

YOU! – Aurel Vlad's Exhibition in Constanța Art Museum

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Abstract: *Who are we humans, we who always need to descend into the inferno to recognize the true face of love? My personal time capsule that I keep ready for when the Voyager spacecraft is launched, contains a painting by Mark Rothko, a copy of one of Lars von Trier's films, and a sculpture by Aurel Vlad, because the message to outer worlds should speak about us, humans at a more profound level, absolved of artifice, or aesthetic dogmas. In Ancient Egypt, the sculptor was called "He who gives life" because it was believed that he granted immortality through his works; for the ancient Egyptians, the afterlife was even more important than the life they lived, and sensed. Aurel Vlad is not only a figurative sculptor. He is a sculptor of human condition in all of its poses. He loves the HUMAN BEING; probably, if asked "What is hell?" he would answer like one of Dostoevsky's characters in "The Brothers Karamazov": "... it is the suffering of being unable to love.". There is no compromise in the universe of forms that Aurel Vlad created, just a raw, direct representation of our anxieties, pain, fears, but also of love, hope and of the excruciating journey to find our true identity. His works always look intently to the sky, in a quiet imploration of divinity, unsure if their prayer would be heard, or answered to. Theirs is a silent cry, a cringe of pain discreetly hidden under layers of metal, under clothes that metamorphose into shadows that show a striking resemblance to graves. Sculpture is the artist's way of connecting to the deepest and the most painful of the human condition – suffering and loss – which he then transforms, and brings back to life in tangible, perennial form².*

Key-words: Aurel Vlad; Sculpture; Human Condition; Constanța Art Museum; Silent Witness, Refugees;

Introduction

With a well-individualized visual discourse, the sculptor Aurel Vlad immediately stood out as one of the most interesting representatives of his generation, becoming an attitude promoter with relevance today. He manages to excel in an apparently rigid area, such as that of the *rond bosse* figurative, returning with a new and substantial expression to where the sculpture left off for more than a century, thanks to Brâncuși. This discourse, structured on the figurative tradition, acquires a dynamic of forms whose stake reverberates in the intensity of the experiences, and emerges in attitudes and embodiments reminiscent of the ancient treatise, offering the image of an artist sensitive to the tragedy of others as well as his own, tormented by doubts, restlessness, but especially about one's own destiny³.

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² Lelia Rus Pîrvan. 2023. "Tu! Expoziție eveniment Aurel Vlad". In *Tomis magazine*. Constanța, no.11, pp.74 –77.

³ Cătălin Davidescu. 2022. *About the happiest of possible worlds*. București: Printex, pp. 6–8.

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1. Human fragility and vulnerability hold a privileged position in Aurel Vlad`s work

The work "*Silent Witness*" speaks about the acute feeling of alienation from others, but also about love and friendship that transcend time and space; it also speaks about memories that flow from a different, better life, where the alienating distance among us is annulled with a hug. Human fragility and vulnerability also hold a privileged position in Aurel Vlad`s work, as mirrors of the perpetual silent sadness that are our lifelong travel companions; at the same time, his works encourage us to dream in order to be able to fathom the complexity of life. The sculptor`s works capture the fact that our first instinct is to run away from our feelings; like him, we can heal, and become stronger by confronting our fears.

Crowded with words, Aurel Vlad`s studio and, more recently, the connected attic store serve undebatably as scene fertilizers. Fully immersed in the prodigy of his acquired shapes, the artist has an animist dialogue with all his imagined beasts. The aesthetic concept of "rude", accelerated by anthropomorphic and parabolic creativity, stands for the socle of tireless effort carried out along a century quarter. After 1990, Aurel Vlad became a reference name in Romania sculpture. Highly esteeming previous generations`art obliged to stone and wood carving, his training observed passionately the skill of roughening in *taille directe*. Processuality of his sculpture was first personalized in cutting-out wood and afterwards in metal-sheet narrative manufacturing.

