

Retro-Macho

Let us return to a time when we played with and traded *Yu-Gi-Oh!* and *Pokémon* cards, bought at small shops and kiosks after school. We staged entire performances in the playground, impersonating our favourite characters and superheroes from the small screen, while our parents and grandparents repeatedly called us in for lunch. For many, childhood looked exactly like this – more or less carefree and consumed by the 2D world populated by its protagonists and antagonists. Back then, we could not have anticipated just how much their sentimental value would change under the influence of the adult world – the world governed by money and collecting.

In the arts, collecting has always been a known concept, where large sums have always been spent on 'high art' and the name behind it. But in the world of so-called nerds and *otaku* – enthusiasts of video games, cartoons, films, and other media – equally vast amounts are spent on paper and laminated cards, plastic figurines, and polyester clothing printed with images of favourite characters, all in the hope of owning a piece of one's childhood or satisfying a current obsession. Producers of such content often exploit the nostalgia of their core clientele – capitalising on exclusivity by requiring pre-orders up to a year in advance. This, in turn, opens the door to unethical practices such as *scalping*; artificially creating rarity in the market by purchasing entire stocks of a product, in this case, a collectable item, which is why there is often a limit on the number of products a private person may order, making it a valuable investment.

With his exhibition, *Retro-Macho*, Dorian Pacak effectively parodies this contemporary issue by crafting character-sculptures in ceramics – a medium associated with quality, expense, and a long-standing tradition – in contrast to their well-known plastic counterparts (action and scale figures). By presenting carefully selected characters as busts, typically reserved for historically significant figures or wealthy patrons, Dorian elevates their overall value – whether monetary or sentimental. Through the predominantly traditional medium of ceramics, he continues to explore ideas rooted in “popular” collecting, which are particularly evident in the various versions of the *He-Man*

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busts. One is painted entirely white to suggest rarity and desirability, similar to the “holographic versions” of Pokémon cards, while simultaneously referencing the unpainted sculptures of the Renaissance and Baroque periods. The same goes for the *Ninja Turtle* busts, whose names, borrowed from old masters, ironically point to a strong connection with tradition.

The characters Pacak primarily focuses on were significant to him and many others at certain stages of growing up; like many, he loved watching the *Ninja Turtles* as a child, while he discovered *He-Man* and *Berserk* a bit later. These characters stem from franchises created in the 20th century, though they have been perceived differently across generations; *He-Man*, an American superhero from the 1970s; well-known *Ninja Turtles*, launched in the 1980s as a comic and cartoon; and *Mozgus* from *Berserk*, a manga that originated in the 1990s, but unlike the first two examples, its content is not intended for children, though 2D media may mislead the uninitiated into assuming otherwise. What unites them is muscularity and a moral dichotomy of good versus evil, though the severity of the threat and the manner of confronting it differs; the *Ninja Turtles* fight against *Shredder*, and *He-Man* against *Skeletor* – both villains who pose no serious threat and whose ultimate aim is domination and conquest without excessive bloodshed – while in *Berserk*, the protagonist *Guts* encounters various antagonists, one more twisted than the other, who often act in extreme ways. The only villain featured in the exhibition is *Mozgus* from *Berserk*, a priest (another homage to church patrons and collectors from the past) who, unlike typical children's villains, justifies all kinds of sadistic means in pursuit of his goals.

The very layout of the exhibition is structured to follow the canonised relationship between the characters; heroes and their villain counterparts. One room is reserved exclusively for the heroes and ‘good guys’, *He-Man* and the *Ninja Turtles*, and is also the brightest. The back room, dimly lit, is home to the ultimate villain, the antagonist *Mozgus*, who hides in the dark. Surprisingly, the characters have not been selected merely for their recognisability but also for their similarly distinctive physical traits: masculinity, muscularity, and angular

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facial features (*He-Man* and *Mozgus*), which reveals Pacak's own identity as a collector who carefully selects and creates his so-called holy grail figures.

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