

REGEN PROJECTS*

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Los Angeles Times

Sculpture of Disorienting Scale, Subtle Tension

Art Reviews

By CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT
TIMES STAFF WRITER

Fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm meet those of contemporary art in the sculpture of German artist **Stephan Balkenhol**—and why not? All three spent their formative teen years in the once-lovely, now gritty town of Kassel. Jacob (1785-1863) and Wilhelm (1786-1859) Grimm are local heroes. For Balkenhol, 45, Kassel meant youthful immersion in Documenta 4, the legendary exhibition of Post-Minimal and Conceptual art that galvanized many who saw it.

At Regen Projects, Balkenhol's latest batch of carved wood sculpture is dominated by "Big Man & Small Man," a two-part work abutting a wall. As with all his titles, this one is a blunt description that slowly turns into an enigma.

The bigger man—standing on his floor-bound pedestal, he's 8 feet tall—looks slightly younger than the smaller man, who's diminutive at just over 4½ feet. The smaller figure is hung high on the wall, which yields two disconcerting effects: His head is on about the same level as that of the bigger man, who looks over his shoulder at him, and, visually, the smaller man recedes in space, as if he's off in the distance and the bigger man is up close.

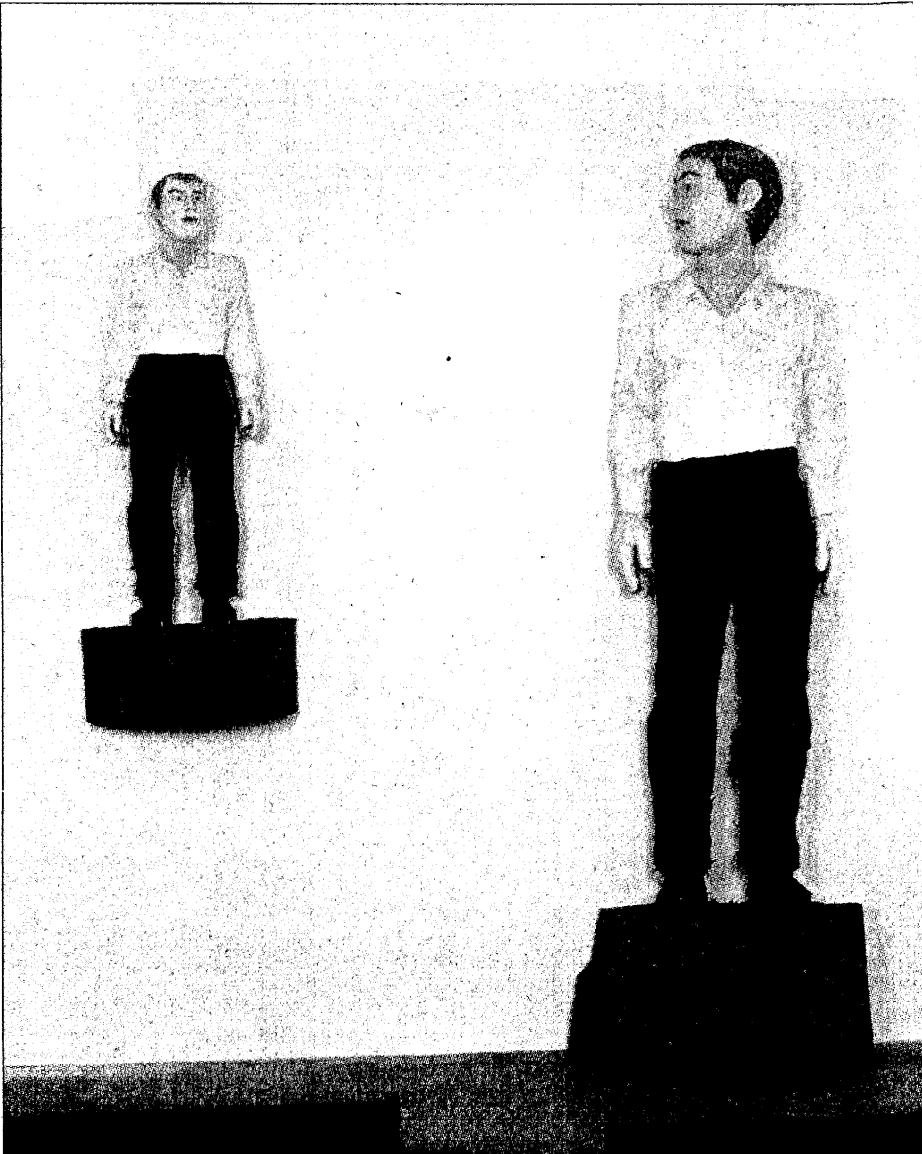
Where does that locate the viewer? You find yourself navigating the room in search of a comfortable place to stand in relation to these figures; the sculpture might be anchored to the wall, but it keeps you moving. Balkenhol plays with perception of scale in ways that physically disorient your body. Never life-size, his sculptures of people nonetheless get under your skin.

Six sculptures, three carved reliefs and two drawings (white crayon on sheets of wood painted black) make up this show of new work, Balkenhol's fourth at the gallery. As always, the sculptures are roughly but elegantly chiseled from rectangular blocks of wood and painted in flat, uninflected color. The method might be folkloric, but the art certainly isn't. The men wear nondescript uniforms of urban modernity: white shirt, black pants, brown shoes. Sophisticated totems, they're closer in style and feeling to the paintings of Alex Katz than to the carved and painted Expressionist sculptures of Balkenhol's countryman, Georg Baselitz.

Five chest-high posts feature small male figures on top. One stands on his head. One lies on his back with his arms and feet up, echoing the form of the post. A third appears to teeter on a thin red line. A fourth leans back as if off-balance. None of these simple, even slightly goofy calisthenics is of course genuine, since the solid figures are whittled directly from the post. Balkenhol builds subtle, quiet tension between object and space, always being straightforward in his means. There's no trickery here.

In the fifth, a male figure holds another, smaller, virtually identical figure, as if he were a ventriloquist's dummy. You half expect the bigger figure to make the smaller one talk—sort of the way a viewer discovers that he actively projects himself into Balkenhol's sculpture. Michelangelo famously said that his job as a sculptor was just to chip away the excess from a block of stone to let out the figure already lurking inside, and Balkenhol does that with wood. The particular genius of his quirky work is to let you know that you have a lot to do with making that figure live.

Regen Projects, 629 N. Almont Drive, West Hollywood, (310) 276-5424, through March 30. Closed Sunday and Monday.



JOSHUA WHITE

Stephan Balkenhol's "Big Man & Small Man" (2002) plays with perspective and the role of the viewer.

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