

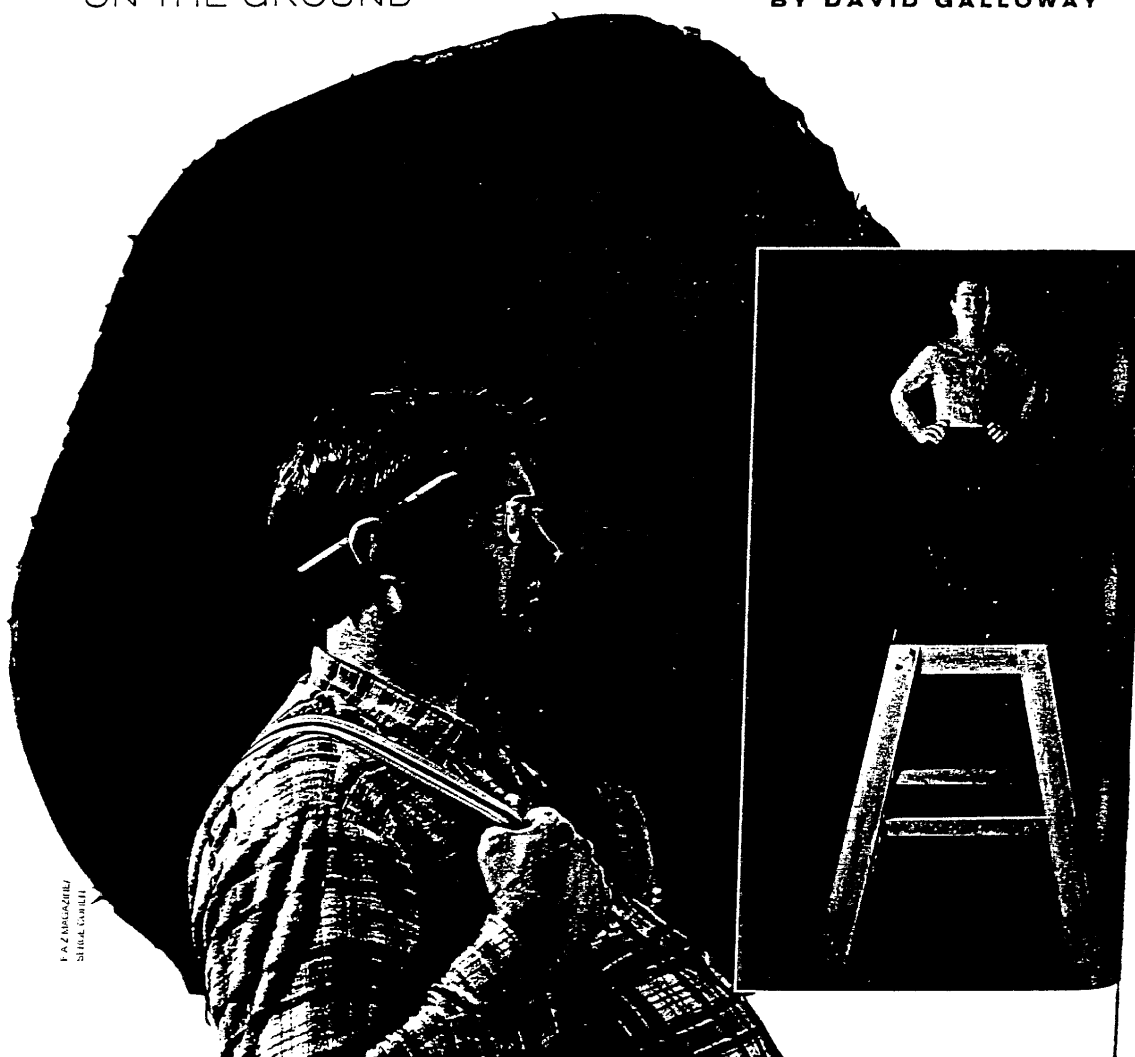
REGEN PROJECTS*

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DEADPAN IDOLS

THE ROUGHLY CARVED FIGURES STEPHAN BALKENHOL SETS UP HIGH ON PEDESTALS AREN'T YOUR USUAL HEROES—VICTORIOUS GENERALS AND POET LAUREATES. RATHER, THEY'RE EVERYDAY PEOPLE STANDING WITH HANDS ON HIPS AND FEET PLANTED FIRMLY ON THE GROUND

BY DAVID GALLOWAY





OPPOSITE Stephan Balkenhol and
his Man with Black Pants, 1987.
• ABOVE Three Hybrids, 1995.

For most visitors to Stephan Balkenhol's recent retrospective at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C. (on view at Montreal's Museum of Fine Arts through May 26), the 38-year-old German artist was a newcomer. "I'm lucky my work got to America at all," Balkenhol modestly reflects. "The cost of shipping sculpture makes most museum directors think twice. But Neal Benezra, the Hirshhorn's chief curator, spent nearly five years organizing the show."

