

BERTOLLE BAK

26.04.2026–10.01.2027

Museo Vincenzo Vela

Ligornetto

EN

BERTILLE BAK

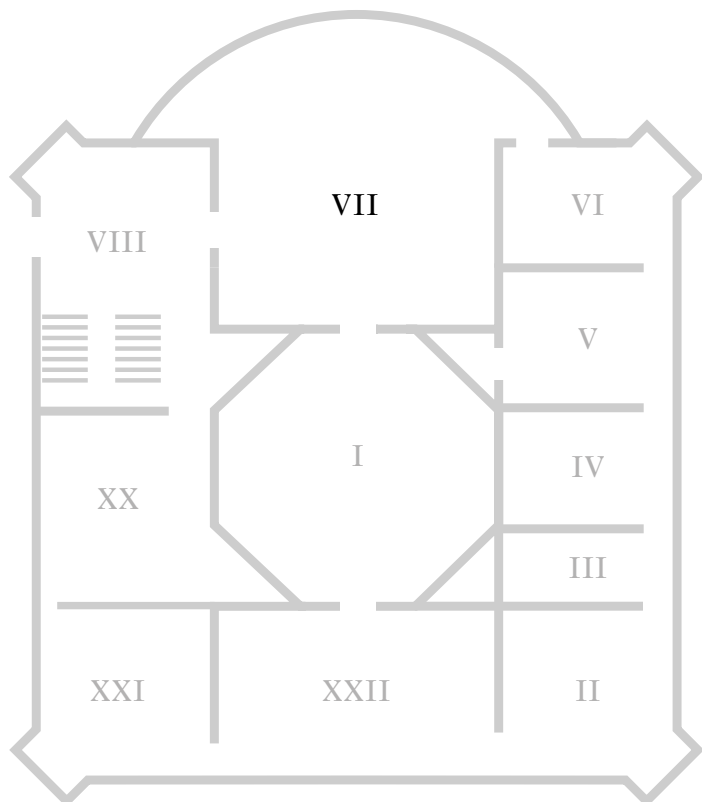
Voci dalla terra

Texts: Antonia Nessi, Rebecca Maspoli

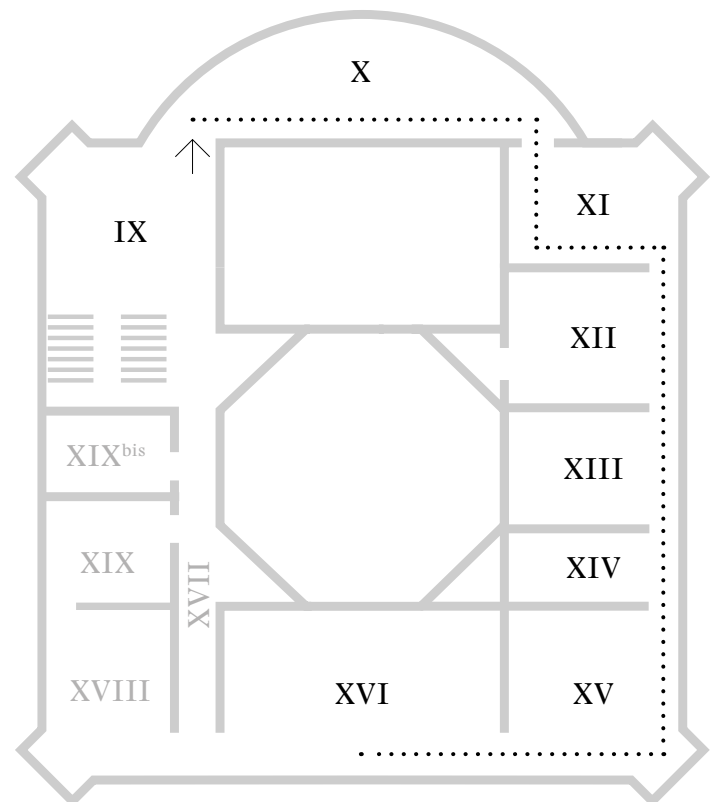
Translation: Sylvia Notini

With this exhibition—Bertille Bak’s first solo show in a Swiss museum institution—the Museo Vincenzo Vela confirms its own support and interest in contemporary art and its multiple expressions. Designed in collaboration with the artist, the exhibition begins on the ground floor of Villa Vela and then continues in the rooms on the first floor, interweaving an engaging dialogue with the permanent collection and in particular with *The Victims of Labour* (1882-83), a masterpiece of Vincenzo Vela’s later years.

