

# TAMARA KVESITADZE



GALERIE **KORNFELD**



TAMARA KVESITADZE

## Foreword

Encountering a new exhibition or work of art by Tamara Kvesitadze is simultaneously thought-provoking and memorable; no doubt because all her works are produced from the promptings of an inner craving and not just the result of mere ambition or desire to be an artist. Inevitably this gives rise to great expectations for all her work – both current and future.

Tamara Kvesitadze works in a variety of forms and media, including painting, drawing and sculpture. She blends an astonishing breadth of techniques and creates multiple points of entry for the viewer into her surreal yet elegant world.

Kvesitadze has an unusual inner power and energy which is reflected in a profound sense of place and national identity. She draws upon and protects her Georgian cultural heritage: a rich and vast treasure which she mines naturally and profoundly. It is impossible to have a complete view of her work without deference to her use of Georgian folk culture which ranges from polyphonic music and goldsmithing to literature and architecture.

Richly textured paintings and sculptures suggest fantastical qualities in their manipulated materiality. Combining surprise and discovery, all her sculptures,



kinetic or static, follow a clear path which the artist may not have thought of during the process of creation, but which naturally feeds her plastic vocabulary. Her sculptures in particular have a reservoir of energy that encourages the viewer's imagination to soar into open space while still engaging in a close relationship within their physical construction.

Tamara Kvesitadze gives endless imaginative opportunities to all her viewers, never repeating herself and producing a new vision with each new work. All of her pieces have a considered depth and uniqueness. The principal and most visible quality of Kvesitadze, however, is that her artistic vision is constantly expanding and ascending. As a strong-willed protagonist, she has stepped up to deliver her message to the world and she will not, cannot stop until she brings her message to its intended audience. She is a born artist-thinker, and cannot be otherwise. Her credentials as an artist of note were assured through her participation in the Venice Biennale, both in 2007 and in 2011.

Mamuka Bliadze  
Galerie Kornfeld



**Sculpture: ‘Me and You’**

Maybe the pivotal center, the keystone of this exhibition of the recent works of Tamara Kvesitadze in the Galerie Kornfeld in Berlin, is not one of the more visually striking pieces that immediately catch the eye of the visitor entering the gallery, but it is a sculpture that one discovers from the street in the window display of the gallery. One sees first a man bending over like a malicious goblin, carrying a canvas on which his improbable shadow is represented: improbable because no light could draw such an unrealistic silhouette. It’s a mythical shadow, one that stems from the historical birth of painting, from the profile of the lover of Dibutades’ daughter, one that makes Tamara Kvesitadze join the secret guild of the shadow lovers, the sciophilous artists, from Masaccio and his ‘Saint Peter Healing the Sick’ in the Brancacci Chapel to Pablo Picasso with ‘L’Ombre’ or Christian Boltanski and his Shadow Theatre. Maybe the shadow of this man is simply a reflection of his inner self, of what some would call his soul. He holds the canvas between his legs, embracing it in a tender and frightened grip, almost kissing it in a Narcissus-like fascination.

Then one must view the sculpture from the back, discovering first the imprint of a hand on the man’s breast, a female hand in a red glove, bursting out from the other side of the canvas: the canvas has indeed a back side, depicting a red-haired woman, nude, curling up, eyes closed as if in ecstasy, lips slightly parted, as if in a rapture. Maybe the man is stealing the painting, abducting the woman, his fingers grabbing ferociously at her bottom. It seems though that they are touching each other, embracing, even ready to make love. She is at the same time object and subject, body and representation. It’s a sculpture and a painting, the shadow and the flesh, the self and the other.

This work celebrates the return of Tamara Kvesitadze to painting, not that she had stopped using the brush, but she had not shown any painting for a long time, concentrating on her elaborate sculptures during these last years. But more importantly this piece,

titled ‘Me and You’ is very emblematic, revealing her duality, her ambivalence: there are always two sides in her work, which can never be easily simplified, categorized. She comes from a country, Georgia, that is neither European nor Asian, sitting between two worlds, a country hesitating between its millenary tradition and its aspiration for post-Soviet modernity. And she lives between Georgia and Europe, London, Paris, Rome, drawing her inspiration from all these universes, developing a complex, unique, nomadic identity of her own.

