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Discovery

Artist Christoph Weber | Interview

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Austrian artist Christoph Weber manipulates concrete. His sculptures often appear like frozen moments and movements of the unyielding material. His studio is located in the heart of Vienna's Favoriten district, a mixed area with many residential buildings. His workshop is on the first floor of a former foam factory, which is currently used as an office building.



vcMag: When and how did you start working with concrete?

Christoph Weber: Ten years ago I made one work that was quite media-critical. I saw a picture of a house in Palestine, which was destroyed during a suicide attack. The image showed this rubble of concrete, because the victims couldn't be shown. I thought this was a kind of symbol for the biggest impact of violence. So I made one chunk of concrete, and then I repeated it – in a way like the photographic negative-positive-procedure. Thus I got four of the same broken edges, which is also this cut-and-paste Photoshop absurdity. That was my first concrete sculpture. I didn't cast it myself, though, a friend of mine did, I made the mold and produced just hollow props, grey plastic actually. Five years later I made a show about Israel and the war. It was interesting for me to make a show about this material, the material of concrete, in the context of the conflict, and dedicate the whole show to this. After that I thought: "I've determined the material, mainly in a political way, for myself, for anybody else – now I am free to do anything I want with it – even if it's not political". It became satisfying enough to do a simple work. Before that, everything had to be really complicated and complex.



Do you always work alone?

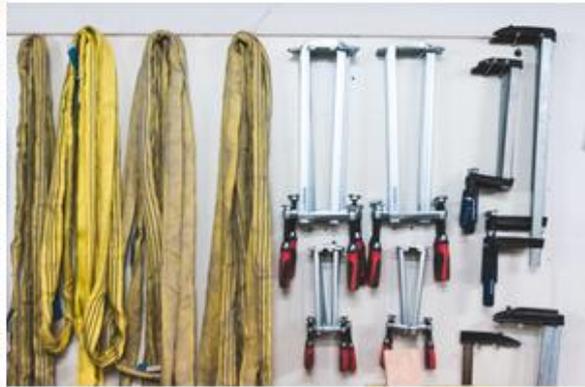
For two years I've been working with an assistant. Lifting and mixing got too heavy. Since I'm manipulating the fresh concrete right away after casting, I need a second person. One person needs to concentrate what's going on in the cast, and the other person needs to clean, otherwise the machine gets stuck. And then I also figured I can't do more than one work with one mix. Everything has to happen so fast. When you mix concrete, you always make a little bit too much. And people have asked me, why don't you use the leftovers to make something smaller, you could have molds and make furniture, or whatever. But that's not possible. Whenever I tried it, the big work failed. (Laughs)

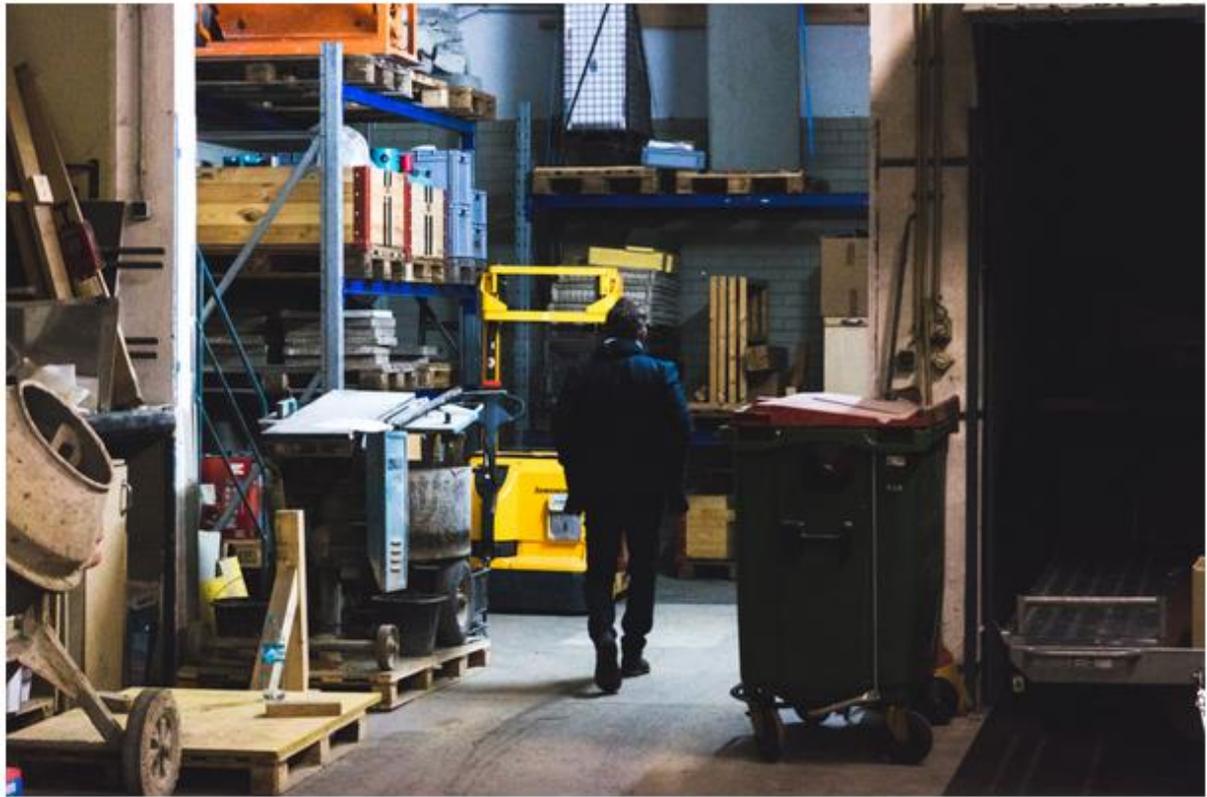
Maybe it's karma! In Russia, there is a saying: you cannot catch two rabbits at once...

