

Interview with Sofia Goscinski by Jasper Sharp  
Held at the artist's studio on December 10, 2019

J.S. I have made a selection of maybe a dozen works over the last five or six years for us to discuss, but to begin with I wonder if we could look at a much earlier work that jumped out at me from your portfolio. It reminded me of aspects that I find interesting about some of the later pieces.

There is a really interesting form, pure form, geometric form that recurs in your work all the time. Even if occasionally you completely abandon it and become wholly organic, you then swing back to a very rigid, found form, if you like. Here we are looking at Altar from 2006, which is in a sense a silhouette of a well-known object. It has a function, or a function of sorts, as do some of your other works that combine form and function — such as the masks. Then there's another layer that I'm interested in, which is the kind of sacred, religious, pagan thing, and that's also a recurring theme in your work.

Sometimes they meet, sometimes one of them takes the lead while the other supports, and they occasionally exchange places. Sometimes one of them is there on its own.

It seems to me that this early work synthesized a few of these things quite early on for you. So I want to ask you about it, how you came to do it, what it represents for you, and if any of these readings make sense.

S.G. That all makes sense to me. I came to the idea of the Altar by way of my passion for minimalism during my academy years. I was intensely preoccupied with this movement. My diploma presentation drew on that. The title was *Die Angst vor der Gegenstandslosigkeit* (The Fear of the Nonrepresentational). In my mind, minimalism, pure form, and monochrome coloring were too heavily conceptualized. Above all, I perceived these works as emotionally touching and felt them to be sacred.

J.S. That's also my biggest problem. I love minimal art, I spent a lot of time looking at it, and also in-situ, going to the places where artists installed their work themselves, like Villa Panza or Marfa. What always bothered me was that there was something cultish about it, there was a kind of tribe of people that was somewhat impenetrable. There was possession, ownership, and that over-theorizing, as you say. I agree with you, I have had some of my most emotional experiences looking at some of the most reduced works imaginable. But when I began to read about them that started to eat away at all of those initial sensations of those experiences and it made me question them. A lot of these guys were genuinely deep thinkers, but I guess much of it is also a sort of insecurity, they need to fill what is an apparent vacuum with lots of words and ideas. I think one just needs to have the confidence sometimes to let a work be.

S.G. I think that's a beautiful thing — you should have the self-confidence to let go of your work and let it be. For me, that's a crucial aspect.

J.S. When have you installed this work, when has it been shown? And you made the decision to show it open or closed? Was the visitor encouraged to open it?

S.G. So far, I've only shown Altar once. Back then it was open and not interactive. But I think to the viewer it's clear that the side wings can be swung shut and the Altar can be closed. Maybe that's also an important aspect, a playful one, that goes back to my childhood. I was baptized Russian Orthodox and thus had a small painted wooden altar on my nightstand. You could swing its wings open and shut and I've often played with that. I have no memory of the pictures but the opened and closed form is etched in my memory.

J.S. It's interesting that you talk about the monochrome because when you look at these lovely old altars, like the wonderful Bosch we have here in Vienna, very often the backside of the doors that you don't see are painted in grisaille. They are some of the most radical paintings that we've ever seen, it's like a Gerhard Richter painted 500 years ago. When you close them you get this wonderful, extremely reduced palette, and then you open it up and there's this explosion inside. So I like the reference to minimalism because I've always been struck by the conceptual nature of the color schemes of these things and you've taken it to the end point. Does black represent something negative in terms of space for you?

S.G. I perceive black as space. That goes back to photography. I was fascinated when I saw an exposure on baryt paper for the first time. The subject was a series of Innenansichten (Interior Views), photos I had made inside a cube I had built for my second solo exhibition in 2006. It was painted white and had windows on all four sides, which were boarded up with black planks. I sat inside it for what was probably an hour with an analog camera and a 1,000 ASA black and white film, taking pictures into the dark. Thus, in that medium black acquired depth and, of course, contrasting the light that fell through the cracks between the wooden boards, it took on a spatial quality.

J.S. Was it performative during the time people visited the exhibition?

S.G. The first time it was shown it wasn't. The second time I sat inside it for about an hour for an opening. But no one knew about that.