**Sculpture: ‘Red’**

The female body has always been very present in her work, but it has rarely been a peaceful representation of quiet women; below the surface there is almost always a form of violence, of destruction. In many of her previous sculptures, the female body is cut, destroyed, torn apart, penetrated, its intimacy is destroyed, raped. ‘Red’ is a tragic sculpture impossible to discard, impossible to forget. Its forms are extremely simple, a circle and a triangle, but they compose a tragic story: a woman transpiercing herself with her sharpened mermaid tail cutting through her lap, tearing apart her womb, opening her belly in a vertical cut which necessarily echoes her sexual slit a few inches below. She is covered with blood from head to toe, the blood of her lost virginity, the blood of her childless parturition, the blood of her self-inflicted death, flowing all over the surface of the statue; she is transpiring blood (“sweat like drops of blood”), oozing blood. One cannot imagine her getting pleasure from this penetration in this fantastic nightmare, this Sadean dream, but her face shows no suffering, just an absence, a void, like a zombie or a death camp survivor. And no man can dare to approach her, hold her, embrace her, even to comfort her, at the risk of joining her in death, impaling himself on her, in a deadly ‘petite mort’.

**Painting: ‘Symposium’**

While ‘Red’ is an extreme piece in Tamara Kvesitadze’s work, many of her pieces have been marked with the same sort of ambivalence between softness and violence, between sex and death, between sen-

suality and tragedy. 'Symposium' may at first sight seem quieter than 'Red', more serene. The body of a nude giant woman lying on a table like a recumbent effigy is worshipped by eight men sitting at the table. It may recall 'Das Frühlingsfest' by Meret Oppenheim, it may echo secret sexual rituals on the edge of cannibalism. The men (whose profiles remind us of Renaissance paintings) caress her hair, her breast, her sex, her leg; they talk in pairs, and their hands are everywhere, touching, grasping, holding, arguing, gesticulating, male hands as source of threats and of pleasure. Some hold a book (is it a bible?), a goblet (is it a chalice?), a leaf (is it a holly leaf, with which caresses would also be punctures, bringing at the same time pain and pleasure?). Some keep one hand below the table, maybe for a solitary pleasure, exacerbating the desire. The giant woman lies peacefully, eyes closed, lips humid, absent, lost in her distant thoughts or in her instant pleasure at being so fondled. She is a victim and a goddess, the cruel idol and the sacrificed innocent lamb. At the top of the painting, a small man, the only one seen frontally, excluded from these tactile pleasures, satisfies himself with voyeuristic ones. Like us, spectators.

### **Sculpture: 'Reptilia'**

Tamara Kvesitadze is well known for her animated sculptures, in which complex movements and rotations give an appearance of life to her creations, through an endless and cyclical metamorphosis, with a permanent tension between the organic and the mechanical, the artificial and the living. Like the young Cnidian with Praxiteles' Aphrodite, we are all ready to succumb to this illusion of reality, mistaking the artificial body of silicon (the modern marble of today...) for real flesh, wanting desperately to believe that these sculptures are not actually moved by small motors, but by true muscles and hearts. Three such installations are exhibited here. The newest one, 'Reptilia', is a moving spine to which are attached twenty-five bodies of aluminium, with twenty-five blank and veiled faces of silicon, rotating slowly under a canopy. Their classical look and their faded half-tones are a stark contrast to the red violence of the first sculpture. This is a sculpture of fragments, pieces combined to form a whole, a monument of unity and of diversity, of permanent metamorphosis and of constant struggle against standardisation.

### **Sculpture: 'Sphere'**

To some extent, 'Sphere', whose striking installation occupies a recess of the gallery space, tells a similar story, one of changing identity and of permanent community, one of a continuous and desperate fight against uniformity; it was much celebrated when it was first shown at the 54th Venice Biennale where Tamara Kvesitadze represented Georgia in 2011. The critic Henk Slager wrote then that it showed "the dynamic reality of processes of mutation and transformation, of human beings as the 'builders of spheres' (Peter Sloterdijk) – a being aware of once having been forced to live on a globe or a sphere, i.e. worlds to be designed again and again."

### **Sculpture: 'Man and Woman'**

The third mechanical installation is perhaps her better known piece, 'Man and Woman'; a 9-meter high version of it, on the seafront at the Georgian resort of Batumi, made her instantly famous. This interpenetration of two bodies, masculine and feminine, is a never ending story of love and separation, of joy and of sadness, of pleasure and of suffering. One must go back to the Bible ("and they become one flesh"). One must go back to one's birth, to one's first love and one's first separation. Maybe it is not surprising that the Batumi sculpture was nicknamed by the local people 'Ali and Nino', the two characters of the book by the mysterious Kurban Said, the passionate, tragic and impossible love story of two Caucasian lovers, an Azeri nobleman and a Georgian princess: the union of two persons searching for their own identity, between two cultures, two languages, two religions, fighting for their love but finally defeated by the modern world (in this case the Soviet invasion of 1920). It's both a universal story and one very much anchored in Tamara's reality, in her own history and geography.