His vocational genealogy had been challenged by some miraculous encounters. At first, when but 16, by Elena "Lot", a student at the High School of Art Galați, his future wife. The valour of trade was prompted by his apprenticeship in late Mihai Mihai`s studio. The pedagogic empathy sculptresses Liana Axinte and Geta Caragiu surrounded him with mattered a lot. Born near artist`s native village, Napoleon Tiron, his model along a unique brave career subsequently his close friend. Professor and civilian person of admirable propriety, Aurel Vlad loves humanity and, in the material imaginary of his studio, he is an authentic artist of the pathos. He turned into monuments convoys of damned humans sacrificed in Stalinist prisons. During the "Byzantine court-yard" period (1989-1993), the sculptor achieved incomparable figurative drafts out of cut-up boards. His sarcastic attitude against consumerist invasion made him imagine a new sanctuary for the TV apparatus (1997) and the Hotline (2000). In the first post-communist decade, his gestural volumes, expressing a large repertory of historical mourning, of fright and suffering, "qualified" him as the Butoh choreographer of grief⁵.

We live in a time when political, ethnic or religious conflicts arise everyday. In Aurel Vlad`s work, this reality means that he switches from the representation and affirmation of individual identity to collective memory and experiences to validate his vision. His "*refugees*" are people on the move, looking for shelter and safety; they are the image of humanity expelled from its original state of harmony and balance. They show new facets of this primordial expulsion and compel us, as viewers, to reflect on the humanitarian crises and on the social injustice around us and on the endless human struggle to adapt and find meaning in an intricate and unfair world.

Our first contact with Aurel Vlad`s art has the impact force of an earthquake of the soul: the viewer go to a personal purgatory, in which he/she identifies with all of the 473

⁴ Lelia Rus Pîrvan, *op. cit.*, pp.74 –77.

⁵ Aurelia Mocanu. 2014. *(Ne)Liniștea*. București: Editura UNArte, p. 21.

hypostases of *Homo Deus*. Nevertheless, Aurel Vlad's sculptures do not change their meaning with the perception of each viewer - they remain rough, immutable, but transform those who contemplate them, at the end of a cathartic journey. The beauty and uniqueness of the exhibition resides in the force of the author's vision; the artist who stands in solidarity with human pain, in all of its forms, also has the solution for being absolved of pain, and finally find happiness.

Perhaps the most important stylistic mark of Aurel Vlad's work is given by the sense of verticality, by the vigor and energy that coagulate the metal, or ceramic fragments or cuts. Because the artist is a tamer of wild beasts and of the monsters dwelling in our souls as well as elements of the soul, the metal he uses has the destiny of man: the more the material is shattered, struck, pierced and then recombined and reshaped, the higher the human soul soars towards the stars⁶.

So specific to the sculptor, the stylistic range the modelled metal sheet display is a baroque whose rusticated figurative shows great compositions adjoined by tiny scenes. The cut-ups and the plane turning-downs are accompanied by massive – even surpassing human scale – shapes beat on the last, reinforced and fixed with rivets and tin-coat tracks⁷.



Fig. 1. Aurel Vlad, *Silent Witness*, technique: ceramic H 250 cm. Photo source: <https://www.facebook.com/muzeuldeartacta/posts/pfbid02qgpVjezVcsceP2u8qeFrw>.
Foto credit: Alin Panaite, Liviu Vlăsceanu.

⁶ Lelia Rus Pîrvan, *op.cit.*, pp.74 –77.

⁷ Mocanu Aurelia, *op. cit.*, pp. 21–22.



Fig. 2. Aurel Vlad, detail from *Refugees*, technique: zinc and iron, H 140 cm. Photo source: <https://www.facebook.com/muzeuldeartacta/posts/pfbid02qgpVjezVcsceP2u8qeFrw>.
Foto credit: Alin Panaite, Liviu Vlăsceanu.



Fig. 3. Aurel Vlad, detail from *Refugee*, technique: zinc and iron, H 140 cm. Photo source: <https://www.facebook.com/muzeuldeartacta/posts/pfbid02qgpVjezVcsceP2u8qeFrw>.
Foto credit: Alin Panaite, Liviu Vlăsceanu.



Fig. 4. Aurel Vlad, *Man in the shadow*, zinc and ceramic, H 140 cm. Photo source: <https://www.facebook.com/muzeuldeartacta/posts/pfbid02qgpVjezVcsceP2u8qeFrw>.
Foto credit: Alin Panaite, Liviu Vlăsceanu.



Fig. 5. Aurel Vlad, *Man in the shadow*, zinc and ceramic, H 68 cm. Photo source: <https://www.facebook.com/muzeuldeartacta/posts/pfbid02qgpVjezVcsceP2u8qeFrw>.
Foto credit: Alin Panaite, Liviu Vlăsceanu.