J.S. Was it relaxing or was it oppressive?

S.G. It was relaxing but also boring. The snatches of conversation I overheard were not all that gripping. In any case, it was an attempt at escaping the situation of an opening. I feel uneasy at openings, rather depressed. I always thought that the advantage of gaining a certain degree of renown was that you don't have to show up at your own openings anymore. It's just hard to dissociate yourself when it's your own work.

J.S. Perhaps we could make a little bit of a jump. You sent me a film (Without Head, 2013) some time ago and it really fascinated me, I watched it several times. It was rather unexpected for me, because a lot of your work is quite confrontational, it deals with difficult, sometimes slightly taboo subjects, which I like. And it deals with them in a highly intelligent, very open way. This one is confrontational in a different man-

ner. As the person sitting there watching it, especially watching it on a laptop, there's an immediate kind of voyeuristic quality that comes in; even more so because you can't see us, me. It unfolds in ways you can't anticipate and the sound is very interesting. What I found one of the most provocative and most interesting parts is how homemade it felt. It was polished in its production and its ideas, but it was extremely rudimentary, which I think is its beauty. Any of us could do this, there's no magic, there's no tricks, and there's a wonderful basic quality to it. Which I think was fantastic. It immediately brings all sorts of things to mind. I'm very interested in Surrealism, and this is something that runs all the way through your work. Very generally speaking, Surrealism mainly divides itself into two categories. One strand is the dreamy, imaginary, Dali and Magritte. The other is the objectionable, the Bataille side of things, like early Giacometti, and I think this is definitely your territory. You know, their obsession with mannequins, headless mannequins, and all sorts of things; and it comes later in some of the other works, as well. I'd love you to tell me a little bit about how long the idea for this work took to form in your mind. How difficult it was to execute? And how you feel about it looking at it now, five or six years later?

S.G. Without Head is a key work for me. I started out working with photography, then I turned to video, as well. I only got interested in sculpture after I'd graduated, and it ultimately became my main focus. Without Head is, of course, a video documentation of a performance, but it is also a sculptural piece. The headless body becomes abstract, almost sexless, or asexual, pure material. It took me about a year to get there. Initially, I came up with this image of a life-size human figure on all fours with its head below the ground and its neck as a fifth supporting limb. However, it proved highly complicated to realize that — modeling it from a complete body in a position that is hard to maintain over a longer period of time and positioning it so that the head would be below the level on which the knees and hands rested. For a while I wanted to scrap the idea but I couldn't get it out of my mind. I wanted by all means to make the image materialize. It took me a while to come up with the idea of building a box.

J.S. And it's a simple wooden box?

S.G. Yes, a wooden box, painted black — on the inside, too. I had the idea of making a video titled Painting my Coffin from the Inside. To that end, I lay inside the box with a brush, black paint, and a video camera and filmed myself painting the box from inside.

I liked the idea, it was a bit unhealthy though as the fumes were pretty strong and left me dizzy for while. This box could have cost me my life. The first time I performed Without Head I was alone in my studio. I could have broken my neck. Imagine people would have found me naked and decapitated; the perfect death, I missed out on that.

J.S. You know there's a tradition in some countries of people painting their own coffins. If you have the feeling you're about to die you get your coffin prepared, and if you somehow then don't die, you give it a new coat of paint every year. And you refer to these people as, "oh, she's an eight-coater," meaning she's eight years past the date at which she expected to die.

Just to go back quickly, when you first talked about the idea, you talked about the “ground.” Why did this become a sculptural object rather than the actual ground? Was it also this reference to the coffin? I mean, you talked about painting the coffin, and so on. You don’t get that obviously with the ground, you maybe get the sense of a kind of grave, but with the box it also becomes a form of stage.

S.G. It was not about sticking your head in the sand, meaning about escape, fear, or anxiety. It was my curiosity as to the effect that a body without head has, a body without identity. From this, ultimately, the text level emerged, in addition to the sculptural level. The writing, in turn, led me to the performance, gave me a way to bring these two levels together.

Ultimately, the function of the box is that of a classic pedestal.