### **Painting: Water colors / Oil / Mixed techniques on wooden board**

As an echo to the tense materiality of the Reptilia figures, the paintings of the artist have also a material, organic dimension: they are adorned with bits of driftwood, with twigs and branches that she picks up in the countryside. The wooded forms, attached to the canvas, underline the painted ones. Here, they become flower stems, ligneous stalks springing from

the bulbs and crossing the horizontal slit between two assembled canvases. There, they flow like hair around the face of a somber man, cruel tribal chief or man-eating deity; the face becomes wood and the dead wood becomes a living tree, a Daphne-like metamorphosis in reverse.

**Painting: 'Branch' (Oil, mixed media on wooden frame)**

Another of these paintings with wood, the smallest one, is more explicit and more tragic: the dead branch has been engulfed in the paint itself, submerged, digested by the distended matter covering the canvas. Between a dark ground and a sun-burned sky, the branch becomes a desolated, lonely tree; a touch of paint evokes a possible hanging, one that took place long ago. No human presence here, but a melancholy that expands even into the frame of the painting. Maybe it's proper to conclude with this piece, another one half-way between painting and sculpture.

Tamara Kvesitadze's ambivalence stems from a sensuality always close to tragedy, from a tension between interior commotion and lusty hedonism. This gallery show is a strong affirmation of her complex identity, of the new strength that she now gains from painting, and of the eternal force of her sculptures. She is not an artist who can easily be reduced to a label, to a predefined identity, to a school, to a category. Feminine and feminist, joyful and tragic, realist and oneiric, materialistic and subtle, she demonstrates here the full range of her talents and of her emotions.

## **The Stage of Existence.** Thoughts on the Current Work of Tamara Kvesitadze *by Susanne Altmann*

A key to the works of Tamara Kvesitadze can be found near her hometown of Tbilisi, at the famous Svetitskhoveli Cathedral in Mtskheta. Located on the south wall of the nave is a famous fresco from the 13th Century. In the center of a large disc, Christ is enthroned as the creator of the universe, surrounded by a circle of the twelve apostles, and around them is another ring depicting the common zodiac signs. In this reading, the medieval world rotates around a spiritual center. Although the mural is naturally static, one has the impression of ceaseless motion. Various states are possible; various interpretations of what holds the world together – figuratively encoded in symbolism and stories that never stand still. The strong colors of the zodiac still shine through the patina of time and reflect the painterly spectrum of the local cultural tradition within which the Georgian artist grew up. It is her favorite fresco, says Tamara Kvesitadze, and surely she is not only referring to its darkened colors. She is also referring to the here frozen, yet ever-present moment of motion of the microcosm and the macrocosm, and certainly also to the inherent balance of the image, which suggests that the world only turns because it is held together by living beings and their spiritual projections.

This historical metaphor for existence is skillfully transported into the present by Tamara Kvesitadze; particularly impressively in her kinetic installation ‘Sphere’ (2011). Here the circle or cycle of existence is represented by human faces, which move gently, virtually breathing, becoming a whole.

Comparable to the similarly conceived figures of the apostles in the fresco at Svetitskhoveli, here the individual disappears within a hierarchal spatial and intellectual context. The animation (also in the sense of “living”) is the result of a divine “mover” – with ‘Sphere’ the impulse comes invisibly from the mechanical insides of the pulsating spherical sculpture. Through their closed eyes, the white facemasks take on something passive about them, floating at the mercy of one another, fused together in the darkness of the exhibition space. This works – like the old

church does for the zodiacal fresco – as a stage for an anthropological lesson. It is always exactly this tension between a social, cultural organism and the isolated individual that motivates the artist, and to which she wants to give shape. She also demonstrates this in her large public sculpture on the beach at Batumi, ‘Man and Woman’ (2011), where the gigantic figures of a woman and a man incessantly approach, unite with, then move away from each other again. What Tamara Kvesitadze wants to say artistically, she usually says with the human form. This has been her poetic figure of action ever since the 1990s when, still understanding herself more as a craftswoman, she created mechanical dolls. Her technical abilities, her sense of mass and her flair for the use of theatrical effects – all of these were acquired during this period. Interestingly, she shares this passion with renowned colleagues from Eastern European cultural circles: the great Czech experimental filmmaker and surreal storyteller Jan Švankmajer enjoyed international success with his marionettes and plasticine figures. The Polish conceptual artist Paweł Althamer regularly creates life-size figurines. Starting with his ‘Self-Portrait’ (1993), to ‘Weronika’ (2001), through to the serial plastic production of ‘Almech’ (2011), he makes creative use of the expressiveness of the human body – not least inspired by the figure ensembles of Tadeusz Kantor. And Andro Wekua, a world-renowned Georgian compatriot of Kvesitadze, repeatedly makes use of the narrative and dramatic potential of model human bodies in his installation settings. What all of these approaches have in common is that the anthropomorphic sculptures do not attempt to disguise their origins in the puppet workshop. Despite their occasional naturalism, these eastern positions (unlike, say, with Duane Hanson, George Segal and Paul Thek) make cultural references that are less to be found in the respective contemporary art scene, but rather in local traditions such as the puppet-theatre, folklore, literature or fairy-tale illustration.

