

Galerie Rüdiger Schöttle

Stephan Balkenhol

Apr 17 – Jun 06, 2015

Opening: Thursday, Apr 16, 2015, 7 – 9 pm



Accident (Relief und halbnackter Mann), 2013,
Wawa wood, sculpture 170 x 24,5 x 24,5 cm / Relief 100 x 139 cm
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57 penguins carved from abachi wood constituted one of the works Stephan Balkenhol exhibited at the Museum für Moderne Kunst Frankfurt/Main in 1991. Visitors were thrilled by this colony of penguins that presented itself in a variety of poses: squatting, standing up, lying down, breeding, running, swimming. At first glance, the sculptures carved from a single block of wood appear simple in their choice of subject, and yet they bespeak not only the virtuosity of the artist's craft, but also his constant questioning of human existence. After all, human beings have been at the center of Stephen Balkenhol's art for more than thirty years. Along with the by now numerous carved "human penguins" – men in white shirts and black pants – which greatly outnumber the Frankfurt penguins in quantity and variation, Stephan Balkenhol also explores the subject of man and woman, which was exemplified in no uncertain terms in his most recent, comprehensive, retrospective at the Landesmuseum in Linz, Austria: A red fan construction shows a man on one side and only by walking around the fan, the onlooker sees a woman depicted on the other side – both paradisiacally naked. Close-by, a "Hermaphrodite" (2013) writhes prettily on a wooden board and a "Satyr" (2014) relaxes in an erotic pose emulating the famed Barberini Faun. A nude man dressed only in a brown jacket and covering his face stands in front of a relief which, much like a cave painting, recalls the origins of human artistry.

Stephan Balkenhol has also created numerous public bronze sculptures, and, quite often, ordinary people are at the center of his attention. A bronze Balkenhol man in a white shirt and black pants balances on a wall – as a memorable symbol of the German Wende – near the former Todesstreifen (death strip) of the Berlin Wall ("Balancing Act," 2009). For Balkenhol, even a young Richard Wagner in Leipzig (2013) is first and foremost a human being; only the sculpture's 13-foot shadow attests to the composer's creative power. And a sculpture of the resistance fighter Jean Moulin in Metz (2014) simply shows the man without any sign of pathos.

Stephan Balkenhol stands firmly in the tradition of wood carvers and manages like no other in this medium to give new expression to human existence. His sculptures are at times gentle and made of hard wood, at times coarse and made of rather soft wood, and almost all of them consist of one single piece of wood. First, the sculptures are sawed from the woodblocks with chainsaws and are then peeled out with great precision with chisels and burins. Finally, the figures are painted. Despite their rough surface structure with protruding splinters, they are incredibly precise sculptures in human form.

One is immediately captivated by these figures that were virtually coaxed out of wood, and always stands before them in fascination. Galerie Rüdiger Schöttle will not show any penguins in the upcoming exhibition, but we are very excited about the new works of Stephan Balkenhol.

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