Benezra had closely followed Balkenhol's development since 1988, when he first encountered the artist's lifelike wooden sculptures in an exhibition organized by the Basel Kunsthalle. The following year, the Hirshhorn acquired his *Man with Black Pants* (1987)—a deadpan, typically "proletarian" subject with hands on hips and both feet planted firmly on the ground.

"The more I saw of Balkenhol's work," Benezra recalls, "the more convinced I was of his ability to make sculpture of quality and timeliness that could also communicate with a broad audience." Indeed, since he first exhibited two full-length nudes at Mönchengladbach's Gallery Löhl in 1983, Balkenhol has emerged as one of the foremost German sculptors of his generation. Yet at first glance, many of his works might seem almost reactionary. Not only does he employ an unabashedly representational mode, but he often places his carved figures on pedestals—and in niches, too, high above the viewer's head. For Münster's "Sculpture Project" in 1987, marking the artist's international debut, his *Man with Green Shirt and White Pants* was mounted on a crumbling masonry wall above a tobacco shop. And *Man with Red Shirt and Gray Pants* (1991), conceived for the garden of the Städel Museum in Frankfurt, was poised in a second-story, neoclassical niche in a rear wall.

Balkenhol debuted in the United States with a 1993–94 show at Regen Projects in Los Angeles and one in 1994–95 at Barbara Gladstone in New York.

Yet neither victorious generals nor poet laureates were being honored here. Balkenhol's subjects are undistinguished "guys and gals" in casual modern dress—some relaxed, some standing at nervous attention as they observe the world passing by. They are not idealized figures but individualized ones, even though their specific identities are irrelevant. In this way they relate to the portrait photographs of Thomas Ruff. The most frequent posture adopted by Balkenhol's "Every(wo)man" balances the weight on one leg, with one hand planted akimbo on the opposite hip. It is a stance familiar from photographs of the artist himself. Similarly, he lurks in his portrait reliefs, too.

But it is the antiheroic stance that runs through this artist's works. Though echoing Rodin's *Thinker*, Balkenhol's *Seated Man* (1990) spurns classic ideals of male beauty to present us with a nondescript, bare-chested worker in black pants, caught in a moment of repose. He might be a stevedore—or a wood-carver. Even when distinct identities are implied—as in the relief portraits *Twelve Friends* (1988)—the subjects come off more broadly as members of a generation. One senses a cheerful, cheeky camaraderie here—much like the spirit that animates the work Balkenhol does with his students at the Karlsruhe Art Academy, where he has taught since 1991.

Like the playful depictions of animals he began to produce in 1985, his men and women testify to his commitment to figuration. "I like the fact that people can immediately identify with them," he says. Balkenhol's predilection for realism dates to his childhood—to 1972, when, as a 15-year-old, he sold tickets and

COURTESY HIRSHHORN MUSEUM AND SCULPTURE GARDEN

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figures by applying a thin, opaque coat of paint to indicate lips, eyes, hair, and clothing, leaving the untreated areas free to suggest skin tones. The realistic effect is thus heightened yet paradoxical, since the treatment of surfaces doesn't differentiate parts. The composition is uniformly jagged, revealing every bite of the chisel, in the manner of Baselitz. While no effort is made to create the superrealism of a Duane Hanson, the total effect is so lifelike that in 1992, when London's Hayward Gallery anchored one of Balkenhol's standing men in the Thames, mounted on a buoy, there were repeated calls to the police about a man "in danger." One stalwart passerby actually plunged into the river to rescue him. Similar reactions were prompted by the wall-mounted figure exhibited in Münster.

Balkenhol's animals are also linked to a rich tradition, particularly in the 19th century. Typically, the artist wanted "to explore what was still valid in that tradition." In addition to the classical horse and lion, his menagerie soon included the salamander, the grizzly, the pelican, and even the snail. The animals, some larger and some smaller than life-size, are often portrayed with a miniature human companion, leading Balkenhol to describe the series in his own wry, tongue-in-cheek

manner as "the adventures of the small man in white shirt and black pants." The remark points to a fundamental difference between his figures of animals and those of solitary people. While the latter typically seem isolated and bereft of personal histories, the "small man" finds companionship and adventure in the animal kingdom—riding on a dolphin, climbing the neck of a giraffe to take a glimpse of the horizon, standing astride the backs of two crocodiles. In *Man with Salamander* (1993), he seems to be bidding the reptile to waltz and even in *Man with Bull* (1994), there is no sense of threat but a Rousseau-like air of playful tranquility.

