

## «Head Download»

Nina Staehli's «Big Heads» at the Kunsthalle Luzern

by Falco Meyer

As though she had cut off the heads of a horde of giants and turned them into oversized shrunken heads, they hang there, waiting for someone to pop them on and breathe a new life into them. In this exhibition, Nina Staehli has zoomed in on her «touching heroes» and boiled down the world around them to the point that we can regard the once-miniature humanoids the way heroes ought to be regarded: with respect for their massiveness. Heads weathered and scarred, like erratics from the deepest glacial crevasses; heads with smooth surfaces, as though polished smooth by a river; heads that are beautiful, simple, brutal and unsettling; and heads sprouted from the soul of an archaic human, connected and wrapped up in a web of stories like that of the Greeks and their constellations.

Nina Staehli does nothing other than invent her own epic, only it is not the heroes' superpowers that make them heroic – it is their magical simplicity. Ruby Dean pees out little snow piglets in the glacier; Hero plants cabbages on the sea shore; Mountain Dean carries chunks of glaciers through the woods and places them into a stream just to let them float away. These are all childish actions that do not require an explanation – which is precisely what makes them so magical. But Staehli does not stop at the mere creation of these heroes – she also wants to bring them to life in the here and now. And she requires a human body as the foundational structure to do so. The title of the exhibition, «Head Download», speaks for itself. The heads hang on steel cables and can be pulled down and put on like hair dryers in a salon – that is the practical part. What happens next is a fundamental transformation. As soon as a visitor musters up the courage to stick his head into the brain of one of the superhuman boulders, he dives into a foreign consciousness. Staehli commissioned sound producer Thomas Binzegger to create soundtracks for the heads' interiors: electronic noise, a scraping gurgle, it is always different depending on the head and general intellectual mood of each of the heroes. The sound is slightly unpleasant, urgent, scratching the surface of reality and in turn taking on an emotional quality. We thus put our own head into a mask, viewed from the outside, while we simultaneously enter into an intellectual and emotional space that is immediately transferred to the brain invaders. It is a technoid world of ideas, electronically alienated sound, as though these creatures had outgrown some lost electro-party youth and regressed into more primitive life forms. These figures are so pared down that their appearance alone has an archetypal function, triggering stories in our heads. It is no surprise that people slip into a role just after they pop the giant craniums on. A hero, not a human being, stands before us – instantly downloaded, internally and externally, and it does not let us go so quickly. This exhibition is an oscillating field in which visitors meld with the heads to form art works while turning all other visitors into spontaneous admirers: another one suddenly appears, tilts here and there, and is immediately photographed by the rest of the visitors. The vast calm inside the floating heads has all but vanished at that point – a sudden incarnation that causes a stir in the social field of the hanging heads. When the wearer finally removes the head, the "Enzo Genesis" head, for instance, he has to smile. On the antihero's side it reads, as though tattooed on: "What kind of an idiot wears a sculpture on his head?"