

Press Release | 21 February 2022

## Bertille Bak

### Mineur Mineur

A project by the winner of the 3rd edition of the Mario Merz Prize

Curated by Caroline Bourgeois

Fondazione Merz, Torino

21 February – 22 May 2022

On Monday 21 February 2022, **Fondazione Merz** presents French artist **Bertille Bak**'s first solo show in Italy. The new site-specific project, curated by Pinault Collection's chief curator Caroline Bourgeois, takes its title from the main work in the show, the video installation **Mineur Mineur** (Minor Miner).

In *Mineur Mineur*, the artist, whose grandparents were Polish miners sent to work in the coalmines of northern France from the age of 13, draws upon her personal history to tackle the subject of child labour, which continues to deprive around 150 million children worldwide of their childhood, dignity and health.

*"Given Bak's sincere sympathy,"* says curator Caroline Bourgeois, *"a deeply honest and respectful desire to encounter human beings trapped in oppression and poverty, her work can be viewed and understood in an honest way. The goal is not to make herself – the artist – known, but to look with attention and humanity, through the unique lens of an artist, at the lives that could have been ours had we been born elsewhere."*

The Foundation's seemingly infinite vertical space inspired Bak, who chose to juxtapose this monumental height with the abyssal depths of the earth. The whole installation, which centres on *Mineur Mineur*, plays on the perpetual alienation engendered by a dual reading of her works: an apparently playful regression to which the viewer is lead, where, however, innocence and brutality coexist relentlessly. The artist affirms yet again her predilection for the language of fairy tales – which underpins all her projects – for its reliance on artifice or ploys which reveal tragic destinies, contemporary truths, and social narratives which become a kind of memory archive binding the lives of the people she has encountered to the creation of a new, collective imagination.

The artist spent three months of intense research on mines and global child labour in preparation for her main work, *Mineur Mineur*. Bak tackled the topic keen to avoid any moralising, choosing to upend the children's story by narrating it through images associated with a carefree childhood: underground labyrinths, upside down spaces, passageways leading through walls and ceilings, slides and voice recorders. These playful evocations guide the viewer towards the show in the final scene, which mimics end of year school plays, where each group of children goes on stage, symbolising their transition to the next school year. In reality, though, the party is a very sombre affair, accompanied by a dissonant flute which pushes the children to the meanders of the earth via slides, transporting them back to their status of small, invisible human beings.

The show is made up of four works which act as a counterpoint to the main work, by alternating videos and installations. ***This mine is mine*** is an installation realised with bright wires which allows the viewer to see

the underground passageways crossed by the young miners. The video **Blues de travail** (Work overalls) is a metaphor for child labour worldwide. **Le berceau du chaos** (Cradle of chaos) is an unusable merry-go-round, where the viewer glimpses only its lower portion, the poorly designed and time-worn animals. Finally, the video **Tu redeviendras poussière** (You will turn to dust once again) is based on the stories of the residents of an old mining city in northern France, analysing the levels of silicosis, an illness contracted by miners, in its residents' lungs.

The artist immerses herself fully in the communities she involves in her projects, creating an iconic present, made up of opposing marginalisation, deprivation and excess, but also of tradition and a sense of belonging. Through shared images, she lays bare the conditions which bind everyone, even when they appear distant. A present which seeks a new language for rights, rules of coexistence and social change, from the past, through the present in order to forge a new future.

The project will be accompanied by the publication of a book, co-produced and distributed internationally by **Fondazione Merz hopefulmonster editore**, which will document the project's inception and development, and will include contributions from the curator as well as writers across different disciplines, bringing together manifold reflections on such an important and urgent social matter.

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**BIOGRAFIA**

**Bertille Bak** (b. 1983 Arras, France, lives and works in Paris) pursues a socio-political, if not ethnological perspective. Her works are expressions of a creative and formalised process. Her process is founded on the modus operandi of an artist who is interested in and seeks to share the lives of marginalised communities, in order to engender not a revolutionary or violent reaction, but one that Bak defines as an 'alternative revolt' against unbearable decisions which render life arduous for members of those communities. The formalisation is the expression of such an approach and of the empathy which unites the artist to her fellow-companions, turning it into something which more closely resembles a fairy tale rather than a documentary. Bak expresses a relational art aimed at both at communities which are more or less aware of their identities, and at minorities which are often forgotten or repressed. During her long visits and sojourns within the respective communities, Bak builds interindividual relationships to raise awareness of the social usefulness of people and groups. Through the sharing of everyday life, the study of the land, the analysis of social relationships, the culture, the traditions and the economic organisation, Bak takes on the role of a social provocateur, putting herself forward as a critical conscience raising political awareness amongst her interlocutors. This results in collective portraits taken from an unconventional viewpoint, often based on the research of individual mythologies, in a resolute attempt to preserve the traces of memory. It is no coincidence that Bak was a student of Christian Boltanski during her studies at the École Nationale des Beaux-Arts in Paris.

With the support of:



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