Mario Dalpra

Chasing Aesthetics

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Poetic view and reflection on Mario Dalpra's sculptures

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The raindrops slide down the sleek surface... The drops absorb abundant reflections of ethnic plants and the shapes of mountains. But they become deformed before they reach the earth. Now the reshaped puddle replicates the form of the object standing above, albeit in a rather distorted way. Here its bright blue metal colour mingles with the still ominous blue sky. The mountain, repeating the line of the breasts, interposes the mirrored image inside. The monsoon season appeared in beautiful Bali and covered all the landscapes with tropical rain. It also dared to trace the strangers—sculptures by an artist who created them here. The sculptures cast from bronze are painted in dozens of different colours and patterns. They are shaped in the form of hybrids, with the appearance of humans and flora. Stretched and leaning, spread out and entangled, prickly and slick, all of them have a quality of liveliness. Diligent, thoughtful and spiritual native people supported these tangible and delicate figures with their willingness and serenity. But that would all be just a figment of the imagination if the artist had not one day decided to jump on the plane that brought him here to discover novel ideas. Travel must be the superlative experience that allows bountiful creativity to be achieved. And it seems the artist found it out here.

It is not always raining in Bali... But the sculptures of Dalpra still shine... and sometimes reflect the shape of raindrops discovered again on that magnificent island...

There is no other way to look at Mario Dalpra's sculptures than with a grace of mind that leads to sublime poetics. Reflections of your own seen on the surfaces of sculptures have a way of taking you deep inside to your inner thoughts. Moreover, they can deliver you to places you have never visited before. The powerful mind conjures up the image of the beautifully wafting hair of native women caught up in a spiritual dance like the Swinging Lady figure, children playing around with sticks from the banyan tree... so tangled and polished by the Indian Ocean, evoking the artist's bronze creations. Some of his creatures have no limbs, but they seem content to interflow into their own infinity. They are so logically balanced, with powers to model their new individuality. Just as clouds in the sky transform as they dissolve and reveal distinctive forms, so do Dalpra's sculptures mutate into diverse creatures when we turn them around.

Meanwhile, other strangers cast from bronze stand with sophistication or bend and kneel agonisingly, deep in contemplation. It feels as though some of them will explode at any moment. The artist likens them to thinkers or dreamers, some of them possessing inflated heads resembling those raindrops described above, which embody the capacity of nature as well as the substance of landscape itself. His attraction to the phenomenon of spirit probably emerged and evolved from experiences in Dalpra's youth, when the Jesuit monastery was his spiritual dwelling for almost two years.

An exploration of exotic nature here, with its bright and colourful beaches, mountains, waterfalls, tree houses and madly jumping monkey-like creatures, calls for a walk imbued with passion and guided by a great desire to infuse the mind with a muse. These very movements or explorations are repeated in Dalpra's expressive figures: the gentle steps—reminiscent of walking on the soft sand of the beaches; the solid form—replicating strenuous hiking in mountains shrouded in fluffy clouds.

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Other characters exhibit the struggle within themselves and the fight against their conditions: overflowing thoughts, melting bodies, exhaustion, hangovers possibly from the dozens of significant morals. Though, among the community of sculptures, several reveal a very peaceful spirit by echoing meditative lyrics. Attracted by simplicity yet raised by dignity, the figurines diffuse the colours of brightness. Travelling indeed has the ability to fill the mind with abundant feelings. Thus, Indonesia has been a never-ending story since the beginning of the artist's glorious travels in the 1990s. The wonderer became the wanderer, who once or twice a year goes back to the origin of his creativity.

That said, there was another country which Dalpra explored, absorbing its ethnic treasures. Back then, in his late twenties, he discovered the islands of New Zealand. Indigenous Polynesian people made an impression with their tattooed skin. Faces, hands, their full bodies were covered with tribal paintings. Meaningful lines and symbols embraced there are set on the surfaces of Dalpra's figures. But just on his figures, not on his own skin. He also created his own tattoos and adorned his beloved creatures with them. Some of them appear human, and some are reminiscent of dangerous snakes or rather engraved tree roots. Indeed, Maori spirit continues to grow inside the figurines.

For a moment let's travel back to Europe, more specifically Austria. Here Mario Dalpra has his three studios; some of them could be called gallery space. Perfectly positioned or exhibited sculptures on grey, black and white plinths are always ready to welcome visitors. It would not be wrong to call this Dalpra's temple, because that is how it feels the first time you enter his creative arena. Movable, light and heavy, they move around the space like contemporary dancers. And if they were to stop, you would definitely see yourself reflected aplenty.