Fig. 6. Aurel Vlad, *Angel baby* (detail in the back), zinc, H 255 cm. Photo source: <https://www.facebook.com/muzeuldeartacta/posts/pfbid02qgpVjezVcscceP2u8qeFrw>.
Foto credit: Alin Panaite, Liviu Vlăsceanu.



Fig. 7. Aurel Vlad, *An almost perfect world*, zinc, wood, iron, H 88 cm. Photo source: <https://www.facebook.com/muzeuldeartacta/posts/pfbid02qgpVjezVcscceP2u8qeFrw>.
Foto credit: Alin Panaite, Liviu Vlăsceanu.



Fig. 8. Aurel Vlad, *Go on, walk!* zinc, H 225 cm. Photo source: <https://www.facebook.com/muzeuldeartacta/posts/pfbid02qgpVjezVc>.
Foto credit: Alin Panaite, Liviu Vlăsceanu.

Beside his corpus of revealing gestures approached in genuine academic manner, the animalier has played the role of expressionist ferment. Predators, bulls, all kinds of saw-fang muzzles have exorcized the attacks of everyday aggressiveness. He has cast in iron and in bronze packs of strung dogs. He has even conceived a powerful spatial griffe from *Dance of the Dog-man* (2008). The “Iron Maidens” Series from the history of torture evolved to the Africanized radiance of nails and wolf-head developments. Just like with Negritude idols, terrific becomes matter-inventive. In the first creative years, the wood, roughly planed off, coloured with white juices and black coal or contoured with red minimum, was gradually clad in metal. Aurel Vlad’s attention has also been attracted by icon metal fetters: the rizas. He had a kinetic episode too: inspired by Tinguely – yet avoiding Swiss’ heteroclite assemblages -, he tinkered iron-sheet angels acted by small movers.

Sculptor’s clear stylistic of robustness is obliged to wooden stump and to bronze casting, often made after Golemic statuary patterns. Using the cut-off technique in wood at first, the artist developed a spectacular narration in metal-sheet planimetric handling. In the insolite scene, the ferrous surface are more voluble, they simply tell stories.

Fashioned like an antediluvian piece of leather having endured numberless injuries, the metal-sheet exhibits its scars. The used zinc-sheet is tinned; the copper-sheet is riveted and, after patination, it is able to “agree” percussion with contusive tools. Cut-out with pointed drawing, foldable, creasable and submitted to high temperatures or hammering, pinched, stung, rhythmically riveted and “scared” with tin, the new zinc-sheet becomes a “bark-leather” which is more theatrical, more sonorous and colder than wood, yet an accomplice of the glittering light. The metal-sheet is like a hyena: it is mischievous and complicated – it is beaten, it is burnt. The artist confesses he is just “nourishing” its surface.

We pretend he is but waking up metal's "beast". Atavistic, sharp, bristly, scaly, the sheet can simulate rough animal and vegetal textures through compulsive rhythmic intervention. Approached mime-plastically, the malleable ferrous sheet facilitated advancement toward hard anatomic breaks: the folded men likewise emerged. The metal sheet permitted shade's void outlining, as the scenes refused depersonalization and fright – in the convoy of "Shades", see the abandoned coat, the hood drawn over the empty face⁸.

The neo-expressionist direction remains one of the main axes of evolution of the 80s generation, being motivated also in the post-December period by the new socio-political context in which Romania found itself. The citationist phenomenon, intensely frequented in the first stage, subsides over time, leaving room for affirmation to those artists who have managed to preserve their personality. Under these conditions, a sensitive field such as art has the chance to exploit an extensive repertoire, probing the individual's relationships with the new ambience of the transition, which does not lack dramatic experiences.

Found for the first time in the space of the Art Museum in Craiova, the sculptor comes with an exhibition proposal relevant to his career, the result of an artistic research that has occupied his attention for many years - metal. If at the beginning he became known for his works in stone and wood, executed in "direct cut", the method also practiced by Brâncuși, the artist now shows his preference for metal, especially sheet metal, creating compositions of classical inspiration, which retain a strong vein epic. His choice is mainly related to an experimental curiosity towards this common material: "*These sculptures grew inside me like plants in the dark...To make them I looked for a material that carries the same streets, emotions, chills, like the images we started from.*" It is a challenge assumed in the idea of representing an inexhaustible inventory of expressions of the human body, a subject that has fascinated him since the beginning. The frequency of these themes and the association with the material is the result of the artist's questions, contradictions and anxieties. And these aggregations of his soul contain, inherently, a series of narratives that evolve naturally, from those of a social or political nature to elements of a family nature and, last but not least, of spiritual reception.