Tamara Kvesitadze has since made strong revisions in her reference to the human form, yet her affinity for the magic of mechanical dolls skillfully appears again and again. In her most recent work ‘Reptilia’ (2013)



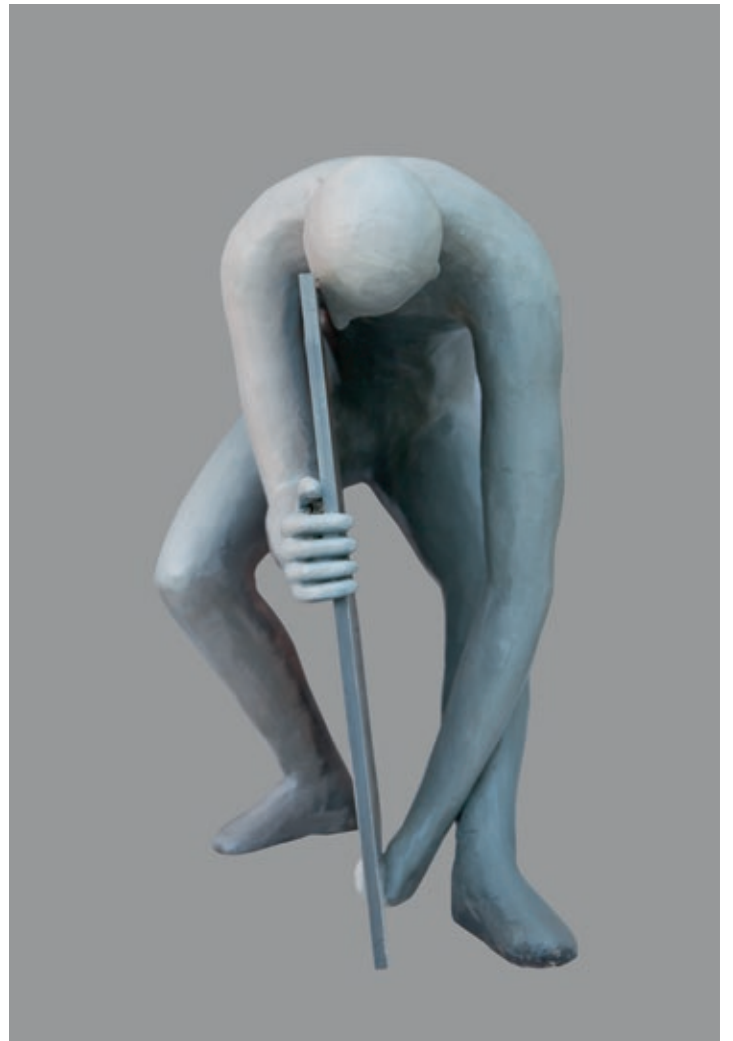
she once again focuses, similarly to 'Sphere' or 'Gori' (2013), on the metaphorical interaction of humanoid elements. Here her similarly flat figures form a kind of spine that, like in anatomical reality, is only capable of movement when each element functions properly. This collective forming of forces leaves the viewer in an ambivalent mood: on the one hand, we are intrigued by the symbolism of this portrayal of individual beings, which stylistically dates far back in human history – right back to representations from ancient Egypt. There, the functioning of society was often figuratively cemented by the harmonized activity of uniform characters (thus rather meaningless as individuals). Tamara Kvesitadze openly acknowledges such inspirations, which are also reflected in the overt two-dimensionality of the elements in 'Reptilia'. On the other hand, of course, the coiled backbone puts our modern notions of autonomy and of walking upright into question, suggesting totalitarian societal experiments. The fact that Kvesitadze allows exactly this dichotomy in interpretation is a great quality of this new sculpture. In terms of content, the painting 'Boat' (2013), with its passengers welded together; and formally, the material picture 'Ancient I' (2013) with its spinally arranged driftwood, both also take up the mood of 'Reptilia'.