## Lucas Gehrmann

Bronze: polished, coated and lacquered, sometimes patinated. Or: aesthetics »in moto«

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Dancing Form, The Lateral Thinker and The See Goddess, like so many of the other sculptures by Mario Dalpra that are shown in this book, give little if any indication of the material of which they are made. Viewed from a distance, they look like biomorphic, zoomorphic or anthropomorphic beings, painted in just one, two or three colours, often with astonishingly flexible-looking bodies which suggest inner parts that are elastic or composed of organic materials. However, as we gradually approach them—not directly, but by meandering or spiralling round them, as they literally invite us to do, with their puzzling multifaceted forms and their potential for being revolved or moved around some of them, at least on a few exposed parts of their extremities, do reveal the »true nature« of their substance: here and there, the golden, highly polished bronze of which the whole body is actually made—lacquered for protection—gleams through. But because, after casting, in every other nook and cranny the surface is not just polished but either lacquered in bright colours, painted by hand or artificially patinated, these layers of »skin« that are applied—in some places transparent, in others more opaque—conceal the body's inner substance. Even those (invariably deliberately chosen) places that are not covered by paint or patina do not give us direct insight into the inner material workings of the sculpture; from a distance they look like golden points of light, while from close up they reflect our own faces and the surrounding room, as if in a convex mirror or even a fisheye lens. As new reflected images constantly appear before the mirror, our gaze at the reflective material is obstructed.

Now, simply the fact that Mario Dalpra de- or re-materialises his cast metal figures, so to speak, by applying a special finish to the surfaces would hardly be worthy of any special attention. We need only think about the very long-established tradition of coating, painting or gilding three-dimensional works: whether they were made of wood, marble or indeed bronze, from at least antiquity onwards the exterior surface was always coloured. Initially, of course, this was intended mainly to make the images as "true to life" as possible, something which has been described, ever since Plato used the term, as mimesis (mimicry of sensory phenomena). This western tradition of art reproducing an illusion of reality, one of the main features of which is the »realistic« representation of things, did not begin to break down, strictly speaking, until the Modernist period, when the concept of reality was extended from that which could be perceived externally to the inner worlds of existence. An idea that is interesting in our context is the concept of »material veracity« which emerged circa 1900. As a reaction to the historical (even pre-Baroque) practice of simulating precious materials by the (extensive) application of relatively cheap finishing materials, the general principle now became established especially in (»avant-garde«) architecture and sculpture that all materials should be allowed to display their natural beauty undisguised and with a finish that matched their technical qualities, for aesthetic (or »functionally« original) effect. So the natural patination of bronze would have satisfied this (new) requirement for veracity, but certainly not the application of an artificial coating. You might think that nowadays such dogmas in art are long since obsolete, but in fact they are being given new life in different circumstances. In 2018, 60% of the world's population said that they encountered falsely presented information or even

fake news »(very) frequently«. When uncertainty is widespread, it is only natural that demand soon emerges for certainty and stability and for the »facts« that are circulating to be verifiable. So »material veracity« could undoubtedly come back into fashion.

The artists who are responding to the recent phenomenon of »reality« that can be digitally generated, simulated and manipulated are doing so in very different ways. Broadly speaking, on one hand there are many who especially if they work in the field of media art and have perhaps helped to develop the new virtual realities—try to counteract the »spacelessness« and ungraspable nature of cyberspace by creating something material and touchable or by producing »installations« in physical spaces. On the other hand, some artists try to address or »visualise« this ungraspability by transforming and de-familiarising certain media and materials—including very traditional ones. So, unlike the pre-Modernist attempt to simulate a reality, nowadays—here and there—different possible forms of reality are (simultaneously) presented.

We can leave aside the question of whether Mario Dalpra sees himself as an artist who is explicitly »reacting« to the phenomena we have described above. In any case, when asked about his intentions, he initially says: »I'm not trying to make a political statement to the world. For me it's all about aesthetics. When we see how much negativity there is in the world today, aesthetics have to maintain their value.« And then he does add: »Negativity has an incredible power to make people uneasy. Here I'm trying to counterbalance that.«