Like all of Balkenhol's works, the animal compositions are either mounted on scaffoldlike pedestals or form a continuous part of the block from which the pieces are carved. And with the aid of a power saw, hammer, and chisels, such compositions emerge with furious speed, as though the artist were bent on freeing the life trapped within. The most remarkable ensemble is a colony of 57 penguins (1991), completed in a mere ten days. The number of figures echoes the artist's year of birth, 1957, but the "decision to produce an entire colony resulted," Balkenhol explains, "from my

admiration for the birds' socializing behavior." During his student years he often observed and sketched them at Hamburg's Hagenbeck Zoo. Ammann, the director of Frankfurt's Museum of Modern Art, was so determined to acquire the work, despite a yawning budget deficit, that he advertised for 57 sponsors to "adopt" the colony. He found them almost overnight.

The accessibility of such works, the spontaneous pleasure they give, has led some critics and colleagues to dismiss Balkenhol as a popularizer, out of touch with the postmodernist spirit. Free of any intimation of angst, Balkenhol's oeuvre is suffused with a compelling humanism that his detractors have seized on as sentimental. The cruelest complaints have come from Thomas Schütte, himself a versatile sculptor, who charges his colleague with a lack of intellectual content and an assembly-line approach to production.

In a "conversation" printed in the catalogue that accompanied a Balkenhol exhibition at Rotterdam's Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art in 1992, Schütte remarked, "If you say something three times, it must be enough. And as for diffusion, we have an excellent distribution system, as well as photography. Today, you don't have to tell the same joke for three years." In response, Balkenhol insists that, while he may repeat such a figure as his adventure-seeking "man in white shirt and black pants," each new incarnation differs significantly from its predecessors. Furthermore, the naturalistic aspect that made Balkenhol seem reactionary to some critics only a decade ago, now seems prophetic. Throughout Europe, but particularly in Germany, a renewed interest in figuration is the most powerful trend to have emerged in the essentially trendless 1990s.

The entire debate about isms and idioms leaves Balkenhol cheerfully unfazed. He is a shy man with a gentle, generous sense of humor which he freely shares with his students at the Karlsruhe Academy. They, in turn, help him maintain "a critical distance" from his own idiom. Furthermore, he knows that he is working in a rich tradition and is convinced "that its potential is still far from exhausted." And he knows that, in an age that bombards us with ever more extreme visual representations, his work can still make even casual passersby stop, stare, and smile. ■

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Three Big Nudes, 1993, without the pathos and narrative implications of Balkenhol's Expressionist forebears.