J.S. Yes and no, because it’s black and not white. Have you ever considered performing the work live?

S.G. In Manila in 2014 at the opening of my exhibition *I Love You* at 1335 Mabini gallery, where I was on a three-months residency. It was really frightening because I was constantly told how courageous it was of me to perform nude. The Philippines are very Catholic and a naked body in public is no ordinary thing. I did yoga every day for two weeks to prepare both physically and mentally. Ultimately, I wasn’t happy with the result. It doesn’t work as a live performance because it takes a calm, contemplative situation as well as a certain perspective on the scenery.

J.S. I don’t think this is a piece to perform live. I also think part of its power is the solitariness of it. Also, when we come later to your self-portrait, the photographs, I think there is a real quality and precision to your *mise-en-scène*, to your setup. That takes time and takes several attempts. I think it’s very interesting that you kind of storyboarded this almost accidentally, because we’re looking at it now almost like a storyboard laid out here in your portfolio, and it’s interesting to see the exercise you went through to get to the final piece. I think it is one of your strongest pieces. I think, again, like the first work we started with, the *Altar*, it synthesizes three or four of the jet streams that run all the way through your work.

It’s not easy to watch. There’s a discomfort on the viewer’s side, which is nothing compared to the discomfort on your side. It’s a different discomfort, a mental discomfort, as opposed to the physical discomfort. At the same time, you can’t stop watching it, because there’s a sort of intrigue about where this is going and how it’s going to end. I kept trying to impose a form of narrative on it, and every time I felt that it was just about to settle, you did something that made the idea not make any sense anymore. I kept on trying to predict and I was constantly wrong. And it was very interesting as there’s a kind of satisfaction in being wrong all the time. I know that sounds counterintuitive but with a piece like this — I had to watch it two or three times. I think it’s one of your strongest works. I think it lies at the center of a lot of things you do. I think this could be the basis of a really great show some time, to put this at the center and have other works kind of vibrating off it somehow.

Like most of your really good pieces, it has layers and layers and layers, but at the end of the day it has a tremendous simplicity to it — coming back to how our conversation began, you know. And like a great deal of artworks that stay in your head for a long time, it doesn't attempt to answer any questions you have, it just asks more and more questions and leaves them all open. In the end, we come away unable to really put our finger on it.

S.G. For me that's a key aspect. I get bored with art that explains itself on first sight. It can be aesthetically appealing and witty or even touch on certain emotions, but without a certain mysteriousness, art doesn't catch on, doesn't provoke a thought process.

J.S. Yes, there's nothing enigmatic about it. I think it's also the type of work that sits very happily with work made in the last couple hundred years. It feels of our time, in a certain sense, because of the technique you've used, the production quality, and so on. We're obviously not looking at a film from the 1920s or something like that. But in terms of the idea, the simplicity of what you've done, it sets up all sorts of interesting conversations with interesting people of a long period of time.

Tell me about rabbits. They make a surprisingly frequent appearance in your work.

S.G. The hare is the theme of an entire series of pieces with the overall title *Angsthase*, and the rabbit pelt-covered punching bag also carries that title. It contains some German wordplay (*Angsthase* translates as "cowardly rabbit" and is equivalent to the English "chicken"). I have an affinity for language, probably because my mother is a writer. Some of my early pieces explicitly work with language. The rabbit is known for being fearful and the punching bag as an object that you treat with aggression. Aggression, in turn, frequently is the result of fear. With this object I wanted to achieve a reversal. You want to hug the punching bag and snuggle with it instead of hitting away at it. The idea worked. There's been a lot of happy snuggling with the *Angsthase*.

J.S. This is another of my favorite works of yours (*Cast of a Rabbit Hole*). I saw one in the studio the last time I came, and when I first saw it I didn't know what I was looking at. Partly because of the scale, the over-dimensionalization of the thing, partly because of the lack of color — in terms of what sign posts it makes available to you in terms of reading it and understanding what it is. I didn't know if you had created it or if somebody else had and you'd found it. It has the quality of a found object, obviously, which it kind of is. What it did remind me of was how objectionable parts of our bodies are when we look at them in isolation from the rest of us. I think Bataille did something about the thumb at a certain point. Obviously, these have the quality of a kind of thumb, they are kind of stubby, they feel warm, and they feel a little like a slightly unloved used part of the body that's not particularly smooth and beautiful. Or, a toe that's been spending its life sitting in shoes that are not too good for it. I was immediately fascinated by it because it was an entire landscape in itself. I think I asked you and you explained that it was a cast of a hole, right? Is it from a hare — is it a hiding place, as opposed to a home?