Regardless of exactly how Dalpra might define »negativity«, he finds it in our times and wants to oppose it by creating something using the »aesthetic« language of art to point out to us that, by paying more attention to, and where possible marvelling at, the positive sides of life, we can help to make that life better and more positive. This idea may indeed be inherent in some of the artefacts that we have from the very earliest days of humankind which, in their design, go far beyond mere functionality. Why is a Neolithic stone axe not just "practical" but also "beautiful«? And why, ever since Late Neolithic times, have metal shapes been imitated in stone? In ancient times, these questions were considered by philosophy, later by art theory and finally by aesthetics as a discipline in its own right. After the Renaissance, such ideas flourished, as artists and architects put forward specific ideals of beauty that were in some cases derived from antiquity. For example, in about 1585, Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo wrote the following about the Figura serpentinata style of sculpture and painting that was developed in the early Mannerist period by artists like Michelangelo and Giambologna, in which the sculpture literally "winds upwards" into the air: »The recommended ideal form unites three qualities: the pyramid, the serpentinata movement and a certain numerical proportion, all three united to form one whole. At the same time, precedence is given to the motor, that is, to the meandering movement, while the pyramid shape, in exact proportion, should create the solid geometrical form of a cone.«1

The Infinite Movement is the title of a glossy, lacquered bronze sculpture by Mario Dalpra dating from 2021 but preceded by several other *Movements*, such as The Red Optimist (2021) and one in pink (2021) and also The Distributer from 2020. Furthermore, movement is not just inherent in the form of Mario Dalpra's

See also Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo, Trattato dell'arte della pittura (1584), Quoted here from: Emil Maurer, Manierismus. Figura serpen tinata und andere Figurenideale; Studies, Essays, Reports, Munich 2001. The »serpentinata« style may have emerged following the rediscovery of the ancient Laocoön Group in 1506. This sculpture is said to have made a particularly strong impression on Michelangelo

der Kunst«, in: Welt. 16/12/2007. lhid

lbid.

Tim Ackermann: »Anselm

Reyle, der Heavy-Metal-Star

Alfred Goldschmid: Echinodermata, Stachelhäuter. In: Wilfried Westheide, Reinhard Rieger: Spezielle Zoologie Teil 1: Einzeller und Wirbellose Tiere. 2nd edition. Spektrum Akademischer Verlag, Heidelberg/Berlin 2007, p. 804 and 824.

12 13 three-dimensional works: thanks to rolling pedestals of his own design, they can also be physically rotated and turned and really set »in moto«. So, in their structure and their transitory nature, there seem to be echoes of ideals of beauty that were formulated centuries ago, traces of which we must have retained deep inside ourselves. However, in addition to those western concepts of beauty, the by now equally traditional preoccupation with non-European cultures also comes into play here. After all, Dalpra has studied these intensively for decades—working in Australia, Tasmania, India, Brazil and Indonesia. That is to say, in cultures which in many respects are far closer to sensuality, »life« and spirituality than is characteristic of our heritage from Aristotelian antiquity, which tends to focus more on »rationality«. Both perceptions—normally regarded as completely separate—feed harmoniously into Dalpra's wandering, multi-perspective sculptures—which look different every time when seen from the front, the back, the side, above and below, but which always »work« perfectly as a composition. In other words, they satisfy our »aesthetic«

sensibilities.