In counterpoint to a universe that absorbs the consequences of damaged social realities, *An Almost Happy World*, the composition that also gives the name of the exhibition, is a form of silent assumption of the drama, an idea that we can also find in *Refugees*. Aurel Vlad's works give the impression that they are composed sequentially, like stop-frames from a film with Tarkovsky echoes, where the grayness of urban life, the problems that disturb society or his own life become the axis of creativity. It is a twilight world of perceived loneliness, without skepticism, but with deep sadness and full understanding. The attitude that dominates his characters, oddly enough, a state of reconciliation, acceptance, but above all of serene meditation on existence. He loves humanity and now, at the age of maturity, his speech, although it retains the fears, passion and pains of the world, adds, in a compensatory regime, understanding or even reconciliation with destiny, but not enlightenment (*Haina, Auriga*)⁹.

⁸ Aurelia Mocanu, *op. cit.*, pp. 21–22.

⁹ Cătălin Davidescu, *op. cit.*, pp. 6–8.

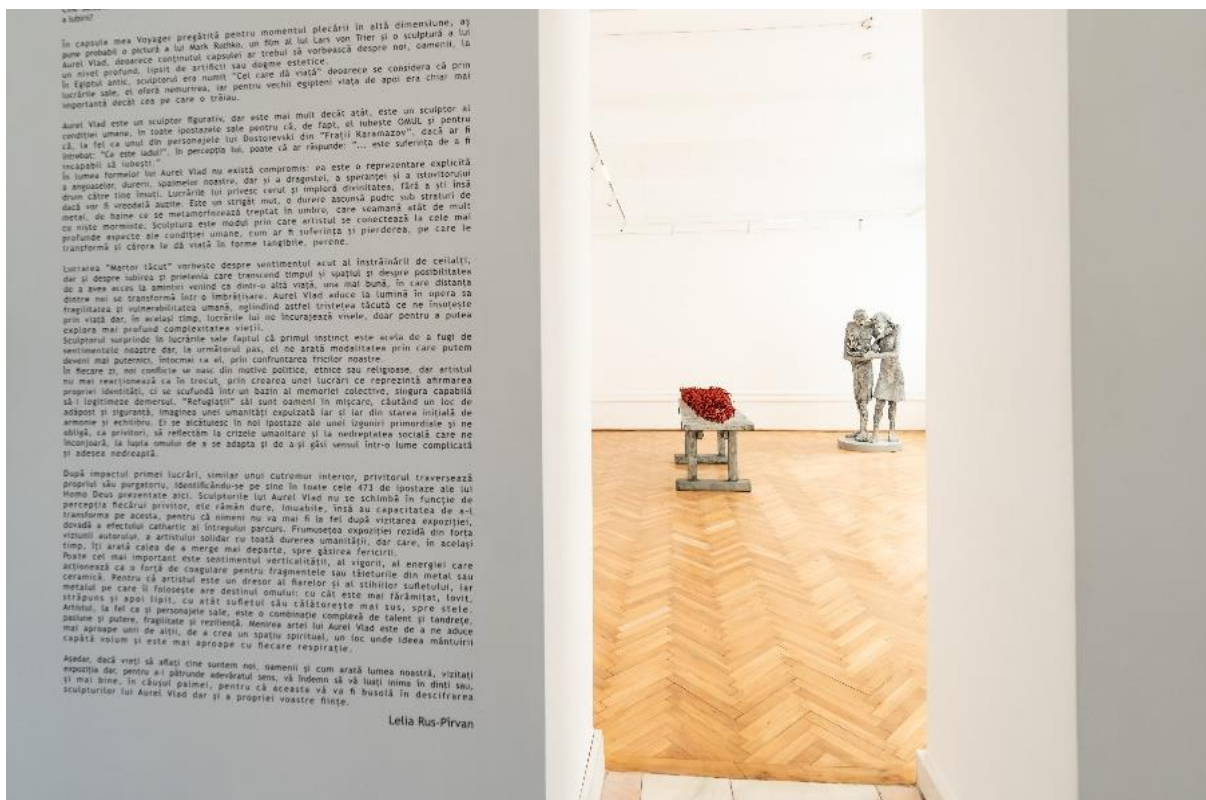


Fig. 9. Overview from the Aurel Vlad's Exhibition, Constanța Art Museum, 2023.