Other works, such as the sculpture 'Red' (2013) or the painting 'Symposium' (2013) make their statement much more clearly, yet no less poetically. The martyr-like female figure 'Red' actually seems to be a literary reference. Much like the two protagonists of 'Man and Woman', this woman is interpreted in a prototypical, figurine-like manner. The bold and title-giving decision for the color red represents rebellion; the expressive body language speaks of the price paid for it. Is it referring to the price that the Russian poet Marina Tsvetaeva (1892–1941) once had to pay for her brilliant lyrics and her nonconformist lifestyle? Shortly before her suicide, she wrote in her diary that she was afraid of her own creative powers, afraid "of my head, this head that serves me so faithfully on paper – and in life is killing me. No one sees – or knows – that for a year (approximately) already I have been searching with my eyes for a hook, because electricity is everywhere. No more chandeliers... For a year I have been trying on death" (Moscow, circa September 1940) This "trying on" of death, and the body that hunches itself into the alleged "hook" – all

of that makes 'Red' an almost unbearable analogy of existentially conceived creativity.

This is reminiscent of the basic theme of Tamara Kvesitadze, who has read her Tsvetaeva: to portray the mental and physical ordeal between individual activity and collective functionality. In this sense, 'Red' is the universal portrait of a creative person, regardless of their sexuality. Against the background of the kind of painful statements that remain relatively unencrypted in 'Red' or 'Me and You' (2013), the series of watercolor-like pictures such as 'Flamboyant', 'Bulb I / II' or 'Ancient II/III' seems to be a kind of intake of breath. Their muted yet nonetheless exuberant color leads back to the initially described palette of the medieval as well as timeless frescoes from the Svetitskhoveli Cathedral. With their gnarled montages of found wood they also have something down-to-earth about them, as if Tamara Kvesitadze is quite literally affirming her native roots.





Me And You  
2013  
Colored fibreglass, oil on wood; unique  
103 x 104 x 60 cm | 40½ x 41 x 23¾ in



Red

2013

Fibreglass, metal, polyester, acrylic, indian ink; Ed.: 6+1AP

159 x 110 x 110 cm | 62 $\frac{2}{3}$  x 43 $\frac{1}{3}$  x 43 $\frac{1}{3}$  in









