

REGEN PROJECTS *

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Emerging Sculptor

Stephan Balkenhol

by Stephanie Jacoby



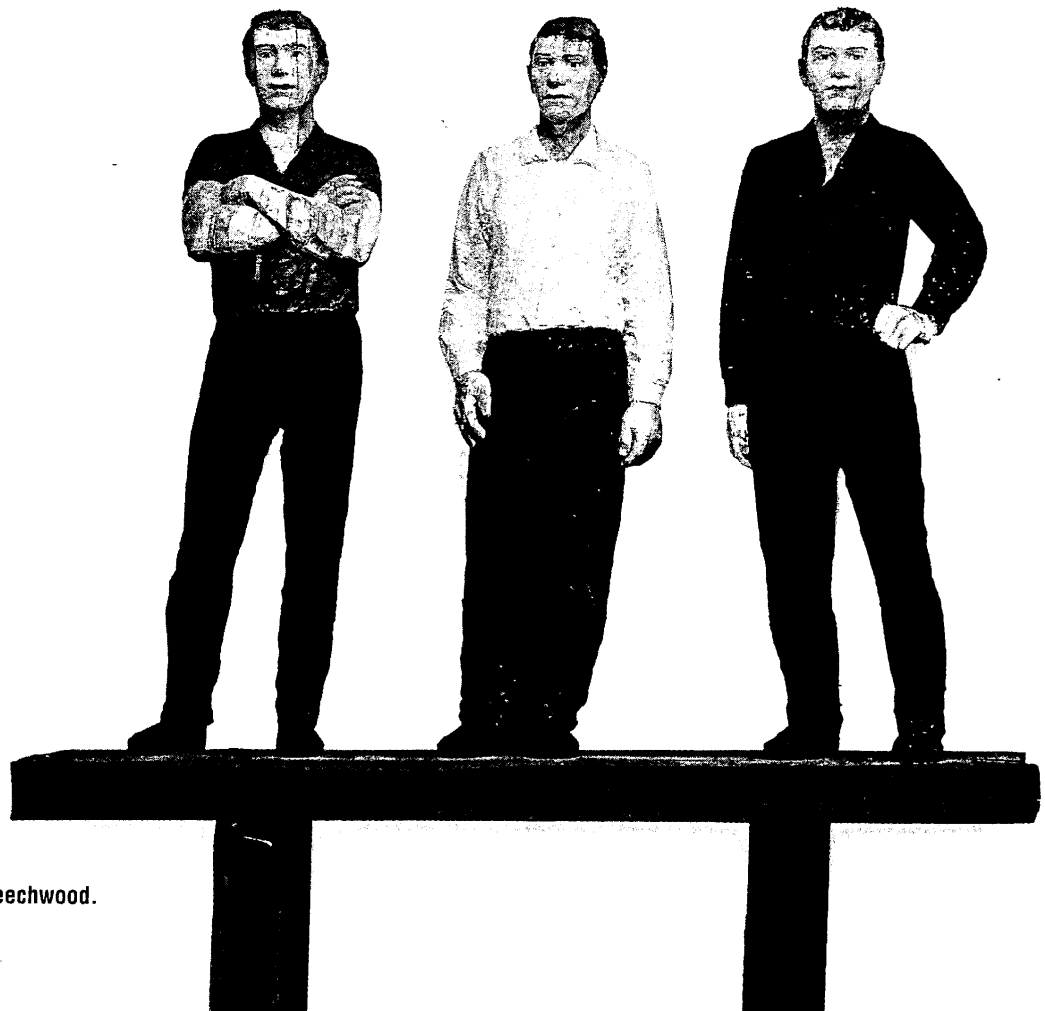
In February 1992 the young German artist Stephan Balkenhol installed an eight-foot-tall standing male figure on a buoy in the Thames River in London for the exhibition "Doubletake: Collective Memory and Current Art," organized by the Hayward Gallery. The wood statue caused much confusion among passers-by, many of whom called the police and several of whom attempted to come to its rescue. One man even jeopardized his life by jumping into the ice-cold river and had to be saved himself.

