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INSIDE BURGER COLLECTION

# WANDERLUST

Realities Beyond the Visible

By Laura Giudici

Laura Giudici explores some of Mirko Baselgia's most evocative works, which take inspiration from the complex relations between humans and nature.

Swiss artist Mirko Baselgia is a perpetual explorer. Whether in his Alpine home-base of Switzerland or in foreign lands, the artist's keen observations into the dynamics and structures that shape our existence allow him to present a compelling perspective on the essential interdependence between human beings and the natural world. These ideas materialize in *Antupada – The Bee Dreams Up the Flower and the Flower Dreams Up the Bee* (2012), for example, a circular cameo made of beeswax, embossed with an intricate design of six bees joined together in the shape of a flower. In Rumantsch, the artist's mother tongue, "antupada" means to meet someone, either by appointment or by chance, whereas the subtitle is inspired by a thought from British botanist and writer Francis Huxley, as quoted by Chilean biologist and philosopher Francisco Varela. Here, the encounter between bee and flower symbolizes the fundamental harmony of their mutually dependent relationship within the ecosystem. This is emphasized by the cameo's shape, as the circle is a transhistorical and transcultural emblem of life and balance.

The artist is particularly fascinated by bees due to the similarity between their highly efficient, precise, hierarchical organization and that of human beings, underlining the parallels between human society and the wider natural order. Another work directly inspired by the way that bees live, work and interact is the sculpture *Midada da structura* (2012), which is an experimental reproduction of a honeycomb. The artist inserted into a beehive a wax base with an Arabic-inspired geometric pattern rather than a traditional hexagonal design to see if it would influence the bees' work. The resulting honeycomb was used as a model for an enlarged sculpture made from the wood of the Swiss stone pine using a CNC machine.

This intertwining of artificial and organic processes highlights the potential for productive interaction between human technology and nature.

Other animal architectures have inspired Baselgia. Looking like the branch of a tree or some kind of neural structure, *Endoderm (Marmot Burrows)* (2012–13) is a bronze reproduction of an actual burrow in the canton of Grisons that was going to be destroyed for the construction of a road near the Julierpass. Collaborating with more than 60 specialists, Baselgia was able to create a concrete model of the underground tunnels, which was then used as a mold for the bronze cast. The sculpture recalls an earlier video filmed inside a marmot burrow, titled *Alice I* (2009). This pair of works not only represents the artist's long-standing interest in animal architecture, but also expresses a desire to uncover the mysteries that lie just beneath our feet.

Continuing our subterranean journey, *Purscheida* (2018), a series of black, life-size, sculptural pomegranates, references the Greek goddess Persephone, the Queen of the Underworld. In the myth, Persephone is condemned to spend winters in the Underworld after being tricked by Hades into eating six pomegranate seeds, returning to the land of the living every spring. While the seeds of cracked-open pomegranates symbolize temptation in the Greek myth, Baselgia's sculpted ones are still intact, leaving Persephone with the possibility of changing her destiny. The artist crafted his pomegranate sculptures out of volcanic rock—from the last eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 1944—due to the material's underground origins as liquid magma from the bowels of the earth. As with *Endoderm* and other works, *Purscheida* reworks a natural structure in an unexpected material, giving it new aesthetic value and meaning.



(Opening page)  
Installation view of **MIRKO BASELZIA's** *Endozochorie-Project*, 2018–, plants, water, table, stone wool substrate, pipes, sodium-vapor lamp, submersible pump, water tanks, tubes and PH-computer, at "Pardis (Curzoin)," Bellelay Abbey, Saicourt, 2018. Copyright Stefan Altenburger. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing/Lucerne.

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**MIRKO BASELZIA**, *Antupada – The Bee Dreams Up the Flower and the Flower Dreams Up the Bee*, 2012, beeswax, diameter 55 x 3.3 cm. Copyright Stefan Altenburger. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing/Lucerne.

(Opposite page, top)  
**MIRKO BASELZIA**, *Midada da Structura*, 2012, stone pine wood, 110 x 178 x 11 cm. Copyright Stefan Altenburger. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing/Lucerne.

(Opposite page, bottom, left)  
Installation view of **MIRKO BASELZIA's** *Endoderm (Marmot Burrows)*, 2012–13, bronze, 110 x 880 x 330 cm, at "Primavera," Bündner Kunstmuseum, Chur, 2013. Copyright Stefan Altenburger. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing/Lucerne.

(Opposite page, bottom, right)  
**MIRKO BASELZIA**, *Purscheida* (series of 6), 2018, volcano stone from the Mount Vesuvius eruption of 1944, diameter 11 x 11 cm. Copyright César Balmer. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing/Lucerne.





Material and structural transformations are at the heart of many of Baselgia's works, including *Autolyse – Coprinus Comatus* (2018), a series of four drawings depicting *coprinus comatus*, a common fungus also known as “shaggy mane” or “inky cap” because of its unusual method of distributing spores, which involves digesting its own cap in a biological process called autolysis that produces a black liquid. Here, self-destruction acquires an unexpected positive meaning by allowing the growth of the next generation. Intrigued by this peculiar phenomenon, Baselgia went foraging for these fungi in the woods and followed an old recipe to extract their ink, which he then used in his drawings of the mushrooms, depicted in their natural environment to highlight the strong connection that these organisms have with their habitat.

