**THE SIEGE OF OZ, STAGE 1**

In his current body of work *The Siege of Oz*, Nikola Vrljić, all the while with an intriguing distinction, is conceptually and formally continuing in the direction already set by his previous exhibition *Cirkus!*. Now, as it was then, the narrative is based on semantically only loosely related sculptures which, even if they remain associatively disconnected, function very well as stand-alone works of art. This approach allows the artist to keep organically building on this narrative, currently exhibited in Galerija Bačva, for the upcoming exhibition stages. On the other hand, Vrljić enables the visitor, inevitably confounded when faced with a titanic head, two sphinxes, a dancer with her leg up in the air, an iconic B-52 bomber leaning against a wall, and a crab, to create a narrative of his own. In terms of content, Vrljić remains his generation’s most prominent representative of figurative sculpture, equally convincing when dealing with male, female or bestial motifs. The extravagant posture of the female figure with her leg held high is one of the most courageous sculptural solutions of the last couple of years. On the other hand, here stops all comparison with his previous work. For, Vrljić has won the acclaim of all those who had previously feared that competency in the traditional sculptural craft had vanished from the local arts scene. And indeed, already at the very onset of his career Vrljić had made a significant contribution to naturalism in Croatian sculpture. This is just as true of the robust, firmly erect, belligerent male characters as of the willowy bestial figures. A born sculptor, Vrljić obviously took pleasure in shaping the massive forms which, due to a good measure of physical and expressive credibility, powerfully dominate the space they are in. Their summary shapes, with no conspicuous details and their surfaces roughly treated, had paradoxically even enhanced the sculptures’ raw plausibility. Even though the final material of the works had predominantly been acrylic resin, each sculpture could easily have been imagined in bronze. And here we touch on the raw issue of the process connected with the traditional métier of a sculptor. Why even create something as a model that should then be cast in bronze, when this is effectively far beyond a young artist’s financial means? I would say that it is exactly with material that Vrljić’s current deconstruction of traditional sculpting begins, a deconstruction that allows him to bridge the gap between the traditional and the contemporary form of expression. Vrljić creates his recent works in polystyrene sheets, stacking them up to the desired height, and then shaping them by cutting them into the desired form. In Vrljić’s hands, the material presents itself as one that is easily moulded, enduring well the procedures of not only cutting and filing but also subsequent interventions with material and color for desired aesthetic effect. And the effect, precisely due to the use of contemporary materials and the decision that the finalized work will display not only the original material, but also the procedures of its primary manipulation, like the layering and gluing together of sheets, or their green and reddish, almost fleshlike color, is outstandingly contemporary. Going back to the semantic layers of Vrljić’s work, as previously, his proclivity for the grotesque in both content and form is well pronounced. We could say that the chosen theme of *The Siege of Oz*, which sounds like a reckoning with the society of the spectacle, works in favour of his tendency to take a cynical commentary as a starting point in his interpretation of reality. Art can not change reality, nor even influence it, but no one, in a democracy, can forbid an artist to express his stance. Can one claim that in order to present an inauthentic reality, Vrljić has purposefully chosen synthetic, replaceable materials, or is this, as mentioned above, primarily an issue of production, the question, in fact, is of no essential significance, because, unlike everyday life, *The Siege of Oz* is an altogether authentic artistic endeavour.

Branko Franceschi