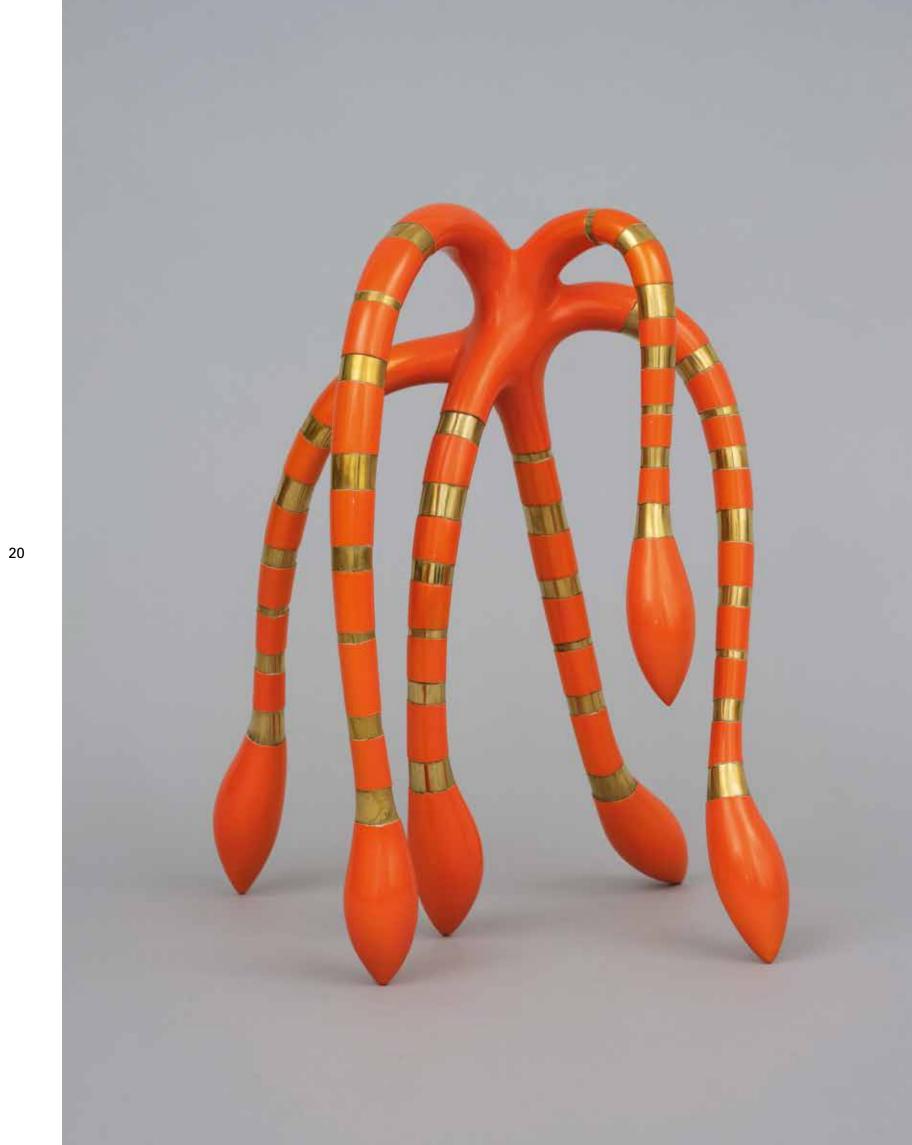
That is why Mario Dalpra's aesthetic style is often seen as following in a line of (European) greats of the Modernist period who were also inspired by non-Western cultures, such as Hans Arp and Henry Moore. Critics also like to compare his work with contemporary art, primarily on account of the surface finish on Dalpra's sculptures—citing, for example, the mirror-finish works by Jeff Koons. Leaving aside the fact that Dalpra, unlike Koons, only produces one-off sculptures (and that they nevertheless sell for much less than those of the US artist ...), in the words of Anselm Reyle, (frequently referred to as the »German Jeff Koons«): »Koons is Pop. He is interested in the consumer world. But my works also always reflect the art of the Modernist period.«<sup>2</sup> This is at least equally true of Mario Dalpra, although his sculpture has as little to do with Pop as it does with Anselm Reyle's short series of African Sculptures, produced between 2008 and 2012: »bronze sculptures — based on figures in African soapstone, scaled up, cast and then covered in gleaming chrome-effect lacquer.«3 »)That's actually how art looks in Donald Duck comics, says Reyle, like the essence of modern sculpture: half realistic, half abstract, a few holes in it. You can look through it.««4