S.G. Not really. It's a fake, it pretends to be one. The idea was to integrate the rabbit hole, as a safe shelter, into the series. It was intriguing for me to make a cast of a hole and claim it was a rabbit den; to play with reality and fiction — which I see as a key aspect of sculpture. While *Cast of a Rabbit Hole* consists of photographs, I see it as a sculptural piece. It's also about the meaning of dimensions, the shifting of ratios. At the outset, it was a clay block measuring approximately 40 x 20 x 10 centimeters into which I bore a hole with my fist, from which I then created a plaster cast.

J.S. And they stayed in plaster, they were never cast? Was the original intention that they would remain sculptural?

S.G. Initially, that was an option. I repeatedly take pictures in the course of a development process in order to look at things outside of the studio, to think about it. Ultimately, I thought the photos were more interesting than the objects themselves and discarded them. Then came the idea of blowing up the photos and creating a kind of rock, mountain, or totem from them.

J.S. They also have something ancient. They feel like something dug up from the ground that's 3,000 years old, because you're taking a kind of anthropological eye photographing them. They look like images that would be in a scientific publication. They have a cold, analytical, object-based approach in the way you cropped them.

Do you know the artist Michael Heizer? He is a minimalist and does a lot of land art projects out in Nevada. He did this amazing work called *Double Negative* around 1970 where he made a cut in the landscape with dynamite, a huge cut. He's building this extraordinary art work called *City* at the moment, which is like some Incan burial site, it's extraordinary. He did a piece at LACMA where he brought a rock from the Jurupa Valley Quarry. They transported it half across California, it sits outside the museum, and you walk underneath it. He did a show where he hung huge photographs of this rock around the gallery. The monumentality I think is such an important part of this because they become almost a bit threatening, which I think is another aspect of your work. There's a sense of threat that runs through quite a lot of your work, a threat to yourself, a threat to us. A mutual threat sometimes, and at the same time they have something a little bit ridiculous, absurd, and humorous.

Tell me about *Rabbit Hunchback* (2016). It's a strange, enigmatic object that I find quite fascinating.

S.G. It began with *I Killed my Angsthase* from the 2015 *Angsthase* series. That was the first clay figure. It was initially based on a dead, dried up rabbit and, in the process, turned into a strange being between dream and death. When I had my studio at Friedrichshof, Burgenland, the rabbits were ubiquitous. Often one of them got hit by a car and was left lying in the road, so you could watch the decomposition process. *Rabbit Hunchback* was made in Mexico City with clay from Oaxaca, it was fired and smoked in a self-built brick kiln, hence the black color. In 2016, curator Michel Blancsubé invited me to Mexico City to create a contribution to a group exhibition on site.

I had seen clay objects from Oaxaca and was fascinated by the deep black color. I wanted to make something from this material for the show and Michel drove me to Oaxaca to get some clay. At first I thought that the clay itself was black, but it turned out the color results from days of firing and smoking the finished objects in an underground cave system.

When we drove there, we crossed a desert strewn with hundreds of thousands of cactuses. This desert was my inspiration for Desert Plants.

What's interesting to me about these clay objects is the process. It's a gestural, expressive, sculptural process. You begin and don't know where and how it all ends. You start out with an idea, maybe even a concrete image, but also a hunch that it will develop into something entirely different. It's about melding with the material, you add some, it reacts, it's malleable, but it also has its properties. Ultimately, it's probably akin to painting that's not done after a model, a specific sketch. You start a process that is in part torturous because it requires absolute attention, concentration, your eyes, your hands. Actually, your whole body is involved and acts, forms, looks, and senses a shape, the material, the focus; the brain is active and newly interprets each stage, until something is there. And you know in that moment, hands off, that's it. In the meantime, you may have already given up a few times, maybe even destroyed it and then, still, taken that lump into your hands again.