Symposium

2013

Acrylic and ink on MDF on metal

250 x 126 cm | 98½ x 49¾ in



**Sphere**

2011

Silicone, metal, fibreglass, mechanics

Ed.: 3+1AP

Ø 190 cm | Ø 74¾ in







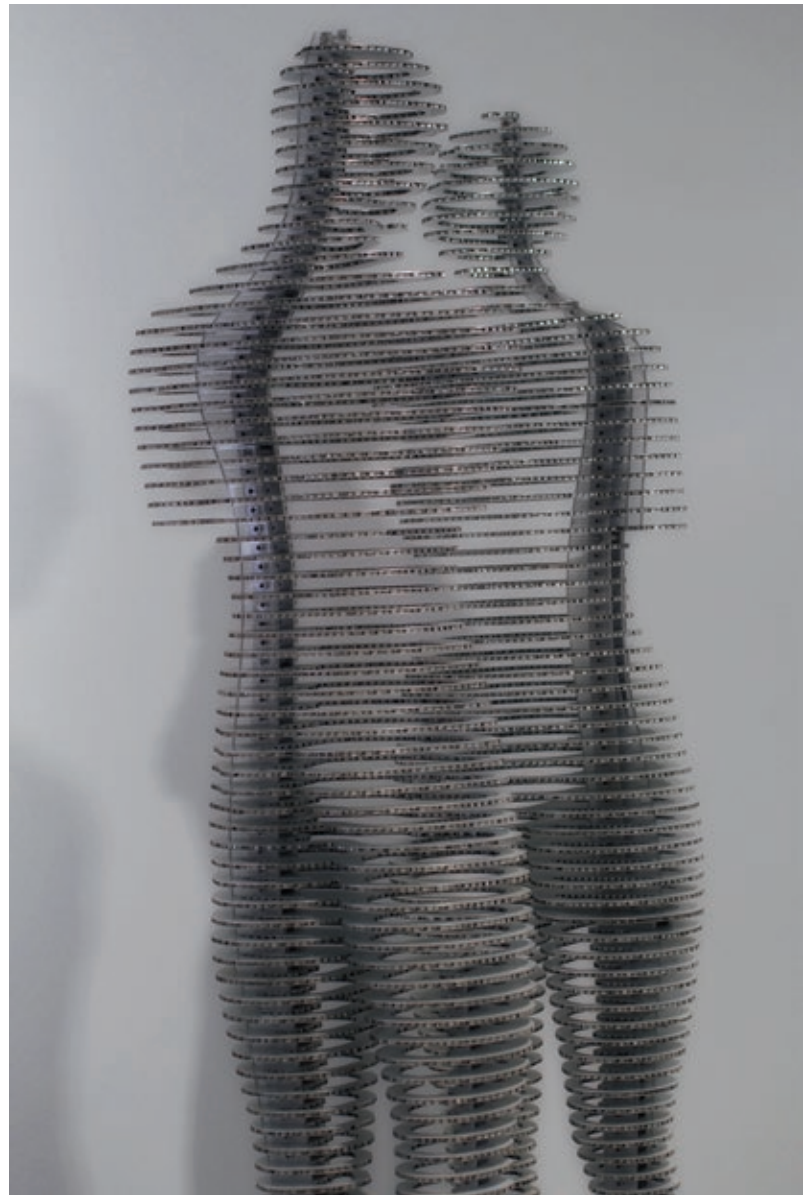
## Reptilia

2013

Stainless steel, aluminium, fibreglass, mechanics; Ed.: 3+1AP

220 x 410 x 190 cm | 86 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 161 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 74 $\frac{3}{4}$  in