Strange alchemy was also central to the exhibition “Kunst in der Krypta | No 5 – Transmutaziun” in the crypt of the Grossmünster church in Zürich. During a three-month residency at Galerie Urs Meile in Beijing, Baselgia came up with the idea of using thin porcelain sheets to cover the crypt's windows. He had long been fascinated by the transformation of petuntse, a gray-green stone, into refined, immaculate porcelain, and decided to use both the raw material and the final product for the exhibition. Filtered through the translucent porcelain sheets covering the windows, the natural light streaming into the crypt cast a milky sheen around the space, creating a calm, meditative atmosphere. An arrangement of raw petuntse blocks filled the elevated part of the crypt, based on the design of the Zen garden at the sub-temple Daisen-in in Kyoto, marking the rhythm of the space as viewers navigated the stone maze. The harmonious installation adapted perfectly to the sacredness of the venue, which Baselgia re-envisioned by introducing foreign elements that cast a new light on the Grossmünster's artistic and architectural heritage.

(Opposite page)  
**MIRKO BASELGIA**, *Autolyse – Coprinus Comatus*, 2018, pencil and ink out of the *Coprinus Comatus* on handmade paper from Papiermühle Basel, 77 x 55 cm. Copyright Cäsar Balmer. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing/Lucerne.

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 Installation view of **MIRKO BASELGIA**'s *Transmutaziun*, 2017, porcelain and petuntse, dimensions variable, at “Kunst in der Krypta | No 5 – Transmutaziun,” Grossmünster, Zurich, 2017–18. Copyright Stefan Altenburger. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing/Lucerne.

(Last page)  
 Installation of **MIRKO BASELGIA**'s *Restructuraziun*, 2014, pine wood sawdust, pine needles, pine bark, 600 x 900 cm, at “The pattern which connects,” Kunstmuseum Olten, 2014–15. Copyright Stefan Altenburger. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Urs Meile, Beijing/Lucerne.



Such experimentations with space through immersive installations recur in Baselgia's practice. *Restructuraziun* (2014), an installation specifically conceived for his solo exhibition at the Kunstmuseum Olten in 2014, involved covering the floor with pinewood sawdust, pine needles and bark in a geometric, optical pattern of green, brown and sand-colored diamonds. After the artist and his assistants' meditative act of laying out the pattern—not unlike the Buddhist sand mandala ceremony—visitors were invited to walk on the installation, putting the work in a state of constant evolution. This participative experience involved not just the eyes, but also the senses of touch, smell and hearing. With the intense pine scent pervading the space and the noise of debris moving underfoot, one had the feeling of walking through a sweet-smelling forest.

Similarly realizing a botanical realm in an indoor space was *Endozoochorie-Project* (2018), shown at Baselgia's solo exhibition "Pardis (Curzoin)" (2018) at the Bellelay Abbey. The show addressed the idea of a terrestrial paradise, and the small-scale, artificial gardens of *Endozoochorie-Project* were Baselgia's futuristic interpretation of the Garden of Eden. In this work, plants housed in blocks of stone wool were positioned under lamps that were on day and night. Under optimum conditions set by a digitally regulated system, what began as neat, little plants gradually grew into a messy vegetal profusion by the end of the exhibition period. Notably, the seeds used in the installation had passed through the artist's digestive system. By playing a fertilizing role and thus giving back to nature, the artist reverses the harmful dynamic of man exploiting land and wreaking havoc on the ecosystem, as seen in mechanized mass agriculture. From these installations emerges the idea of harmonious coexistence between humans and the natural world, of a reality where the baser instincts of human are

subjected to the control of reason and will, as in the biblical Garden of Eden, before the fall of Adam and Eve.

The ideas of territory, natural resources, impermanence, and the cycles of life, death and rebirth are recurrent in Baselgia's practice. Furthermore, the sensory experience of art plays a central role across his oeuvre, with his subtle experiments with materiality having tangible impacts on one's perception of the surrounding space. Mining the infinite potential of a variety of mediums and materials with the help of craftspeople and other professionals, the artist is able to realize even the most demanding and eccentric ideas and designs. As an alchemist manipulating the materials and structures of the external world, Baselgia simultaneously undergoes an inner, personal transformation that allows him to get closer to his true self, unalienated from nature, and to shape the way that he interacts with his surroundings. His individual perspectives reveal, in an unexpected light, the essential interdependence between the natural environment and ourselves, and unlock new ways to reflect on and explore our own inner worlds.

**Mirko Baselgia** was born in Lantsch/Lenz, Switzerland, in 1982. He received his Master of Fine Arts from the Zürich University of the Arts in 2010 after completing an architecture apprenticeship. Baselgia has had solo exhibitions at prominent Swiss institutions, including the Bellelay Abbey (2018); the Kunstmuseum Olten (2014–15); and the Bündner Kunstmuseum Chur (2013). He received the Manor Art Prize Chur in 2013, and the Kiefer Hablitzel Grant in 2012. The artist is represented by Galerie Urs Meile (Lucerne/Beijing) and Galerie Heinzer Reszler (Lausanne). He is currently based in the Swiss mountains.

**Laura Giudici** was born in Bellinzona, Switzerland, in 1984. She holds Master's and doctorate degrees in art history from the University of Fribourg, Switzerland, where she also taught history of photography. She is an independent curator and a regular contributor to *Kunstbulletin*. She lives and works in Geneva.