<https://www.facebook.com/muzeuldeartacta/posts/pfbid02qgpVjezVc>

Foto credit: Alin Panaite, Liviu Vlăsceanu.

There is nothing ostentatious in Aurel Vlad's art. Happiness can emerge if we try to overcome our own anxieties, and the theme of dread follows the artist through his entire existence. His world abounds in archetypal characters, whose whims and gestures bring into question the human condition, with a perpetual balance between hope and despair. In addition to these major coordinates, the work that gives the title of the exhibition, *An Almost Happy World*, calibrates in a certain sense the idea of power, bringing into discussion the role of the individual and the crowd, the subject being frequently found in his artistic thinking: "all my works I'm part of an endless convoy".

Heroes made of scrap metal occupy a privileged place in the artist's work after 1984. This recycled raw material becomes epidermis, shell and plate, constantly reminding of the impermanence and fragility of the human being. But, there is always hope in Aurel Vlad's universe, there is that spark that brightens our lives. His characters overwhelm with the desire to achieve their own ideals: *A Battered Icarus* is caught in a moment of precarious balance between rise and fall, *The Refugees* metabolize their traumas and Adam and Eve search for their purpose, expelled from a Paradise in which they do not they found their purpose. The naked bodies, hidden by the primordial pair, betray a huge soul void. We find an Adam bent under an eternal burden and an Eve so contorted that, in the gesture of hiding her nakedness, she acquires more and more obviously the torturous posture of *The Bent Man*.

Last but not least, the emotional personal life stories tell us that Aurel Vlad's entire work touches a wound, activating a soul tension that brings back to the present an older

statement of the artist: "For me (un)quietness is not a game of words, but a state"¹⁰. There are, I think, many affinities between his inner structure, between his way of being, not only from an artistic point of view, and the way of being of a silent volcano. With a gentle air, which probably derives from his wisdom, with a temperance unaffected by humor, with an unparalleled sense of propriety, Aurel Vlad gives the impression of a friendly calm. However, looking at his workshop, the polymorphic, invasive, overwhelming creatures that attack from all angles, you realize that his social serenity is only the attempt at peaceful coexistence of an educated soul, but which, artistically speaking, boils, generates dangerous explosions and modifies, without concessions, the landscapes around him. In the world, Aurel has a sedate and imperturbable profile of mountainous eminence. When he sees himself around his tools and under the favorable shadow of the workshop, he begins to unleash and erupt like a volcano returned, after silence, to change everything around...¹¹.



Fig. 10. Aurel Vlad, *Silent Witness*, technique: ceramic H 250 cm Photo source: <https://www.facebook.com/muzeuldeartacta/posts/pfbid02qgpVjezVc>.
Foto credit: Alin Panaite, Liviu Vlăsceanu

The pedagogical dimension of this exhibition resides, beyond the open message, in its extraordinary technical achievement. I had the privilege of witnessing the disclosure to young people of the technical aspects by Professor Aurel Vlad. We thus learned that, although two decades ago the artist was called "The Woodman", in recent years, zinc sheet has become the preferred material in which the artist chose to coagulate his thoughts and emotions. Thus, the impressive-sized forms carry elaborate internal structures, while the small-sized pieces render in detail gestural and facial expressions, with the acuity of a theatrical act. When a work takes the form of inner thought, says the artist, then you will know it is ready and every detail will be superfluous. Works only live when they are seen by the public, so be honest with yourself

¹⁰ Mihaela Velea. 2022. *How happiness is (t)rated*. București: Printex, pp. 14–15.

¹¹ Cristina Bolborea. 2016. *Silent Witness*. București: Editura UNArte, p. 7.

so that your works speak to the public about your inner truth. Look for the material that expresses you best, because today, you have a choice. Your challenge will be to keep up with technological breakthroughs, but even so, only your consistency with yourself will make your works relevant works of art.

The exhibition enjoys a real interest, both from expert critics and from the public. We have organized guided tours, because people want to know more about these creatures that populate the imaginative universe of an exceptional artist. Those who know him, are impressed by the short time in which all these works were brought to life. Those who have not had the joy of meeting him until now, are impressed by his human quality, his modesty, directly proportional to the scope of his works¹².