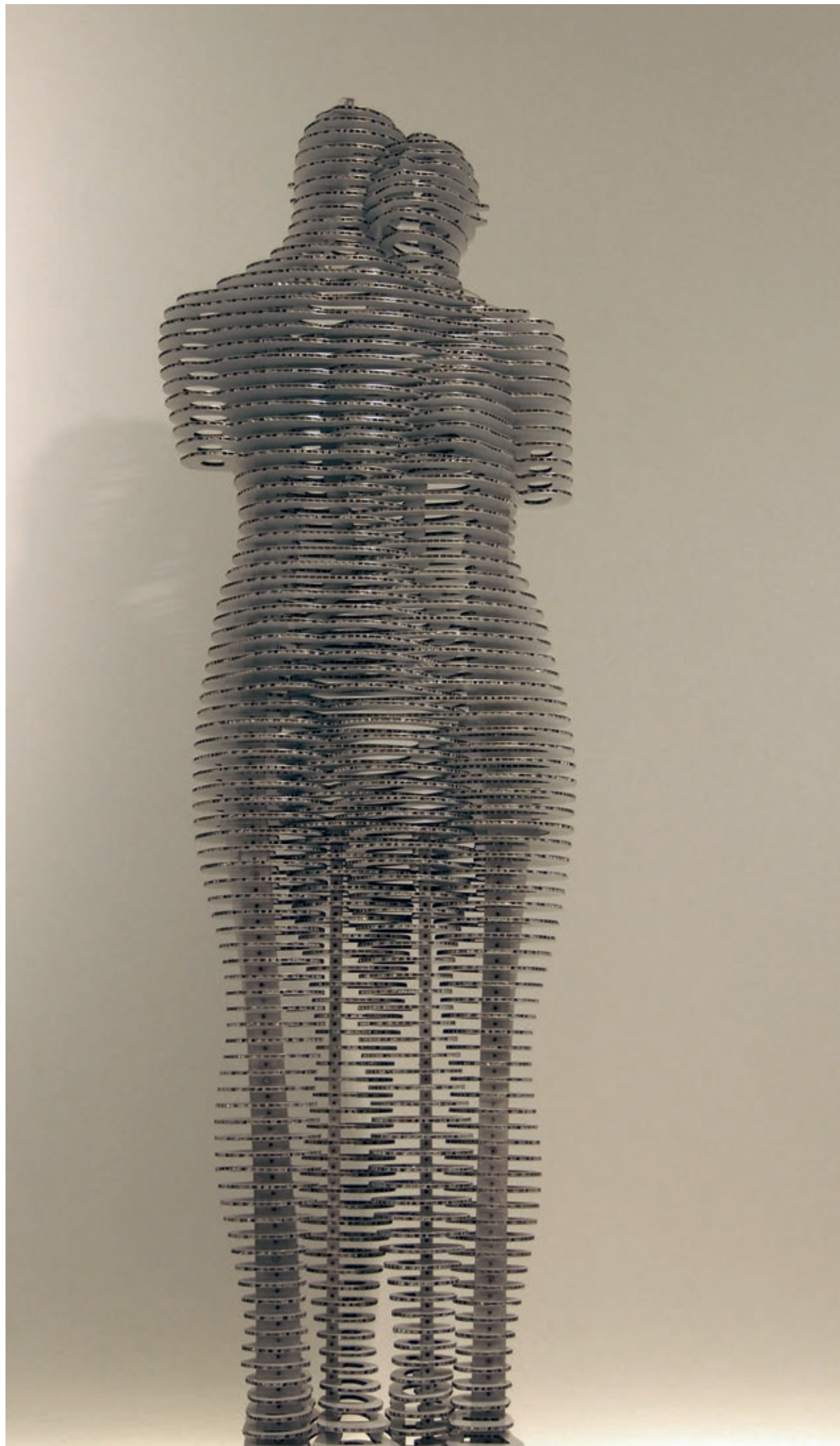
Man and Woman

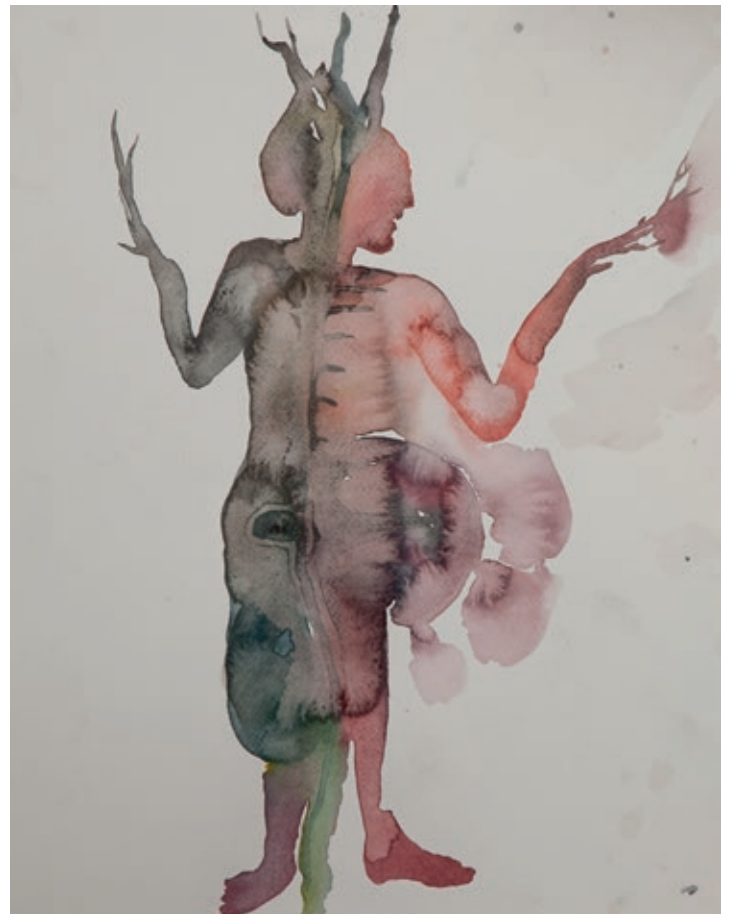
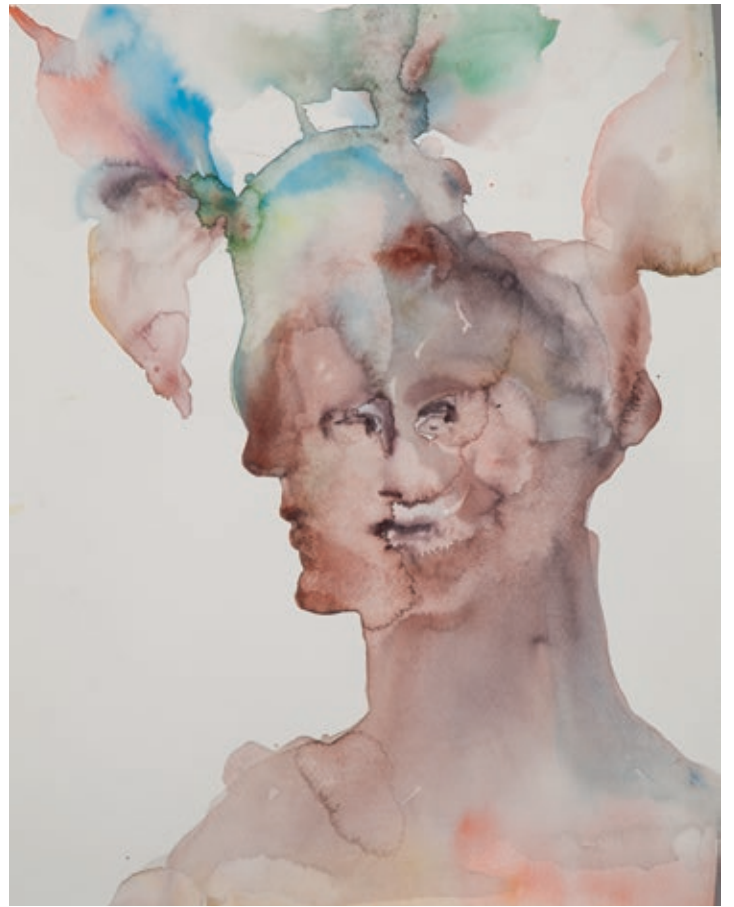
2012