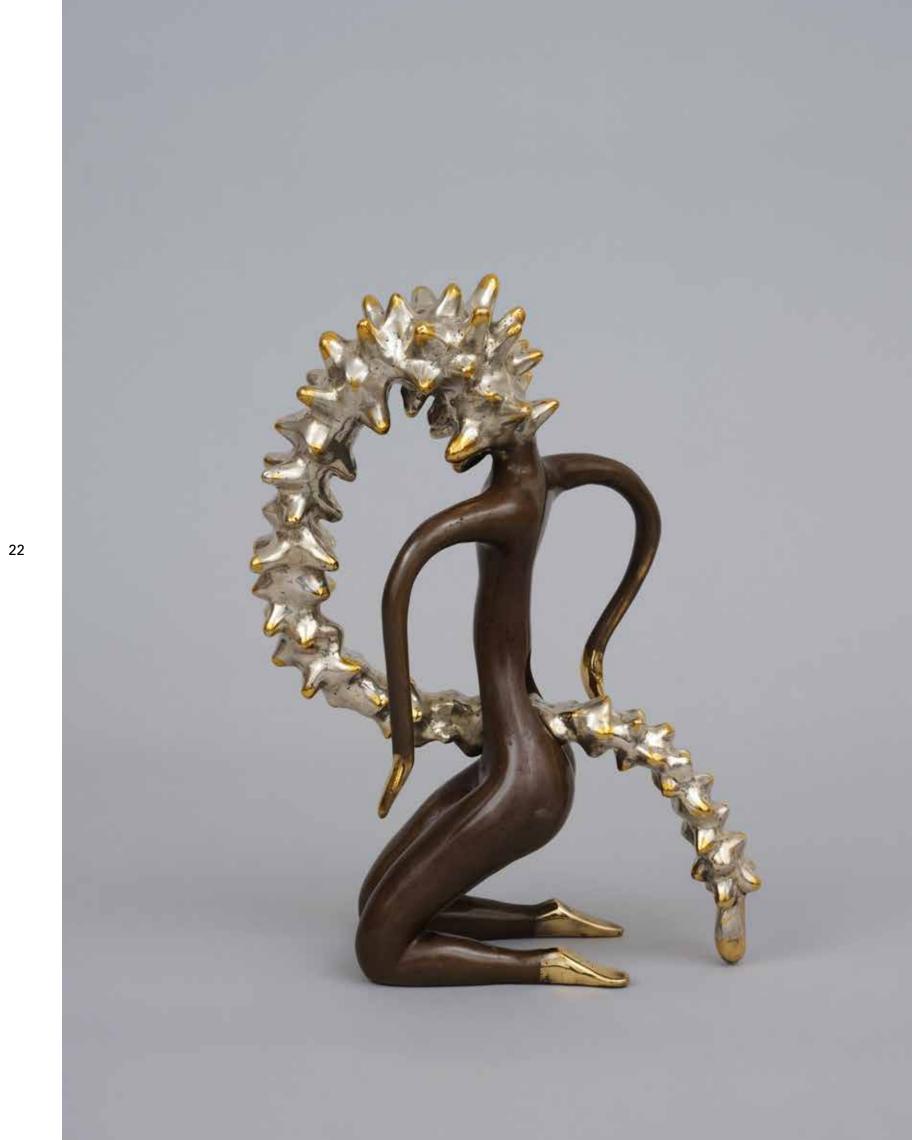
Perhaps it makes more sense to look for comparisons with Mario Dalpra's always biomorphic or zoomorphic sculptures not in (contemporary) art but in nature. Take, for example, the sea cucumber (Holothuroidea), a subspecies of echinoderm, whose many and varied spines (vechin-c = spiny) grow out of their skeleton and are mobile, jointed hollow structures covered with an epidermis. The spines serve several important functions: they protect the creatures from predators [...] and they are used in movement.« The colouring in their skin comes from pigment cells which »can react to light so that many species have different markings by day and by night. [...]. The colours themselves are the result of mixing different dyes, including dark melanins, red carotenoids and keratin proteins, which may be blue, green or violet.« And: »Some species, such as the Coscinasterias species, can grow additional arms by fission...«<sup>5</sup>

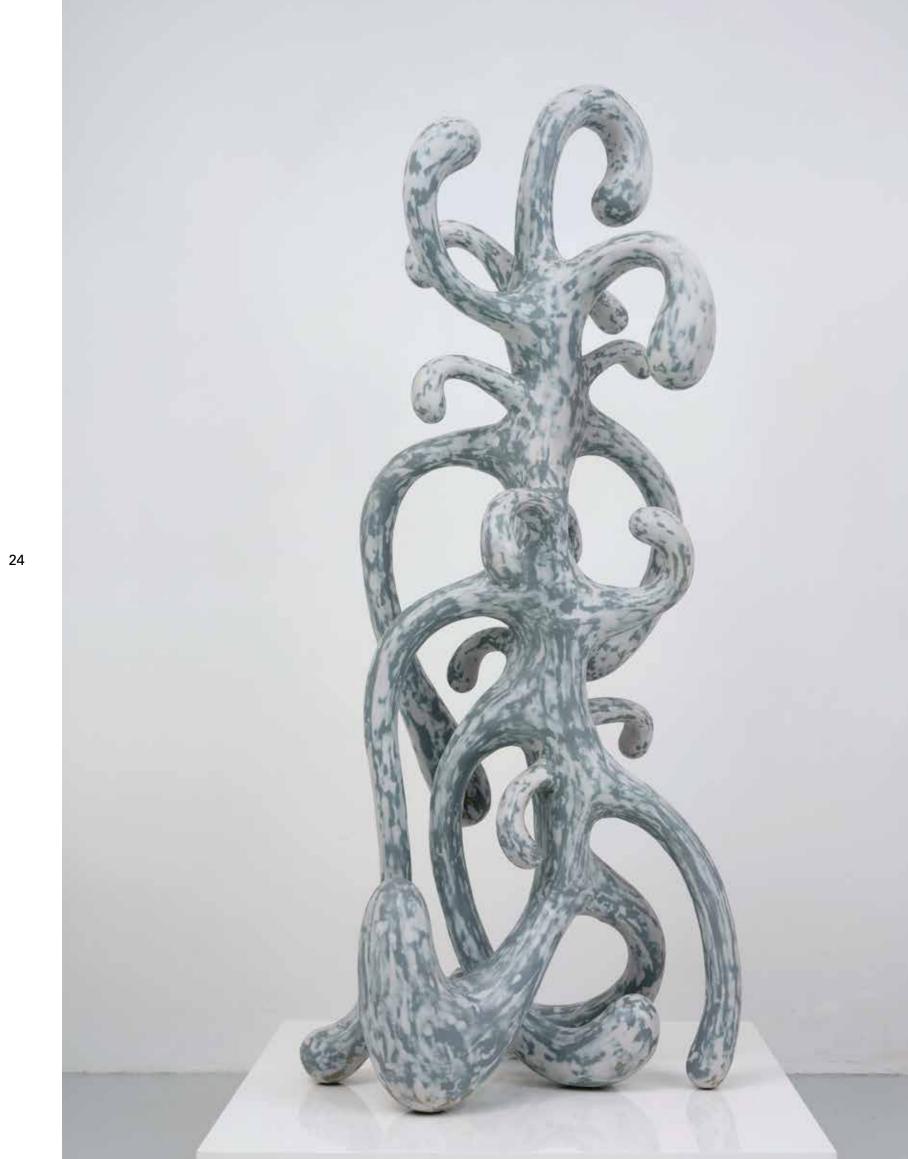
This description may put us in mind of Dalpra's all-encompassing Swinging Energy (2021) or his Self-Contained Form (2021)—or simply of The Pleasurable (2021).