~~To me, Rabbit Hunchback embodies the loneliness I felt in that city. I spent a lot of time alone in a society where there is practically no such thing. In Mexico, no one is alone, at least not in public. It was depressing. The seclusion and the doubts, because there was, of course, pressure to produce something for the exhibition and my French colleagues were quite dominant in their demeanor and their works. I was the only woman in the show.~~

J.S. Let's talk about the self-portraits; we've got two self-portraits. I saw the "untitled contemporary" show — that was the first time I met you, actually, we were looking at this work at Sammlung Friedrichshof and we talked a little bit about it. I was doing a project with Claude Cahun's work at the time and she was very much on my mind. There was something about the approach to these, the play with identity, the play with masking, and so on that struck a chord with me. These works were all made in the same year. Self-Portrait with a Ritual Mask, two works with the same title. And then another work from the Mask Series. Perhaps you could tell me about the mask and its role in your work, also in your paintings.

S.G. What's interesting to me about masks in general is that they make us believe we are hidden behind them, but the eyes of the wearer are often visible or palpable. I guess their expression is felt more intensely as the mask is mostly rigid and simplified. Now, with the mask, you can conduct yourself freely, without any commitment, and give yourself away entirely.

I'm reminded here of the opera or the classical drama. As a child I always wondered why a performer puts on a mask on stage and the other actor suddenly pretends to not recognize him, even though there are other things that betray who he is, his body, posture, or voice. Perhaps I already understood instinctively back then

that this was not about the outward appearance but about a social ritual. When someone wears a mask he or she is allowed to be someone else, is given permission to be a stranger, that's an essential interpersonal outlet.

What's more, masks used in ritual ceremonies are energetically charged objects that have a story to tell. I think this aspect is fascinating, too.

J.S. Are you also interested in the simple formal aspects of the mask?

S.G. Yes, masks show exaggerated features or, conversely, simplified ones. Templates of faces, so to speak. You can pretty much tell from the outline of a mask what culture it originated from.

J.S. I was quite grateful when I saw the Self-Portrait with a Ritual Mask at Friedrichshof. I had always been interested in masks, again, mainly through studying surrealism. They collected masks, it was their link back to — the word which has become very problematic now — the primitive, the tribal, the un-programmed. You look at the history of painting around that time, they are everywhere. At the same time, I had also dismissed masks in my mind. I'd lived in Venice for six years and I thought I could never see another mask for the rest of my life. Masks for me became something just ghastly and kitsch. When I saw this mask, it was the first time that I reacquainted myself with the fascination after a long time of actually running away from masks. So I spent quite a long time standing in front of those pictures, trying to work out where they were from, how old is it, who is this person, why have they done this? Do they have any right to do this? You know, it brings up taboos. These masks are incredibly sensitive, they carry all sorts of meaning in certain communities, and so on. There's trouble associated with the wearing of masks.

S.G. I wanted to create a mask myself and opted for rubber as a material. I've repeatedly worked with rubber ever since I discovered this material for myself in Manila (Fishing for Compliments, 2014; Sunshine Depression, 2014; Rubber Paintings, 2018). The mask, along with the self-portraits, is part of the Mask Series, which in turn is part of the series titled Funfun Rituals. This contains more wordplay: Fun can be read as the English word, but in the language of the Yoruba people (West Africa), *funfun* means white. The inspiration here was, on the one hand, African masks, ritual objects and figures, as well as horns of African oryx antelopes, which are coveted hunting trophies, but, on the other hand, also figures and tapestries I had seen at Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico City. Other pieces from this series are based directly on the book *Black Skin, White Masks* by Frantz Fanon (1952).

J.S. This is *Peau blanche, masque noir*?

S.G. *Peau blanche, masques noirs* (Mask Series, Couple, 2017) consists of two photographs, one showing a male and the other a female figure. Both wear my rubber mask. This work is based on a chapter from the book where Fanon is questioning whether the white man's hatred is based on a sexual inferiority complex towards the black man.

