

The Times Magazine
 'Freeing the Spirit'
 June 1996
 Roger Boyes

FREEING the SPIRIT

Stephan Balkenhol, the German sculptor, celebrates the post-heroic age in his larger-than-life figures, Roger Boyes writes



HE IS NOT a Small Man in White Shirt and Black Trousers. He does not sit on alligators and he does not have a cow's head. No, Stephan Balkenhol (left) is actually a big, rather chubby man who, at this

moment, looks uncomfortable in a White Shirt, Black Tie and rented Dinner Jacket.

Germany's most talented wood sculptor is in a rush — "Can I borrow your cuff links?" — to attend a state banquet for Nelson Mandela. Dining with the great and the good is almost certainly not his métier. Mandela (visiting Bonn to drum up investment for South Africa) is a revolutionary hero who still stands on a pedestal: one of the few. Balkenhol has created a world of non-heroes, accidental men and women, standing on pedestals. He is in pursuit of Everyman, not Superman.

For two months, a cast of Balkenhol characters will be occupying the Saatchi Gallery. They are stoic figures, and even when they are given the head of an animal, most look as if they are waiting at a bus stop. Familiar figures: Man with a Green Shirt resembles a stranger at a bar who could, according to mood, bash you on the nose or buy you a drink. A large Woman with a Yellow Shirt is very large indeed, and could overwhelm you with love or ignore you completely. They baffle and intrigue, these ordinary people.

Critics, of course, have a field day with Balkenhol, pumping significance into his rough-hewn people and animals. In the view of James Lingford, Balkenhol's people have been extracted from a crowd. "In the crowd, the individual is freed from the tyranny of distance and transcends the limits of his own person. If Balkenhol's heads remain anonymous individuals, it is because they have a memory of the crowd embedded within them." Elias Canetti, after all, saw the crowd as "a state of absolute equality".

That seems closer to the mark than some of the political motives ascribed to Balkenhol.

One English critic sees

the Balkenhol figures as representing the confused identity of Germans after the merger of their two separate states. Balkenhol shrugs off this and other ponderous political interpretations. "My connections with the East are not particularly strong. I was only once there, in Magdeburg, after 1990."

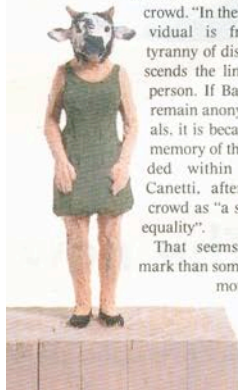
Balkenhol has, of course, watched with interest the East-West developments since the collapse of Communism, but his artistic roots are firmly embedded in the West. His father took a job teaching at the European School in Luxembourg, and Balkenhol grew up fluent in French. His studio is outside a French village just across the border from Germany.

Even so, there is a political context to Balkenhol. How could it be otherwise? Throughout the early Nineties there were scores of reports about the dismantling of Lenin busts in Eastern Europe. I once visited a strange centre of decapitated revolutionaries — stone body parts piled up in the outhouse of a Polish palace — and was struck by their force, even chipped and veined by spiderwebs. This is a post-heroic age; dissidents turned leaders, with the exception of Vaclav Havel, have been taken apart with the thoroughness of the statues of their Communist predecessors. Balkenhol makes monuments out of ordinary people, with their hands in their pockets; there is no room in his world for generals, cosmonauts and party chairmen.

Is that not a political statement? "I don't see it that way — it's simply that figurative sculpture was over-freighted with politics. The point was to cut the figure loose from politics, to free him."

Balkenhol works quickly — some say too quickly — whittling down single blocks of wood which can be African wawa or oak, or, if it is available, Lebanese cedar. Under the tutelage of Ulrich Rueckriem at the Hamburg Art Academy, he sculpted initially in dolomite. Rueckriem charts on paper very precise split-stone compositions, but leaves most of the execution to quarry assistants. Balkenhol rebelled somewhat against Rueckriem's techniques, took up wood and made sure that he was involved in every stage of his own work.

The actual sculpting usually occurs — in warm weather at least — on a patch of grass outside his studio near Meisenthal. Chain-smoking roll-up cigarettes, stripped down to shorts and shoes, he works like an artisan, with furious speed. The splits in the wood — which can be clearly seen in some of the figures at the Saatchi — are caused by the wedges and chisels, or by the drying out of the wood, and are accepted as part of the personality of the figure. Usually, too, he



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Stephan Balkenhol's *Head of a Man*, 1992 (above), and *Woman with Cowhead* (below), 1996

supervises the setting up of the exhibitions — the distances and angles between sculptures, the correct lighting are all critical for figurative display. The Saatchi organisers, however, have chosen to set up the exhibition without Balkenhol's direct involvement. "In this respect, the Saatchi exhibition will be a new experience."

London has seen Balkenhol before. In 1992, a good citizen jumped into the Thames to save a marooned figure who appeared to be on the brink of committing suicide. The despairing floating stranger was in fact Balkenhol's *Figure on a Buoy*. His would-be saviour had to be fished out of the river by the police. Balkenhol also placed a giant head — almost 12ft tall — on the old Blackfriars Bridge. That kind of scale has echoes of the heroes of Communist propaganda, yet the face was of a gentle, slightly disconcerted man with brown hair. The most desperate-looking of his sculptures are those set in the sides of

walls or on high ledges. Yet the despair is all in the setting, in the eye of the beholder.

Balkenhol's personal adventure is still in motion. Charles Saatchi has a nose for talent, and there is no doubt that the sculptor — still only 39 years old — is a man with promise.

A fellow sculptor, Thomas Schuette, claims that Balkenhol is repeating himself. "If you say something three times, it must be enough..." Balkenhol remembers the rebuke, pushes back his glasses, adjusts his bow-tie, and comments drily: "I must be naive — I've said nothing but nice things about Schuette." His defence is his work: "I am not repeating, I am going deeper." The fact is, after years of drift in the world of German sculpture, Balkenhol has rediscovered and reinvented the human figure. ●

Stephan Balkenhol's sculptures will be at the Saatchi Gallery, 98a Boundary Road, London NW8, from June 7 to July 29

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