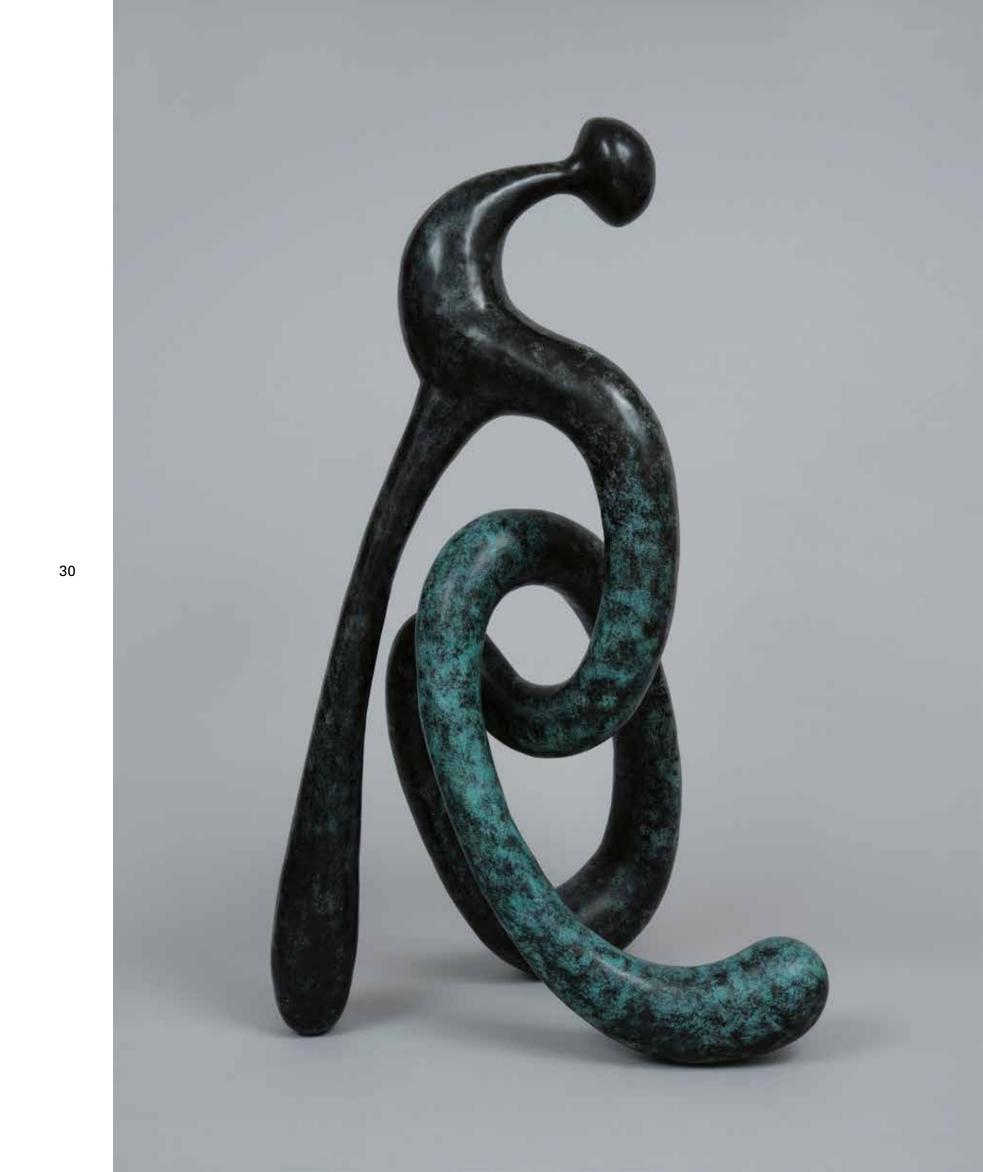
















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Mario Dalpra was born to a postal worker and a housewife in Vorarlberg, Austria, on 22 October. After a happy childhood, he completed his schooling and became an apprentice chef. Following his apprenticeship, Dalpra spent a year working in various professions before making the decision, in 1980, to move to Vienna. Ever since then, his artistry has been shaped by numerous trips around the globe, by culturally diverse encounters, friendships and a variety of avenues of learning.

Dalpra spent two years at a Jesuit monastery working as a gardener, which paid for his food and lodging. During this period, he enrolled at the adult education institution Maturaschule Dr. Roland and applied to the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, where he was admitted to Arnulf Rainer's master class in 1983. This heralded the start of a very exciting and industrious time. Rainer nurtured him by affording him plenty of freedom. Initially, Dalpra devoted himself to drawing and painting. He also studied improvisation, singing and art history, and played the piano and guitar. His works were displayed in an exhibition for the very first time at the Jesuit monastery.

Dalpra became a seeker of new impressions, other cultures and different experiences. He spent four months at Emerson College, an anthroposophical educational institution in Sussex, UK, and travelled throughout southern England.

Dalpra embarked on a life of travel. Over the next 19 years, however, he would repeatedly spend his summers in Italy at the Fattoria il Poggio in a manor house belonging to the Pirelli family, where a spacious studio was placed at his disposal. Many of his drawings were created in this wonderful place. In the same year, the Albertina Museum in Vienna acquired four of his pieces.

1983

1989

Dalpra travelled to Spain and North Africa. He stayed in Morocco for several months and then visited France, where he spent three months at the Sorbonne in Paris. He travelled all over France for several weeks. Architectural and cultural impressions became imprinted on his consciousness and would later find their creative expression particularly in his sculptural works. The Louvre became a daily destination.

An invitation from Marcel Marceau, the French mime artist, took him to the south of France for several months, where he presented his works in an exhibition at the Festival de Cahors. Here, at this festival of music, art and theatre, he also displayed his talent for making new friends and finding new forms of expression through creative collaboration with other artists.

