

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Stayinart
The Sculptor Stephan Balkenhol
Kay Heymer

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Stephan balkenhol's sculptures are some of the most wellknown works in the contemporary sculpting scene in germany. His mostly casually loitering, neutral, 'normal' figures populate countless museums and open spaces in our cities. He predominantly sculpts human figures but has also offered us animal representations and fairy-tale denizens whose simple and unobtrusive quaint formal language contributed to his considerable success as well as igniting the spark of provocation for some critics and other representatives in the art world.

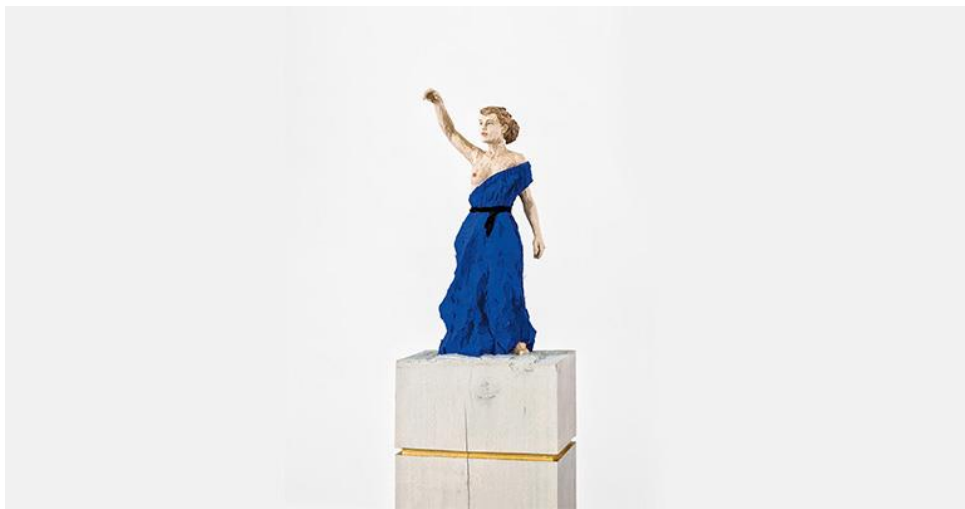


It's for that exact reason that the organiser of the colossal Documenta 13 2012 exhibition felt compelled to distance herself from the artist when one of his sculptures was placed in the tower of the St. Elisabeth church; the figure could be spotted from miles away and was a nod to a Balkenhol exhibition taking place in the place of worship in Kassel. Said event had nothing to do with the Documenta. Recently, critic Hanno Rauterberg published a polemic in Die Zeit magazine titled Holzköpfe für alle (Blockheads for everyone) where he attacked Balkenhol's work for being 'naïve, always the same art (...) of sweet sometimes cheerful triviality.'

Critiques lambasting said alleged superficiality and the decorative and harmless nature of art is a badge of honour Balkenhol shares with a packed list of incredibly successful artists whose work is accessible to a wide audience – just think of painters such as David Hockney or Alex Katz, whose works are tarred with the same brush. Interpreting ease of access and popularity as a defect speaks of fear rather than self-assurance and sovereignty. The examined works aren't superficial, rather the critique itself is if it relies on superficial first impressions of a work of art.

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Stephan Balkenhol's sculptures embody a conscious debate with the sculptural tradition of the classic antiquity and unite a sequence of partially opposite sculptural ideas and concepts. Balkenhol is a post-abstract, post-minimalist sculptor and his figures have been filtered by a modernist sieve, thus becoming an objective amorphous reduction of formal language. If they're undefined, 'neutral', stripped of their past or unliterary from an iconographic point of view, one should accept that they're so for the abovementioned reason. **Balkenhol's archetype of a man in a shirt and black trousers reflects the only formal element hewn from the individual granite block taken from his teacher, Ulrich Rückriem, or the lacquered steel box of Donald Judd.** Balkenhol's decision to create using his bare hands to bring forth the figure from the wooden trunk is by no means a revisionist approach to minimalist art when considering his resulting objects – he doesn't reject that sculptural tradition, rather incorporates and uses it for the benefit of his figures to create further content. American painter Alex Katz adopted the same approach when he observed the freely flowing huge formats by Jackson Pollock. One doesn't have to necessarily acknowledge this relationship to a modern narrative; however, it's decisively present and can't be neglected when judging these works.

Even though the literature on Stephan Balkenhol always refers to the lapidary neutrality of his painting execution, we can't ignore the precision and details of his formats. Many of his figures were sculpted featuring micro gestures, giving the impression of a well-defined ego – this becomes clear in his sculptural groups, e.g. the penguins at the Museum of Modern Art in Frankfurt, or the representation of dancing pairs which offer us a considerable range of details to observe and analyse. In the last thirty years of his sculptural work, Balkenhol has always further refined his formal language and used the most diverse objects to do so.



Reliefs were added to figures in early production stages, creating landscape portrayals of considerable artistic persuasiveness. His repertoire of figures went from the simple man on his feet in a shirt to its iterations interpreted and depicted in a number of different ways. These changes wash over the topoi (men, women, animals, chimaeras) bringing about transversal changes as well as affecting details such as posture and changes in size. Balkenhol reflected on fundamental sculptural issues: one of them was the socle. He often integrated it into the same block of wood he selected to carve his figures, thus making it inseparable from the figure itself. He often used tables or consoles for mounting a figure on the wall. His sculptures constantly differ from the actual size of the models he uses and, by doing so, highlights their artistry. Using this simple method Balkenhol can, without stepping into emotional excess, hint to the fact that art represents its own world.

With that narrative in mind, consider how his works always radiate a contemporary feel, making them unequivocal pieces playing a balancing act between the 20th and 21st century despite the artist's decision to mould them using sculptural forms which could be centuries older.