Bertille Bak focuses her research on the human being, the importance of the encounter, and the topic of work. Guided in her artistic practice by a simultaneous feeling of awareness and empathy, she brings about exchanges with specific communities, forgotten or marginalized ones, whose everyday life she shares. By means of their direct engagement, with no pre-established script, she uses media such as videos, drawings, and installations to create an alternative narrative. Far-removed from the usual clichés, and avoiding a pietistic approach, the artist reveals complex realities from a new perspective, offering the people involved the chance to tell their stories in ways that can be subversive, or express self-irony. Poised between the social documentary and fiction, realism and the burlesque, she creates a “factory of stories” that reinvent the everyday and offer a form of poetic resistance vis-à-vis the difficulties of life. In the rooms of the Museum, her works grant *The Victims of Labour* a new interpretation, extending its meaning to contemporary reality and to the issue of work in a global and universal sense.



GROUND FLOOR



FIRST FLOOR

LE BERCEAU DU CHAOS

The exhibition begins in the room that hosts *The Victims of Labour* offering a significant comparison with Vincenzo Vela's work. The imposing *Le Berceau du Chaos* (The Cradle of Chaos) opens the exhibition dramatically, fostering a dialogue with Vela's high-relief, a masterpiece of social verismo and among Europe's first monuments built to honour the working class and the dignity of work. An apparent ode to carefreeness, the merry-go-round, according to the artist's own definition, is actually a "children-catcher": while resembling a game it traps childhood and projects it into the world of labour and exploitation. The oxymoronic value of this desolate carousel, accompanied by a dissonant melody, echoes the impact of Vela's miners, the victims of labour both today and in the past.

Le Berceau du Chaos, 2020
electro-mechanical installation,
metal, wood
Private collection

Concept and realization:
Charles-Henry Fertin, Atelier L'Ensemblier
Production: Fondazione Mario Merz, Turin

FIRST FLOOR

Room IX, balcony
Room XII, balcony

Le Berceau du Chaos, 2025
wood, acrylic
Courtesy of the artist

CORONS

The origin and meaning of Bertille Bak's work are closely tied to her life story. The granddaughter of coal miners from Nord-Pas-de-Calais, the artist spent her childhood in contact with the reality of the mining cities and of the immigrants—Polish, Belgian, Algerian, Moroccan, and Italian—who were once called upon to work in the coal mines. The encounter with these communities constitutes the starting point of her artistic work, which began in 2005. Experience in the field and her direct involvement with these interlocutors, who were invited to tell the story of their lives, would become essential elements making up Bertille Bak's working methodology.

In 2007 the artist first began to survey the complex of residential neighbourhoods in Nord-Pas-de-Calais before their restructuring or total destruction. The buildings, which she drew on rolls of paper, appear to be isolated from their context. Their typology is linked to a specific industrial heritage and the conception of architecture for the masses. However, upon closer examination the houses reveal details that allow us to glimpse the individuality of the people who live there. Akin to a diary, the drawings preserve traces of a territory undergoing profound change and that is losing its points of reference.

Dessins 03, 07, 15, 17, 19, 24, 25, 27, 31
2007–23
black ball-point pen on paper
fine art print on Hahnemühle paper
Courtesy of the artist

TU REDEVIENDRAS POUSSIÈRE

In this work Bertille Bak harkens back to the theme she developed from her artistic debut: she returns to Nord-Pas-de-Calais and to her family origins, involving the inhabitants of the region. Filmed in Barlin, where her grandparents lived, the video stages the battle against silicosis affecting the elderly members of the coal mining community and their wives, often widowed. Silicosis, also known as “the miner’s disease”, is caused by inhaling silica dust, which in time gradually reduces lung capacity. Focused on the testimony of the inhabitants, the video reveals the ambiguity and the questionable role of physicians and political authorities in recognizing the consequences and the problems of mining work. The video shows the everyday life of a community that is destined to disappear and its lost battle for justice. The use of unprofessional actors, the burlesque tone, the self-irony and the use of artificially and deliberately surreal expedients contribute to creating a tale that is as unlikely as it is close to the harshness of the reality.

Tu redeviendras poussière, 2017
FHD video, 24'
16:9, stereo
Courtesy of the artist

Production: artconnexion, Lille
With the support of Fondation de France
as part of the “Initiative d’Artiste” programme
Production co-funded by Pictanovo –
Fund for the support of associative
audio-visual creation

CHILDHOOD

Throughout his career Vincenzo Vela devoted himself to making portraits of children, for both funerary and domestic purposes. His portraits of children, which he at times executed with the help of photographs, reveal a rare sensitivity in grasping the postures typical of childhood. Distinguished by their intimate nature, these works evoke the fragility but also the emotional richness of the world of children.