He spent a few months in Berlin and travelled around Europe. He would remain an eternal traveller, a cosmopolitan repeatedly pitching his tent in other countries, in other places. The unknown moves and inspires him. He finds freedom and inner peace in the constant change of location – this is not a paradox for him. There followed an exhibition at the Galerie Eva Poll in Berlin.

Dalpra travelled to Australia. He remained in Sydney for several months and travelled all over the country. It became one of his most successful creative periods. In collaboration with the Sherman Gallery, exhibitions in Japan, Asia and the USA followed. Vogue Australia did a feature on him as a new exceptional talent.

Over the next four years, Dalpra performed several concerts for two pianos with his composer friend Gerald Futscher in Sydney, Seattle, Tokyo and Vienna. Some of the experimental music performances were given in various locations with a 25-piece string orchestra: in Sydney at the Sherman Gallery, in Tokyo at Club »The Blue«, and in Seattle at the Seattle Center. This resulted in two music CDs.

1993/94 On his travels through New Zealand, Dalpra's attention was drawn to Maori tattoos, which he would later interpret on his sculptures.

Australia became Dalpra's second home, and yet, following successful exhibitions in the USA and Asia, the artist decided to leave the Sherman Gallery and to return to Vienna. The following year, he was invited by the Greenaway Art Gallery in Adelaide, Australia, to put on an exhibition.

Dalpra travelled to Indonesia and Australia on trips lasting several months. An invitation to Brazil then resulted in several months in Rio de Janeiro as part of an artist-in-residence programme. There he met the American sculptor Richard Serra. Dalpra's installation »The Mindbox« was presented at the Centro Hélio Oiticica, where Richard Serra also had a solo exhibition. In the years that followed, he would return to Brazil again.

Dalpra began to work on his first wooden sculptures in Indonesia and rented a workshop in Mass. In the ensuing years, an exciting new phase of his work began, which was also influenced by his close friendship with Iketud Benkur. To this day, Dalpra still works with him on sculptures, initially cast bird figures and later surrealistic, modern, vivid creatures »from outer space« made of bronze and aluminium. He tirelessly applies himself to three-dimensionality, and since this time he has experimented with materials, shapes, colours and coatings.