The ostensibly provocative element is the black penis prosthesis worn by a white man, but the more subtle provocation, I think, lies in the naked man with a faux member standing next to a veiled and dominant female figure with the appearance of a witch or sorceress or Medusa.

I was deeply touched by this book and it has left a lasting impression on me. Based on his education and training as a psychiatrist, Fanon attempts to find an analytical solution to the traumas inflicted by colonialism both on the oppressed and the oppressors. At the same time, he describes his personal situation, mood, frustration, in short, his personal trauma as a black man in the white society of 1950s France. However, over and over, my empathy for Fanon was disrupted by the discrimination of women that is obviously apparent in his writing. The book was penned in the 1950s, you can feel that in every word. Hence the witch, the sorceress next to the amputated white man.

I was accused of cultural appropriation because I, as a white woman, depicted myself wearing an African mask. I hadn't thought of that but it did, of course, add a provocative element. I get this feeling that we live in a time of hamfisted categorization. The criticism of my work is based solely on the fact that a white woman is wearing an African mask. What the piece expresses is deemed irrelevant. That's a type of censorship that, I think, is highly dangerous in the world of art. It's definitely important to treat artifacts from other cultures with respect and caution, but exploring it on an intellectual as well as a physical level shouldn't be taboo and forbidden as a matter of principle. I fell in love with this mask and united myself with it in this photograph. That's based on an experience and not on appropriation.

J.S. Another work from this cycle is *Fetish Figure* (2017). Is that something that interests you, that you were particularly striving for?

S.G. The specific inspiration for this piece came from a figure at the exhibition *African Beaded Art* at Li-aunig Museum. *Fetish Figure* falls in line with *I Killed my Angsthase* and *Rabbit Hunchback*, in the sense of the material. The figure was first modeled from clay and then cast in bronze. You begin and don't know where you'll end up. In the course of my work what was initially a standing figure began to sag, due to the weight of the clay, into a position reminiscent of Buddha statues. It's a good example of how the material has a mind of its own; basically, it can also play into your hands if you let it. You could almost call it teamwork.

*Fetish Figure* is asexual and it devours and stuffs itself at the same time. There is something greedy and self-destructive about it but also something sublime or supreme, maybe on account of its Buddha-like posture and the bronze. It was the first clay figure I translated into bronze. At first it had a festive golden color, which actually would have been consistent with greed as well as with the object as a fetish, or the object vis-à-vis a fetish. Over time, it grew darker and took on the typical brown bronze hue. I left it that way, I thought it had turned into a better expression of itself. The earthy color brought something much more interesting to light, has restored it to its original material. This figure is not an idol, it's something else, something very peculiar and, to me, it certainly has a life of its own.

I've repeatedly heard from artists who have a hard time letting go, giving up control over their work. I'm really glad that I have an easy time of that. Once a work of art makes its appearance in the public eye, it's free to lead a life of its own. I guess having too much control can lead to creative block and even be destructive.

J.S. I'd like to discuss with you a few different works, each of which were made using the same material, namely concrete. They are *Staff of Honor* (2017), *Desert Plants* (2018), and *Perfect Form* (2019). The first two are quite closely related, the third less so. Could you talk a bit about each of these works, what they share in terms of process or thought, and what distinguishes them from each other?

S.G. *Staff of Honor* is from the same series as *Fetish Figure*. I saw such objects in photos of the Yoruba, a West African people. It's a scepter the King and the queen carry during ceremonies. The original staffs are elaborately decorated with beads, metal, and leather. There is a male and a female staff of honor, which differ slightly in their shape. The translation of the staff of honor into concrete is probably owed to the fact that, at the time, I was working on other pieces with concrete, such as the *Oryx* series (for which I made a concrete cast of an oryx antelope horn). On the other hand, I was inspired by Giacometti and the manner in which he kneaded his figures. I wanted to try to work with concrete in the same way as with clay. Kneading concrete and creating an interpretation of a staff of honor with this technique seemed like a logical thing to do, as concrete is something between stone and earth and thus appears archaic, which seemed fitting to me. Perhaps this is another good example for my way of working. I draw on specific inspirations but I'm not interested in imitating something or coming close to the original. I feel the need to develop something myself, something that doesn't exist in this form. I find my sources of inspiration everywhere — things, shapes, colors, and subjects linger in my mind and surface again at some point, as a trigger for a process, for the choice of materials, for formal orientation. With *Staff of Honor*, the famous *Excalibur Sword in the Stone* from the story of King Arthur probably also plays a role. I take pleasure in the awareness that with age, the source becomes ever richer and a great number of things play together, simply because they are stored on the same "hard disk" in my brain.