Aluminium, mechanics; Ed.: 9+1AP

210 x 220 x 100 cm | 82 $\frac{2}{3}$  x 86 $\frac{2}{3}$  x 39 $\frac{1}{3}$  in











Untitled  
2013  
Water colours  
40 x 32 cm | 15¾ x 12½ in





Ancient I

2013

Acrylic, ink and drift wood on wood  
100 x 75 x 6 cm | 39½ x 29½ x 2½ in





Ancient II

2013

Acrylic, ink and drift wood on wood  
90 x 53 x 14 cm | 35½ x 20¾ x 5½ in





Ancient III

2013

Acrylic, ink and drift wood on wood

75 x 55 x 13 cm | 29½ x 21⅔ x 5 in



Boat  
2013  
Oil on wood  
153 x 99 cm | 60¼ x 39 in





**Bulb I**  
2013  
Acrylic, ink and drift wood  
on wood on metal  
163 x 80 x 7 cm  
64¼ x 31½ x 2¾ in



**Bulb II**

2013

Acrylic, ink and drift wood  
on wood on metal

163 x 80 x 10 cm

64¼ x 31½ x 4 in





Portrait in Black

2013

Mixed media

50 x 50 x 9 cm | 19 $\frac{2}{3}$  x 19 $\frac{2}{3}$  x 3 $\frac{1}{2}$  in





Woman  
2013  
Mixed media  
149 x 100 x 23 cm | 58 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 39 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 9 in





Bird  
2013  
Mixed media  
139 x 115 x 13 cm | 54¾ x 45¼ x 5 in



**Branch**

2013

Oil and drift wood on wood

70 x 53 x 4 cm | 27½ x 20¾ x 1½ in



Flamboyant

2013

Acrylic and ink on wood

79 x 97 cm | 31 x 38¼ in



1968	Born in Tbilisi, Georgia
1985-90	Studied at the Architectural Department of the Tbilisi Technical University, Tbilisi, Georgia
1990	MA in Architecture
2002-04	Contract with “Daum” glass company, France, limited edition for three pieces
2001-05	Contract with Swiss international company “Saicat”, Switzerland
2002	Gilbert-Albert-Museum, Geneva, Switzerland

### Selected solo exhibitions

2013	Red, Galerie Kornfeld, Berlin, Germany
2011	54th International Art Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia, Georgian Pavillon, Venice, Italy Galerie Orem, Paris, France
2009	Holster Project, London, England
2005	Gallery TMS, Tbilisi, Georgia
2001	N Gallery, Tbilisi, Georgia
2000	Gallery Chardin, Tbilisi, Georgia
1999	Gallery Chardin, Tbilisi, Georgia

### Selected group exhibitions

2013	At the Crossroads: Contemporary Art from the Caucasus and Central Asia, Sotheby's London, UK
2007	52nd International Art Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia, Georgian Pavillon, Venice, Italy OPEN 10, Lido, Venice, Italy
2003	Installation, N Gallery, Art Cologne 2003, Cologne, Germany
2001	Thomas Boland Gallery, Jacob Javits Center, New York, USA
2000	CFM Gallery, New York, USA
1999	Thomas Boland Gallery, Jacob Javits Center, New York, USA
1998	2 Dagen, Internationaal Centrum Poppenkunst, Goes, The Netherlands
1997	Multi media Sculpture, CFM Gallery, New York, USA Art Against AIDS, Stricoff Fine Art Gallery, New York, USA
1996	Transformation, CFM Gallery, New York, USA

### Artworks in public spaces

2012	‘Hours’, Marjanishvili Street, Tbilisi, Georgia
2011	‘Rotation’, Khimshiashvili Avenue, Batumi, Georgia
2010	‘Man and Woman’, 9 m tall sculpture in the harbor of Batumi, Georgia