His stays in Ubud were interspersed with trips to Italy spanning several months at a time and a trip to India in autumn.

1999

Dalpra moved into a small studio in Anjuna, a village in Goa, where he created his first large-format paintings and wooden figures. The following year he married Zenita Luis. With the construction of his house and studio in 2004 and the birth of his daughter Saira in 2005, a new and more settled period of his life began. His home became a popular place of residence and meeting point for numerous friends and artists, among them Jakob Gasteiger, Erwin Wurm, Richard Kaplenig, Eva Wagner, Klaus Spies and Max Böhme. Over the next 10 years, Dalpra would spend every winter in India.

The Lentos Museum in Linz acquired some of his paintings.

Dalpra worked with bronze for the first time. His wooden figures period came to an end.

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- 2007–09 Dalpra spent several months in Asia and India, where he met and befriended the graffiti artist Banksy on Anjuna beach. Dalpra explored new ways of working the surface of his sculptures.
- He created his first high-gloss sculptures. His works were varnished multiple times after casting. This was the start of a decisive transition.
- 2011–12 His travels took him to Thailand, Indonesia and then Australia, where he opened his exhibition with »bag sculptures« and paintings at the Greenaway Art Gallery. In June, following a lengthy break from exhibiting in Europe, Dalpra presented his works at the Galerie Wild in Zurich. He created new bronze sculptures in his Indonesian studio. The Museum Angerlehner acquired three large sculptures and paintings for its collection.
- Dalpra developed his first relief works, cast in bronze.
- 2014–15 Numerous exhibitions at art fairs and presentations in prestigious galleries occurred during this creative period, including at the Albemarle Gallery in London, the Galerie Eva Wild, the Arthouse Gallery, the Galerie Šikoronja and the Galerie Gans. His sculptures were also displayed at Art Miami Beach and in the Artpark Villa Bulfon at the Galerie Kandlhofer.
- 2016–19 Dalpra was commissioned to produce sculptures for renowned companies, including the international pharmaceutical company Croma and the world's largest luxury cruise ship »Harmony of the Seas«. The Liaunig Museum acquired two sculptures for its collection, and the Cselley Mühle in Oslip in Burgenland displayed his works. This was followed by presentations at the Galerie Hametner in Stoob, Austria, the Galerie Barbara Paul-Zittlau in Ravensburg, Germany, the Villa Falkenhorst in Vorarlberg, Austria, the Jedlitschka Gallery in Zurich, Switzerland, and the Galerie Artecont in Vienna, Austria.
- 2020–22 The coronavirus pandemic left its mark. For Dalpra, it became a period both of retreat, into inner spaces, and of awakening, in the sense of creating new forms. He created the »Overloaded Minds« sculptures, an expression of social change, which is testimony to upheaval, decline and new beginnings, to overload and finding one's way back, possibly to old values.

The figures are pulled down by their oversized and seemingly heavy heads, without really losing their balance. They symbolise the level of overload felt globally by many people. The forms of the sculptures build tension, which is dissolved into harmony by bright colours as visual stimuli. There is hope for the future, the artist seems to want to communicate to the viewer, albeit always refusing to give any answers and allowing the viewer the freedom of interpretation. His works celebrate the variety of form, diversity in every respect, especially that of culture; they are intended to show us the »ease of creation«. The Odunpazari Modern Museum (OMM) in Turkey acquired a sculpture at the Volta Art Fair in Basel, During these two years, numerous other exhibitions followed in Austria, Germany and Switzerland. His journey is far from over.

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p. 155 The Big Vulva Bronze, lacquered 43 x 28 x 18 cm Unique 2022

p. 157 Abstract Maori Bronze, lacquered, hand-painted

40 x 42 x 35 cm Unique 2021

p. 160 (top) The Searching Figure Bronze, patinated 52 x 45 x 30 cm Unique 2021

p. 160 (bottom) Blue Spirit

Bronze and chrome, lacquered 18 x 35 x 15 cm Unique

2019

p. 161 The Swinging Bronze and chrome, lacquered

110 x 50 x 45 cm Unique 2021

p. 163 The Overloaded Aluminium, lacquered and polished 40 x 40 x 15 cm Unique 2019

p. 165 Fleeing Energies Bronze, lacquered 45 x 35 x 25 cm Unique 2022

p. 167 The Harmonizing Movement Bronze, polished 70 x 45 x 30 cm Unique 2020



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Book coordinator and editor Lina Albrikiene

Text Lina Albrikiene Lucas Gehrmann

Art direction and graphic design Anna Liska with Lucia Elena Průša

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