With their attributes—the dove, flowers, the toy—Vela’s two sculptures harken back to the innocence and the honesty of youth. The childhood that is currently denied to many children and that is both fragile and precious features among the main themes of Bertille Bak’s research.

Vincenzo Vela (1820–1891)
Girl with Dove, 1855–65
plaster, original model
MVV - Ve90

Vincenzo Vela (1820–1891)
Portrait of a Child from the Ferraguti Family
with Flowers, ca. 1855–67
plaster, original model
MVV - Ve72

MINEUR MINEUR

The granddaughter of Polish-born coal miners, Bertille Bak is inspired by her own personal story to explore the theme of child labour. Five videos present at the same time the work of “underage miners” in five countries around the world associated with the extraction of raw materials: India (coal), Indonesia (tin), Thailand (gold), Bolivia (silver), and Madagascar (sapphires). Due to the travel restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the artist worked in close contact with the local associations as well as with boys and girls and their families, whom she met with remotely. Each film follows the typical day of these young miners as they navigate mazes, tunnels, and chutes in the language and images that are typical of the carefree world of children. Taking its distance from a dramatic and voyeuristic telling, the narrative assumes the semblances of a game leading to a final performance in which the children emerge from the underground areas, thus subverting their tragic fate. The drama thus seems to be transformed into a common, playful, and innocent activity. Nonetheless, it is a disenchanted and ephemeral kermesse: a chute pushes the children into the meanders of the earth once more, bringing them back to their everyday reality. This piece makes evident the subtle and perverse mechanisms of child labour, where the allure of amusement and enchantment underlie a cruel reality.

Mineur Mineur, 2022

installation

5 FHD synchronized videos on vertical screens, 15'

podium, metal structure, cardboard structure

9:16, stereo

Courtesy of the artist

**Production: Fondation des Artistes;
Institut français; La Criée centre d'art
contemporain, Rennes**

**With the support of Commission mécénat
de la Fondation des Artistes; Réseau Eau de
Coco; ONG Bel Avenir; Coalfield
Children Classes; Association Musol**

**Rainbow created by children as part
of a mediation project in collaboration
with the Swiss Red Cross, Museo Vincenzo
Vela, April 2026**

THIS MINE IS MINE

Bertille Bak organized workshops with some of the protagonists of the video *Mineur Mineur*, inviting them to draw the underground tunnels they crossed when they were working in the mines. The work *This mine is mine* consists of structures on which one must climb to be able to see the subtle coloured neons reproducing the drawings of the tunnels. The map of the routes taken inside the mines is made with different colours, depending on the shape of the layers and the depth of the underground galleries. The colours are bright, the exact opposite of the darkness and the gloom connected to the exploitation of children.

This mine is mine, 2022

metal structures, cardboard, luminous wires

Courtesy of the artist

Production: Fondazione Mario Merz, Turin

BLEUS DE TRAVAIL

Bleus de travail is part of the wide-ranging project that Bertille Bak has devoted to child labour in the contemporary world. The idea was born from the discovery, in a Moroccan market, of baby chicks coloured artificially and sold for tourists' amusement. The animals don't survive more than a week, as the tourists abandon them before leaving. In the video, the baby chicks that were dyed while still inside the egg, are taken away from the hens and dragged into the cogwheels of work right after hatching. Dressed in blue "work uniforms," they are catapulted into the air on electrical wires, forming a rainbow whose purpose is to brighten up the day-to-day lives of the golden eagles that reign over the top of the food chain. The scene thus becomes a metaphor for the pyramidal structure of our society and the absolute power of the strongest, who exploit the weakest until they reach the point of exhaustion. The charm of these brightly coloured docile baby chicks proves to be an illusion, the promise of pleasure that conceals a harsh reality.

***Bleus de travail*, 2020**
HD video, 10'
16:9, stereo
Courtesy of the artist

Production: Le Cyclop, Milly-la-Forêt

BOUSSA FROM THE NETHERLANDS

In Arabic, the word *boussa* means "kiss". The title of the two videos (*A Kiss from the Low Countries*) thus reminds us of words that we often find on a postcard or a travel souvenir. Nonetheless, in this case the tourists, in an ironic twist of fate, are the grey prawns fished in the North Sea, transported to Morocco to be shelled by cheap labour, and then shipped back to the Low Countries where they are sold. A paradoxical cycle that reflects the competitiveness of the multinationals, to the detriment of the rights and work conditions of the female workers. To describe their situation, Bertille Bak involved the workers employed by the Dutch company: in a cold factory, the shellers work at a frantic pace dictated by the piece work, challenging each other in racing games. The eyes of the crustaceans, the only element that is not exploited in the production chain, are recovered, dried, painted, and patiently packed in the souvenir-bottles of their long journey, symbolizing the absurdity of an activity that is as laborious as it is senseless, the emblem of globalized trade.