Within the last decade Balkenhol has established himself as one of Europe's most unorthodox sculptors by rejuvenating the tradition of siting figurative statuary in civic spaces. He has had major shows throughout Europe where he is represented in several museums. The first North American exhibition of Balkenhol's work, "Stephan Balkenhol: Sculptures and Drawings," is a 12-year survey organized by Neal Benezra, chief curator of the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington,

D.C. (through January 15, then traveling to the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts February 15–May 26). Thirty sculptures—freestanding male and female figures, busts, reliefs, and ensembles of animals and humans—in addition to a recent series of 16 large-scale drawings are included.

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, Balkenhol studied at the Hochschule für Bildende Künste in Hamburg, a school highly respected for its minimalist and conceptualist bent. As a student and later a studio assistant of the Minimalist sculptor Ulrich Rückriem, Balkenhol soon realized that the figurative tradition in sculpture had been interrupted in the 1960s. Startled by Minimalist dogma condemning figuration and eager to forge a direction for himself, Balkenhol scrutinized the history of art—from Egyptian and Archaic Greek sculpture to 20th-century Expressionism—in an effort to "reinvent the figure."

Balkenhol pursues tradition and innovation at the same time. He carves fig-



Three Figures, 1985. Painted beechwood.
Collection Elisabeth Ruhland.

ures by hand and without assistance, adding color to highlight hair and facial features and to define clothes or fur, leaving the bare, light-toned wood to render skin. Unlike the highly finished figurative bronze and stone sculpture of the classical tradition, honoring heroic, political and military achievement, Balkenhol's figures are utterly commonplace and have an unfinished quality that emphasizes their materiality. The artist's use of scale (figures are either larger or smaller than life-size) and his reintroduction of the base, which sculptors of abstract art had largely abandoned since the 1960s, establish subtle yet distinct boundaries between sculpture and viewer. Balkenhol explains: "I always wanted to keep the sculptures as open as possible. . . . I wanted an expression from which one can imagine all other states of mind, a point of departure from which everything is possible." Through generalized carving that is devoid of individualized characteristics, his sculpture provocatively occupies a space between art and life.

By creating mute likenesses in a medium often associated with the Expressionists tradition, Balkenhol sets his work apart from carved and painted wood sculpture by early 20th-century German Expressionists and from the related work of his contemporary, Georg Baselitz. Instead, Balkenhol continues the Minimalist tradition of his teacher, Rüdiger Kriem, in his insistence on material, plastic form and serial repetition, as evident in *Three Figures* (1985) and *Relief Heads 1-6* (1988). Each of these works appears to consist of disconnected elements joined only by their rigorous formal structure. In the late 1980s Balkenhol's sculpture, his relief heads in partic-



ular, had been compared to Jeff Wall's early photo series of young workers and to the portraits by the German photographer Thomas Ruff, who depicts young, middle-class men and women with expressionless faces, linked by the overall structure and their commonality.

Whereas in the 1980s Balkenhol fashioned primarily psychologically disengaged figures and animals, in 1990 he began to investigate narrative and the concerns that ensue and arrange sculptures in groups. Among the most notable works are an installation of three figures in the garden of the Städtische Galerie, Frankfurt (1991-94), and a flock of 57 penguins on individual pedestals, a particularly popular piece in the collection of the Museum für Moderne Kunst in Frankfurt. Balkenhol has also set out to carve small male figures interacting with docile undomesticated animals. He has further explored narrative content by carving and siting a black male and white female on

the roof of Museum Africa for the first Johannesburg Biennale, and creating personifications of a devil and an angel, which were included in this year's Carnegie International in Pittsburgh.

Balkenhol's sculptures, which have been shown, discussed, and collected in Europe since the mid-1980s, are now fated to make an impression on this side of the Atlantic. **S**

Stephanie Jacoby writes about contemporary art and resides in Washington, D.C.

left: Three portraits from *Relief Heads 1-6*, 1988. Poplar. Collection Elisabeth Ruhland.
below: *Small Man on a Giraffe*, 1990. Conifer. Courtesy of Galerie von Braunbehrens, Munich.