Made of zinc sheet - under the visible rivets, which seem to form imaginary maps, you have the impression that life is pulsating, and under the metal cover you can feel the rush of blood, defying the law of gravity -, pressed in burnt and colored earths, monumental or of Lilliputian dimensions, Aurel Vlad's works are just as many microcosms. Monochrome predominates, the metallic gray of the zinc leaving the impression of relief engravings, but there are also spots of color.

Disturbingly expressive are the faces and bodies that make up the sculptural ensembles "Refugees" and "An almost happy world". Each body is unique, unrepeatably as an emotion, as a state, as are we, me, you, them... Each one is part of a whole, a community, which acts according to the same laws, sometimes looking down at the ground, sometimes with raised eyes to the sky

"You" is a pretext to discover ourselves through the eyes of others. Visiting Aurel Vlad's exhibition, you get the impression that you are entering an inner museum of emotions, moods, and the joy that results from the contemplation of an imperfect but painfully beautiful world.

The keystone of the "You" exhibition is, in my opinion and not only, the profound humanist message conveyed by the first monumental work of the exhibition, the one in which the shadow of man embraces, with a conscious gesture, which leaves no room for... coincidence, the shadow of the dog - of the domesticated wolf - a reliable friend, with whom man has traveled the long path of his evolution, "Silent witness" of thoughts that do not need to be verbalized to be understood.

The "You" exhibition remains open at the Art Museum until November 30. Its curator is Dr. Lelia Rus-Pîrvan, director of the Constanta Art Museum, whose words about "You" are an integral part of the exhibition. You will see in what way.

So, if you are passing through the area and see the "Eclipsa" statuary group, strategically positioned in the open air, close to the entrance to the museum, you should definitely take the time to see this unique, unrepeatably and surprising exhibition¹³.

¹² Mădălina Mirea. 2019. "Non laciare ogni speranza voi, ch'entrate". In *Aurel Vlad. Hai, mergi!*. București: Editura Centrul de Cultură Palatele Brâncovenești, pp. 3–4.

¹³ Mirela Stîngă. 2023. "You! an invitation to meditation in the universe of the sculptor Aurel Vlad". In *Tomis Magazine*. Retrieved March 21, 2024, from <https://www.revistatomis.ro/2023/09/22/tu-o-invitatie-la-meditatie-in-universul-sculptorului-aurel-vlad/>.

2. Conclusion

"You", me, us... Bucharest sculptor Aurel Vlad invites us, this autumn, at the Constanța Art Museum to discover ourselves, to find Man, in all his majesty and unhappiness, in an exhibition-event, "painfully beautiful", as described by his younger colleague, the sculptor Lelia Rus-Pîrvan, who was also his student at the National University of Arts in Bucharest.

Aurel Vlad's exhibition, called "You", has in its center Man - a divine creation - banished from Heaven, whose perpetual fall and struggle continues with himself, with his inabilities and chimeras, with the wolves that inhabit him, the white and the black, the good and the bad, is surpassed only by its elevation, by the etherization of its experiences.

The ultimate creation, the thoughts, the tree of life, "Judgment," the expulsion from heaven, the primordial couple, the "Angel's Child," the blameless fruit of an earthly union between Him and Her, "Jacob's Struggle with the Angel," unequal and crushing, but so uplifting, like "The Fall of Icarus" are some of the themes that conquer Aurel Vlad's creation¹⁴.

In Ancient Egypt, the sculptor was called "*He who gives life*" because it was believed that he granted immortality through his works; for the ancient Egyptians, the afterlife was even more important than the life they lived, and sensed. The artist himself is related to his characters- his personality and persona are a unique marriage of talent and tenderness, of passion and strength, of fragility and resilience. The purpose of Aurel Vlad's art is to bring us closer to each other, to create a spiritual space, a place where the idea of salvation appears closer with each breath we take.

In conclusion, if you want to know who we, humans are and what our world looks like, visit the exhibition; lift up your hearts, and wear them on your sleeve to feel and understand the artist's works but, more importantly, to feel and understand yourselves¹⁵.

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¹⁴ Mirela Stîngă, *op. cit.*, Retrieved March 21, 2024, from <https://www.revistatomis.ro/2023/09/22/tu-o-invitatie-la-meditatie-in-universul-sculptorului-aurel-vlad/>.

¹⁵ Lelia Rus Pîrvan, *op. cit.*, pp.74-77.