I really have to focus on what's going on. Every time it's quite stressful two or three hours. But it's fun as well.

It also requires a lot of crisis management, making quick decisions. How do you deal with that?

It's fun! It's a great challenge. And since I have been forced to do it, my workshop is in order, because you have to find things very quickly. Weird stuff is lying around, but in a very orderly way. Wooden pieces that look like trash, placed neatly in a shelf. You need them all the time, to screw something, if something is moving, or nearly falling down, you need different lengths of wood.





I see more and more people working with their hands, quitting banks and getting crafty, doing furniture and so on. Ten years ago it was not cool do to crafts.

Yeah, it was still cool to be a nerd (laughs).

Do you see more interest of young people in your work?

I don't know about that. I have not been teaching, so I don't have that much contact with young people. But the ones I know, like works like these. The simple focus of craftsmanship. I always thought painting should be a bit like that. With other media you have to think.

Not when you paint?

Maybe that's bullshit (laughs). But if it's very abstract, or if it's as simple as my casts – you think before you start and predetermine what you do. Unless something fails.

Were there a lot of works that failed? And what happens to them?

Yes, quite a lot. They go to the trash. The owner of this building gets some of the pieces I would never sell, and puts them in his garden.

So he has a collection of your failed works?

Like five or six, smaller ones. He sees something and is... like... "can I use it as a table?" But that's OK, for me it is just trash.

Is it important for you to know a collector who is buying your work? Do you know all the collectors who own your works?

No. Mostly I don't know them. It would be interesting, but it's not important. And if I happen to get to know a person, it's a nice surprise. Most of the collectors also don't want to know the artists...

Why?

Because then all the mystery is gone! Or the artist is so crazy that it might be fun. But most of the artists I know and like are not these super-fun-crazy people. It may be nicer to get to know your collectors later, when they already got acquainted with your work. It can be a fantastic talk, they can tell you how much they love your work (laughs), show you cellphone pictures of where they put it: This “Louise Lawler – moment” to find the context of your piece.

But often your work gets sold and ends up in a storage. Is that fine with you?

Depends on the storage! (Laughs) If it's dry it's fine. I could build the crates myself. I think most people who buy my stuff, install the piece actually. I'm not that blue chip (laughs) – my work doesn't have to be put in some duty free cargo storage in Hong Kong.



Tell me more about the area your studio is in? And the building?

The building is fantastic! The material it was built for is the opposite of concrete. It used to be a factory, where they cut foam, for mattresses and stuff. I think it was the only place in Vienna where you could buy this. It was built in the 60s. They have a huge freight elevator here, but it only carries 500 kg, because they only used it for foam. So I can't really use it.

The area is really good for my shopping; with hardware stores, sand and cement are just around the corner. And it's still very central. It's a diverse neighborhood, like everywhere in the 10th district. There weren't any restaurants here, but a fantastic Turkish restaurant opened recently. They do everything themselves, the meat, the sauces, the bread... But now they are closed for reconstruction, so I cook myself.

What are special places for you in Vienna, personally?

Recently I've re-discovered the Kleines Café. My grandmother used to live around the corner, so I am very connected to this area. I used to pass by two, three times a week when I was a kid. I always loved the Franziskanerplatz, with the dots on this building.

Do you have any secret places?

Hmm, yes, but they are too secret. It also changes for me every couple of years. But really special places are old factories, old shops, that are there forever and nobody knows about them. I like to discover things like that, where you enter to buy some weird stuff, and you would not expect it to still exist. Like this factory that makes hinges, in the 6th district, in Sandwirtgasse.

What is your quiet place in Vienna?

On the weekend, it's my girlfriend's studio in the Prater, in the old Bildhauereigebäude des Bundes. The street is closed on Saturday and Sunday. It's very quiet. You just hear horses, since it's near the racing tracks. It's going to be torn down though. But these days, for me there's no real quiet place any more as I have a little kid. (Laughs) Matilda is two now.

When you want to get out of Vienna, where would you go? Any weekend trips around Vienna?

I never do that! I think the weekends are really nice in Vienna. It's easier to stay and go to the park, or go to the Stadionbad. We use Judith's studio as a bathing hut.



Thank you Christoph for showing around your studio. Visit the Galerie Nächst St. Stephan Rosemarie Schwarzwälder for more info about Weber's work.