

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Hasta

"Everyman": The Indefinite and Universal Figures of Stephan Balkenhol

James Rodgers

9 February 2019



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Stephan Balkenhol, Sphaera, 2007. Kapitelplatz, Salzburg, Austria. <http://www.stiftungkunst.de/kultur/en/projekt/6-salzburg-art-project-stephan-balkenhol/>

SALZBURG, AUSTRIA –

In Kapitelplatz outside of the Salzburg cathedral, there rests a monumental sphere with a golden sheen that reflects the sun. The sculpture – titled Sphaera (2007)- is about nine meters high, including the pedestal. On top of this abstract orb stands a man, made of wood or bronze, dressed in white shirt and black trousers emanating a neutral expression. It is not a recognizable person, but a figurative depiction of any human figure.

Over a thousand miles away and across the North Sea there stands a similar statue outside of the Edinburgh City Council Offices. It too is raised, on a scaffolding about seven meters high, and depicts a man with identical clothes and expression wielding a slightly different stance. This work, from the same year and entitled Everyman, depicts nearly the same thing

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but, geographically, much further away. Said to represent “Joe Public”, it is a figurative sculpture of a man with a neutral expression that projects through the air.



Stephan Balkenhol, Everyman, 2007. Waverly Court, Edinburgh, Scotland. <https://canmore.org.uk/collection/1427844>

Figurative sculptures depicting the everyday man or woman lies at the center of German artist Stephan Balkenhol's (b. 1957) work. His sculptures, normally made from wood of an African wawa tree, glorify indistinguishable and ordinary people. They wear regular clothes and pose in normal stances, having no reference to real-life people. Stylistically, they are rough-cut and unpolished, accepting the cracks and defects that sometimes come with the medium. This, combined with their realism, neutral expression, and averted gazes creates an ambiguity which allows people to immediately identify with them. This serves multiple purposes. First, in his own words, Balkenhol “wanted an expression from which one could imagine all other states of mind, which was a starting point for everything else”. Sculptures such as Everyman and Sphaera serve to create an interaction with the audience by allowing viewers to project every emotion or psychological state there is.

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Stephan Balkenhol, Lady with Red Dress, 2017. Painted wawa wood, 60 x 60cm. Stephan Friedman Gallery, London.
<https://www.stephenfriedman.com/artists/stephan-balkenhol/artwork>

Second, it distances himself from being labelled as an Expressionist. His early three-dimensional statues and flat woodcuts were nudes which stylistically pulled on traditional techniques. This suggests an influence from the German expressionists of the early 20th century, such as Kirchner and Lehmbruck, who returned to traditional ways of producing art. To mark his difference from the expressionist movement, and in order to be more representative of real life, he began to clothe his figures.

From 1976 to 1982, he trained at the Hochschule für Bildende Künste in Hamburg and studied as an assistant to Ulrich Ruckreim. There, instead of absorbing the minimalist style of his teacher, he continued his work in the realist vein with an affinity for the human figure. Yet, Balkenhol is not tied down to a particular idiom; in fact, he pulls on a variety of sculptural traditions spanning cultures and eras. He re-introduced the classical pedestal to his sculptures, which is made from one continuous block of wood, and is particularly taken with Egyptian sculptural techniques, evident in *Three Hybrids* (1995) which features three men with animal heads.



Stephan Balkenhol, *Three Hybrids*, 1995. Synthetic polymer on wood. Joseph H. Hirshhorn Bequest Fund, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C. C., USA.

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https://www.saatchigallery.com/museums/FullSizeMuseumPhotos/ac_id/193/image_id/1131/imageno/10

Instead of depicting fierce animals, the heads are tame and domestic in contrast to their Egyptian counterparts. These figures are placed opposite a work titled Three Figures from 1985. It features three men, dressed exactly the same with similar poses, but attached by the neck are normal human heads. Through this, he highlights the companionship humans find in animals and its "playful tranquillity". Furthermore, works such as Three Hybrids are comical and engaging through this aspect, without commenting moral and political narratives or agendas.

The way Balkenhol fuses his works with everyday life lends themselves to accessibility and creates widespread popular appeal as he repeats the motif of the "everyman" in many of his sculptures. Because of this, some critics have accused him of simple-crowd pleasing or being out of touch with the "postmodernist spirit". In Edinburgh, the Everyman sculpture drew mixed feelings and criticism for its simple design, even though it had unanimously been selected by councillors in April 2007. In response, Balkenhol has said that all of his figures are slightly different. This is evident despite reincarnating the same subject matter, such as "Joe Public", the everyday human figure of society, due to their handmade quality as well as their figurative quality.

Ironically, Sphaera is culturally significant and recognisable specifically to German speakers – that is, it may represent the protagonist of the Austrian play Jedermann (Everyman). The play has been performed at the Salzburg Festival annually for the past hundred years and is based on several medieval mystery plays including the English morality play of the same name. Yet, an almost identical statue lies in Edinburgh, which is ostensibly interpreted differently. While seemingly contradictory, it reinforces the broad nature of these types of sculptures, that because of their neutral poses and similarities people can project cultural implications onto them without explicitly being expressed, thus providing accessibility to anyone despite their level of awareness of any given cultural environment. In Kapitelplatz, this is especially pertinent to tourists (such as myself) who may not be aware of the cultural significance of Jedermann.

Ultimately the indefinite figure, as stated before, is central to Balkenhol's work and is one of his greatest strengths because it is recognisable to everyone from every culture. In other words, the human figure is universal. Though not everyone looks the same, humans instinctually understand the structure of the human body and relates to its emotions. In that way it is easy to understand that the neutral expressions of these figures and paintings represent the entirety of human emotion. Additionally, by reducing the facial expressions of the human figure these works point to the expressiveness of gesture and other parts of the human body. This could be seen as why Balkenhol was able to successfully install (nearly) identical sculptures in two countries with different cultures and languages which project their own implications.

At the risk of taking a formalist approach, Balkenhol's work seems to demonstrate that art does not have to have a complex background or meaning in order to be accessible, nor does its accessibility necessarily diminish its artistic qualities or potential for deep and subjective meaning. In my view this is the real beauty of the "Everyman" – it can comment on the nature of physical human existence and our relationships today simply by being relatable and accessible.

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