In the second video, the workers dressed as sirens sing in Dutch the "Internationale", the historical anthem about workers' struggles. The lines of the song, phonetically transcribed on the blackboard, are repeated by the women in a language they do not know, revealing the difficulty of the emancipation process.

***Boussa from the Netherlands*, 2017**

- 1** **FHD video, 19'**
16:9, stereo
- 2** **installation**
bottles, prawn eyes, acrylic, cork, metal, wood
- 3** **FHD video, 2'30"**
16:9, stereo

Courtesy of the artist

NATURE MORTE

In *Nature morte* Bertille Bak continues to examine the consequences of industrialization, showing how this has come to subsume the plant world as well, a silent victim of the same extraction and productive rationale. The video allows viewers to follow the path of flowers from when they are picked to when they are sold, from Colombia to France. We observe the ecological absurdity of the air traffic flows that try to satisfy a never-ending demand, all year round and especially during the festivities that mark the calendar. Akin to her previous works, Bak resorts to humour, special effects, and contrasts, creating an illusion of reality and at the same time a distancing from reality itself. It is a *décalage* that aims to lay bare the mechanisms of oppression and offer a chance for resistance.

An installation created ad hoc for the spaces of the Museo Vincenzo Vela transposes the reflection of the video to a more material and sculptural dimension. One hundred and twenty-seven frames are arranged on walls covered in floral wallpaper. Inside the frames are flower species that have become extinct, a reference to the funeral wreaths that were used in the nineteenth century. The flowers are no longer dried: they are made of plastic, manufactured mechanically. This attempt to bring nature back to life casts light on a paradox: industrial flowers, with their unreal whiteness, are the simulacra that will never truly be able to compensate for a loss: they are reduced to artificial memories of what at one time was alive. The hand that picked or sculpted them has surrendered to the machine that standardizes memory.

***Nature morte* *, 2023**

HD video, 23'

16:9, stereo

Courtesy of the artist

Production: Galerie Xippas, Paris

***Nature morte* **, 2026**

127 rounded frames

3D prints, wallpaper

Courtesy of the artist

**Production: Museo Vincenzo Vela,
Ligornetto**

Bertille Bak (*Arras 1983) lives and works in Paris. She was trained at the École nationale supérieure des beaux-arts in Paris, where she was taught by Christian Boltanski (2002-07), and at the Studio National des Arts Contemporains Le Fresnoy in Tourcoing (2007-08). Her first works, which she produced in 2005, focus on the populations of the mining cities in Northern France: a situation she is familiar with as her grandparents were miners in Pas-de-Calais. In the following years, the artist continued her research focused on human beings and their contemporary life, with particular attention addressed to the world of labour.

Her work has been presented in major exhibition venues both in France and abroad. In 2019, she was the recipient of the Mario Merz Prize. In 2025 the French Republic named her Chevalière des Arts et des Lettres.

AGENDA

Public guided tours

Sunday

10 May 2026

11.00

Guided tour with Antonia Nessi,
director and curator of the exhibition

Sunday

17 May 2026

11.00

International Museum Day

Sunday

14 June 2026

11.00

Guided tour with Anita Guglielmetti,
research associate

Sunday

4 October 2026

15.30

Guided tour with Pier Giorgio De Pinto,
artist

Sunday

15 November 2026

11.00

Guided tour with Rebecca Maspoli,
art historian

Guided tours included in the admission ticket

Registration appreciated: booking.vela@bak.admin.ch

“Con altri sguardi”

Sunday

6 September 2026

11.00

Conversation around the exhibition with
Orazio Martinetti, historian and journalist,
and Gianmarco Talamona, head of the photography
department at the State Archives of the Canton
of Ticino

Sunday

25 October 2026

11.00

Conversation around the exhibition with
Nelly Valsangiacomo, Professor of Contemporary
History at the University of Lausanne

Publication

Bertille Bak. Voci dalla terra

ed. by Antonia Nessi

texts by Antonia Nessi and Mohamed El Khatib

Federal Office of Culture,

Museo Vincenzo Vela, Ligornetto, 2026

languages: Italian, French and English

MUSEO VINCENZO VELA

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Opening hours

Tuesday to Friday

10:00–17:00

Saturday, Sunday and public holidays

10:00–18:00

Monday closed

Special openings

1 May

14 May, Ascension Day

25 May, Whit Monday

4 June, Corpus Christi

1 and 15 August

1 November

8 and 26 December

6 January

Closed

24, 25 and 31 December

1 January

Reservations

booking.vela@bak.admin.ch



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