozce, Klatovy, Czech Republic Pavel Kraus, Czech Permanent Mission of the United Nations, New York, NY
- 1993 Pavel Kraus, G.H. Dalsheimer Gallery, Baltimore, MD

Selected group Exhibitions

- 2014 Marble House Project Residency, Marble House, Dorset, VT Mysterium Cosmographicum, Stephen Romano Gallery, Brooklyn, NY
- 2011 Spring Round Up, The Proposition, New York, NY
- 2006 The Invisible in the Visible, Anita Shapolsky Gallery, New York, NY Monument and Fragments, Koehline Museum of Art, Oakton College, Des Plaines, IL
- 2005 Offerings & Books, 5+5 Gallery, New York, NY
- 2004 Identity-Records, Lönnström Art Museum, Rauma, Finland
- 2003 *Gravity*, Robert Pardo Gallery, Chelsea, New York, NY *Human Factor*, London Czech Center, England
- 2002 Crossing Boundaries: Seven Contemporary Artists, University of Wyoming Art Museum, Laremie, WY Codes and Signs, The Czech Museum of Fine Arts, Prague, Czech Republic By Pound Per Piece, Kunsthall, Ceske Budejovice, Czech Republic
- 1999 6+1, Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, NY
- 1995 Art Institute of Chicago, IL
- 1994 Seda Cihla 66/1994, Exile, Prague, Czech Republic
- 1993 Griffin McGear Gallery, New York, NY Exile in New York, Galerie Spalova, Prague, Czech Republic
- 1992 Foster Peet Gallery, New York, NY
- 1986 Sally Hawkins Gallery, New York, NY
- 1985 Gallery K, Washington, D.C.
 Crux Gallery, Chicago, IL
 Davidson Gallery, Seattle, WA
 101 Wooster Street, New York, NY
 808 Penn Modern, Pittsburgh, PA

1984 DBN Exhibition Space, Washington, D.C. Brandeis University Art Exhibition, Washington, D.C. Lansburgh's, Washington, D.C.

PERMANENT PUBLIC ART INSTALLATIONS

2006 *Chandelier* – installed at the American Asset Corporation [AAC], Charlotte, NC *Levitation* – installed at the Whitehall Corporate Center, Charlotte, NC

Selected bibliogrpahy

- 2014 Pavel Kraus: Enigma. New York: Stephen Romano Gallery. (Exh. cat.)
- 2007 "Pavel Kraus, Public Art 2006 in Review," *Art in America*, Annual Guide Bartelik, Marek. "Pavel Kraus at OK Harris," *Art in America*, February
- 2005 Leffingwell, Edward. "Pavel Kraus at Bond Gallery," Art in America, December
- 2002 Crossing Boundaries: Seven Contemporary Artists. Laramie: University of Wyoming Art Museum, WY. (Exh. cat.)
- 2000 Ebony, David. "12/15 in '6 + l': Better Late than Never, "Art in America, April
- 1999 Ebony, David. "Pavel Kraus at Manes," Art in America, November 6 + 1. Saratoga Springs: Skidmore College, NY. (Exh. cat.)
 Sex Death Offerings. Prague: Konsthall Manes. (Exh. cat.)
 "Zivot ve smrti Obetiny," Atelier, October
 "6 + 1," Atelier, July
- 1998 "Pavel Kraus Sex a smrt," *Atelier*, January
- 1997 "Ancient Mysteries," Seven Days, December
 "Imaginary Archaeologies," Vox, December
 Ebony, David. "Pavel Kraus at Joyce Goldstein Gallery," Art in America, October
 "Václav Bláha and Pavel Kraus," TimeOut NewYork, March
 "Souzneni v romanskem podzemi, Pavel Kraus Zbytky budoucnosti," Atelier, March
 "Kraus se nevraci ze sentimentu," MF DNES, February
 "Romanske sklepy," MF DNES, February
- 1996 Pavel Kraus Hearts and Minds. Prague: The Czech Museum of Fine Arts. (Exh. cat.)
 "Mozky a jine zbytky," Reflex, December
 "Pavel Kraus (New York Prague)," Labyrint, December
- 1994 Seda cibla. Klenova: Galerie Klatovy. (Exh. cat.)



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, thank you to Pavel Kraus for his generosity of spirit in entrusting the gallery with his life's work for this exhibition, which looks back on his accomplishment with the utmost integrity. Thank you also to David Ebony for organizing this exhibition and for his eloquent essay that elucidates the transcendental nature of Pavel Kraus's art. Many individuals' ongoing support perpetuates the gallery's program, to name just a few: J. Kevin O'Rourke, James Brett, Larry Dumont, René Pierre Allain, Edward Blanchard, John Foster, Amie Romano, Nastia Voynovskaya, Kena Vernon, Samuel D. Gliner, Allison Meier, Trippy Curry, Gail Worley, and Pam Grossman.

-Stephen Romano

I would like to thank all those who made this exhibition and catalogue possible, especially Stephen Romano, David Ebony, Thomas Wilson, Dennis Báthory-Kitsz, my assistants Olivia Kane and Antonia Orol-Berlinger; Sarah S. King, Louis Doulas, and Diane Armitage of SNAP Editions and to Tim Laun, the catalogue's designer; Malta and, most of all, my wife, Bette Kraus.

-Pavel Kraus

Published by Stephen Romano Gallery, New York, on the occasion of the exhibition, *Pavel Kraus: Enigma* September 4 – October 11, 2014

Catalogue © Stephen Romano Gallery, 2014 Catalogue essay © David Ebony, 2014 All art by Pavel Kraus © Pavel KRAUS Studio, Brooklyn, NY

Director and Publications Manager: Stephen Romano Editorial Production: SNAP Editions Design: Tim Laun with SNAP Editions

Principal Photography: © Thomas Wilson Photography: © Pavel KRAUS Studio: pp. 2-3, 4, 7, 27

Printed in the USA by Digital City Marketing, New York, NY

Cover: Offering/Redemption, Yellow, 2008-09 Pietre dure marble inlay and semi-precious stones 15 ¾ x 15 ½ x 15 ½ in. (40 x 39.3 x 39.3 cm)

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