J.S. In *Desert Plants* you make specific reference to an artist from an earlier time, Alberto Giacometti. What is it about Giacometti's work that you find most interesting?

S.G. The same goes for *Desert Plants*. Two things came together here, the cactus fields I saw on the way from Mexico City to Oaxaca and Giacometti's ceaselessly kneading hands. *Desert Plants* is an important piece of work for me. At first, I had a really difficult time with these kneaded pillars. I thought they were un-aesthetic and too simple for me to take them seriously. I wanted to discard them but still wasn't able to demolish them. Honestly, I had also put some pretty hard work into them. And so they stood around in my studio, I guess I had five pillars in the beginning, and every time I stepped into the studio and saw them in the daylight (in the case of my studio, you could say Caravaggio light), I had to stop and look at them for a short or sometimes a longer while. They wouldn't let me walk by, they simply had a strong presence in the room. There was a point where I thought I could try to spray paint them with bright colors, a technique I had previously tested successfully on the oryx horns (because I was just about to ditch them, too). At that moment I

had the feeling these Desert Plants were talking to me. They said, if you coat us in colors, you'll rob us of our sincerity. I think this "conversation" had me convinced. They were strong and I had to accept them and stand by them.

J.S. One thing I feel some of your works share with Giacometti is this sense that they are thousands of years old, like ancient forms that have been dug up from the ground.

S.G. It's probably down to my fascination with anthropological objects (which is also apparent in the Party Cups series) as well as with "archetypal" shapes. That is to say, shapes found in all known ancient cultures. I think Perfect Form is a piece that plays with that. The shape of the circle inside a square as a relief in concrete, that reminds me of things I've perceived, here and there, in architectures in ancient cultures. Again, not a copy, more a perception. I've always been fascinated by reliefs, but not necessarily figurative ones, more by the abstract kind. The coffered ceiling of the Pantheon or Frank Lloyd Wright's Ennis House, which was, in turn, inspired by Mayan temple complexes in Mexico.

J.S. The final object I would like to ask you about is perhaps the most mysterious of all: лошадь (2018). What can you tell me about this strange thing?

S.G. The inspiration for лошадь (Horse) 2018 was a Soviet-era Russian animated film. Its title translates as Hedgehog in the Fog. It's an absolutely magnificent film accompanied by wonderful music by Mikhail Meyerovich. Hedgehog runs through the wood to bring Bear a jar of jam for his tea. Suddenly a mist arises and he gets lost. In the fog Hedgehog meets the horse, among others. As if out of nowhere, the horse's head appears from the mist to drink from the puddle at Hedgehog's feet.

лошадь certainly draws on childhood memories. I first watched this film in my youth, but when I was a child, my father had taken us to Poland in the summer to go horseback riding. It was a pretty wild place and back then, riding was no luxury sport in Poland. In the morning we were assigned a horse and had to take care of it for the day. We fed and saddled them and, after going for a ride, scraped out their hooves and rubbed them with hay if they'd sweated. Those were certainly some of the most beautiful moments of my childhood, this being together with a horse. I haven't been on horseback for ages, but I can't walk by a horse without stopping.

My mother is from Russia and has some Jewish roots, my father is from Poland and has some Tartar roots. I think that perhaps this Eastern-bloc—cocktail, in connection with being born and raised in the West, enables me to change back and forth, without inhibitions, between abstract, formal, perhaps even cold and figurative as well as expressive art. I feel a need for that, too, I would otherwise lose my inner balance. I think you have an obligation to art to be as free as you can in the way you think and work.