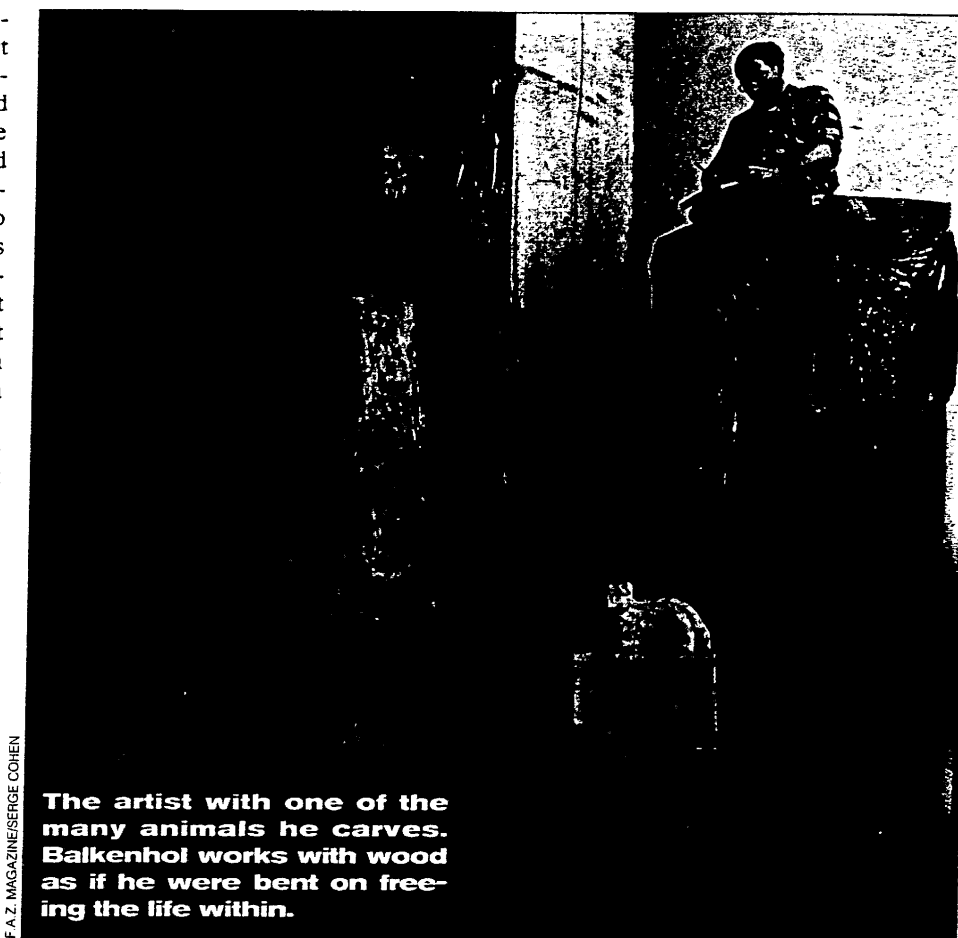
COURTESY JOHNNEN & SCHÖTTE

catalogues at Documenta, the international exhibition of contemporary art held every five years in Kassel, Germany. In his free time there, he would visit the hall devoted to the figurative works of the American Pop artists and photorealists—a special presentation curated by Jean-Christophe Ammann, who was later to become one of Balkenhol's most influential patrons. Given the vigorously abstract bias of postwar German art (inspired, in part, by American Abstract Expressionists), this fresh new wind from the New World amounted to a revolution in the eyes of many younger artists.

Balkenhol went on to sidestep the Conceptual-art bias of the Düsseldorf Art Academy—which was then dominated by the spirit of Joseph Beuys—enrolling instead in the more traditional courses offered in Hamburg. He eventually became the studio assistant of Ulrich Rückriem, known for his mathematically precise split-stone compositions and like Rückriem, who incorporates the unpredictable irregularities that occur when his blocks of dolomite are split apart, Balkenhol accepts the splits effected by wedges and chisels, and the fissures as wood dries out. Nevertheless, Balkenhol describes his former teacher as “a desktop artist” who plots his works on paper and leaves the execution to quarry assistants. “I’m grateful for what he taught me about the technique,” Balkenhol reflects, “but the best thing Rückriem gave me was something to rebel against.”

Though he experimented with a variety of styles after entering the Hamburg Academy in 1976, Balkenhol soon reaffirmed the affinity for realism he felt as a schoolboy in Kassel. Furthermore, even his more conceptual ventures had an implicit mimetic dimension. Around 1980, for example, he and fellow classmate Michelle Bourgeois created frozen-fabric outdoor installations by draping chairs and steps and tunnels with damp fabric and exhibiting the icy castings, which collapsed into an unidentifiable mass as they thawed. In another reality-based conceptual project, subsequently destroyed, Balkenhol used texts, photographs, and interviews to produce a study of the decaying French mining town of Longwy. He now produces most of his work near the French town of Meisenthal, not far from the German border. On a property he acquired there in 1992, he has built a spacious, no-frills studio. He and the artist Alenka Klenencic live in the nearby farmhouse with their four-year-old son, Konstantin.

Looking back on the recognition he has



The artist with one of the many animals he carves. Balkenhol works with wood as if he were bent on freeing the life within.

achieved since his first figures were exhibited in 1982, the artist seems genuinely astonished by his success. “At the time,” he recalls, “it was taboo to work figuratively, but I wanted to find out what was still possible.” So he traveled throughout Europe and as far away as Egypt, studying, photographing, and sketching the sculptural traditions of the past. While he found the startling perfectionism of Roman portrait statuary to be curiously empty, he was impressed with the Egyptians’ “fascinating aura of eternity and tranquility.” Their inspiration is apparent in his *Three Hybrids*, completed in 1995, which consists of a trio of men with animal heads. But whereas the Egyptian god Horus was often represented as a man with the head of a falcon, and Anubis with that of a jackal—images intended to strike fear and respect into the viewer’s heart—Balkenhol’s cow and bird are tame creatures, and even his lion seems as harmless as Bert Lahr in *The Wizard of Oz*.

Early in his career, Balkenhol worked with all the traditional sculptural materials, including bronze, granite, and marble. But it was a series of heads from 1981, roughly kneaded in clay, that established his own idiom, though he soon

found wood to be the most articulate for his purposes. Conveniently, timber was a major import for the harbor city of Hamburg, where the artist remained for several years after completing his formal studies. “With wood,” he says, “I can achieve a sense of vitality not possible in marble or bronze.” African wawa wood became his favorite. “It is a fast-growing, thick-stemmed tree,” he explains. “And because the trees are systematically cultivated in plantations, the wood is also environmentally correct.” A pair of gigantic portrait heads (1982) and full-length figures of a man and a woman (1983) were the first major works in the medium. Because the latter are nudes, they evoke some Expressionist antecedents, including Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. But Balkenhol insists that he rejected the pathos and narrative implications of those artists’ works. The casual dress of subsequent figures helped to neutralize their potential “expressiveness.”

Nonetheless, it must be acknowledged that painted wooden sculpture has a strong modernist tradition in Germany, including the three-dimensional works of Georg Baselitz. But it also has affinities to the “naive” folk arts of Poland and eastern Europe. Balkenhol completes his