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Stefan Rinck: The Dignity of Monsters

By Volker Corsten



Stefan Rinck carves humour in stone. At ART COLOGNE, the Nino Mier Gallery is exhibiting new works by the sculptor, which straddle the line between mythical creatures and contemporary figures.

This crocodile has clearly seen a lot in its time. Its eyelid hangs heavily over its gaze, its elongated body resting on short legs encased in clunky shoes. Scales run along its back like a stone latticework. ‘Buffalo Croc with Crocs’ is the title of a limestone sculpture by Stefan Rinck, created in 2023: 220 centimetres of concentrated bad temper, imbued with a play on words that links the reptile to footwear fashion. Rinck gives a prehistoric-looking creature the expression of a contemporary figure whose patience has run out.

Such fusions are characteristic of the sculptor, whose new works are being presented by the Nino Mier Gallery at ART COLOGNE. In his menagerie of crocodiles, owls, dogs and hybrid creatures that are difficult to identify, different eras seem to coexist. Medieval gargoyles meet comic-book characters; iconic images meet caricatures. With their stocky bodies, Rinck’s creatures exude a peculiar dignity that neither their costumes nor their grimaces can entirely overshadow.

“Sculpture is often treated as a weighty affair that leaves little room for humour or playfulness,” says gallery owner Nino Mier. He is interested in how Rinck subverts the tradition of an art form that immortalises historical figures and authenticates significant events. Where the monument exudes authority, Rinck’s characters allow themselves a sceptical gaze. The gallery owner, who also runs a branch in Brussels, recognises in this a kinship with the Belgian blend of humour and surrealism.

The free, uninhibited nature of these figures stems from a thorough understanding of the material and its properties. Born in Homburg in the Saarland in 1973, Rinck initially trained as a stone sculptor in Zweibrücken from 1993 to 1995. This was followed by a degree in art history and philosophy at Saarland University, and subsequently, from 1996 to 2000, a course in sculpture at the Karlsruhe Academy of Fine Arts. Today, Stefan Rinck lives and works in Berlin. His work combines technical precision with a humanities-based curiosity: each figure possesses a tangible physical presence whilst simultaneously embodying a richly layered cultural memory.

It all begins, of course, with the block of stone. Rinck takes into account its structure, its grain, and the points where it might give way or break. Using a hammer and chisel, pneumatic tools and an angle grinder, he carves out the form. Rows of small indentations, grooves and grinding marks remain visible on the surfaces. They lend density to a coat of fur, give structure to a garment or allow light to play across a face. In this way, the process of carving itself becomes a means of expression; the story of its creation remains legible in the finished figure

The stones, too, have different appearances. Dark diabase lends the figures a compact presence, red sandstone introduces warmth and graininess, whilst marble offers a different brightness and veining. The material prevents the figures from being lost in their own punchlines. What the title seems to capture at a glance takes time to appreciate as a sculpture: one must walk round the outline, discover the reverse side, and examine the relationship between mass and detail. The physical persistence of the stone offers a counterpoint to the fleeting wit. The names, too, play on this tension. ‘Love Doctor’ sounds like a specialist in matters of the heart, whilst ‘Pythagoras’ evokes the authority of the ancient mathematician. The humour arises from the gap between the grand promise of the name and the headstrong subject.

Rincks’ visual repertoire ranges from Romanesque sculpture and pre-Columbian forms to fantasy, video games and emojis. Yet this does not result in collages of quotations that can be neatly deciphered. An animal may look like a guardian without guarding an entrance; a figure may be reminiscent of a divine image without belonging to any particular religion. The figures carry with them the memory of former roles, yet have been released from those roles. This is where their creative tension lies: they appear to be responsible for something whose meaning has been lost.

Just how productive this shift can be was demonstrated in 2025 by the ‘Parade’ exhibition at the Domaine de Chamarande. A dog wearing a ruff held a human mask up to its face, whilst a hybrid creature with a crocodile’s mouth and fur clutched a jester’s puppet. Rinck took as his point of reference a 17th-century French court ballet in which Louis XIII himself performed. Representation and disguise, authority and farce converged. The animal costume revealed the nature of social roles: who is parading whom here, and what authority remains once its insignia veer into the grotesque?

Another form of human projection was the subject of Rinck’s 2023 work ‘Early Birds and Late Night Lizards’ at Nino Mier in New York. Dinosaurs became symbols of boredom, wonder and discontent; the sculptor even fitted some of them with headphones. The starting point was the gap between the preserved bones and the vivid images we conjure up of extinct animals. Rinck used this scope to explore our imagination. His prehistoric creatures also reveal how readily humans populate the unknown with their own feelings.

The Nino Mier Gallery has represented the artist since 2020. His first solo exhibition in Los Angeles was followed by one in New York in 2023; he has also taken part in art fairs in Europe and the USA. “When I opened my first galleries in Los Angeles, I wanted to introduce a new generation of artists to the American public,” explains the gallery owner. His programme also includes Jana Schröder, Thomas Wachholz and Andreas Breunig. Rincks’s idiosyncratic approach expands this connection to the German art scene to include a form of sculpture that is accessible internationally without any prior knowledge, yet is nonetheless full of literary and art-historical references.

With its appearance at ART COLOGNE, the gallery is presenting his works in Germany for the first time. On display are sculptures in marble, limestone and diabase, as well as bronzes – a material Rinck has only recently begun to work with. The sculptor is sharing the exhibition stand with the Italian artist Angiola Gatti and her ballpoint pen works. “One of the highlights of this presentation is the ‘Walking Cloud’ series: a new group of small, cloud-shaped sculptures with wonderfully silly and humorous facial expressions,” says his gallerist, building anticipation. This new body of work also marks the start of the gallery’s ambitious plans for Stefan Rinck in 2027. Following solo exhibitions in Los Angeles in 20 20 and New York in 2023, a third solo exhibition is scheduled to take place at the Nino Mier Gallery in New York.

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