

# thomas houseago: where the wild things are

(sainsbury centre for visual arts, norwich)

Sculptor Thomas Houseago's exhibition '*Where the Wild Things Are*' opened on the 30th July at the Sainsbury Centre (SCVA) in Norwich. His early plaster, plywood and rebar constructions are housed inside the Modern Life Café, while more recent bronze and aluminium castings are situated outside in the sculpture garden, visible through Norman Foster's expansive window and nestled in with Henry Moore's mesmerising *Draped Reclining Woman*.

The comparison with Moore is interesting, if inevitable. Whether Houseago's work was sat next to a Moore or not, we would be inclined to draw comparisons; just as Picasso dominated 20th century painting to the extent that every artist was obliged to *deal* with him (recall Lee Krasner's anecdote about Pollock hurling a Picasso tome across the room before bitterly exclaiming 'that fucking Picasso, he's done everything!'), so sculptors since Moore have been forced to do the same. In addition, comparing Houseago to great modernist sculptors is by no means perverse, wanton or unnecessary – Houseago is steeped in art history, his enthusiasm for great predecessors (Epstein, Paolozzi, Brâncusi) is inscribed into every surface of his monumental, statuesque figures. Having heard him speak about his influences, it is clear that this ebullience is not passing or contrived; he is fond of the phrase 'fucked up', gleefully deploying it as an unreserved plaudit for Boccioni's *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*, Magritte's *L'Ellipse* and even Michaelangelo's *David* ('a very, very, very fucked up sculpture').

Of course Moore distorted the figure, but he did so with a gentleness and voluptuousness that, in comparison to Houseago, delivered serene, welcoming and often maternal figurations. Indeed, as one scans across the garden at the SCVA, Moore's *Draped Reclining Woman* offers a moment's pause in amongst Houseago's thick-set, confrontational pieces – the shrunken head and blinking pinhole eyes of Moore's figure suggests an innocence that offsets its sturdy-yet-feminine torso, resulting in a wholly seductive geniality. Houseago's distortion is of a very different sort, but it is akin to Moore's in its attempt to gain an artistic distance from the pedestrian experience of the human form. Both artists seek a paradoxical realism in their abstraction by rendering the human through the eyes of an *artist* – one who sees the world in flux, the body in motion, and humanity in universal terms. But this is probably true of any modernist sculptor worth a damn – what is significant about Houseago's distortions?

Houseago's sculptures are definitely fucked up, but not in the way that Boccioni's distorted our perceptions of space and movement; not in the way that Giacometti's touched us with fragile human shadows; and not in the way that Paolozzi's splintered the human form into clusters of sensation (although Paolozzi is the most immediately recognisable touchstone in Houseago's work). Many of his sculptures strike us as *monsters*, like semi-decomposed aliens from a sci-fi film or primitive representations of demonic spirits. In fact, it is in this symbiosis between primitive totems and contemporary science fiction imagery that Houseago's work makes a lot of sense. He makes no bones about the continuity between African fang sculptures, Modigliani and Darth Vader, recognising the influence of African art on modernists, the influence of Epstein's *Rock Drill* on the Star Wars designers, and the influence of the science fiction aesthetic on Houseago's contemporaries (products of the

1970s, inheritors of a dwindling space-age optimism that's tinged with fear and menace). In Houseago's work, therefore, there is a constant process of re-interpretation; a juggling back-and-forth between the ancient, the modern and the contemporary, with an intoxicating swamp of references to wade about in.

Crucially though, Houseago's conviction is that this approach is not detached parasitism or stylistic incest, but part of an eternal process of human self-understanding, embodied by the heightened emotion and exaggerated form of masks and monsters. I suspect that, for Houseago, the carved heads of ancient cultures are fundamentally continuous with Boba Fett's helmet or Spiderman's mask, being stylised externalisations of human archetypes. As such, despite the sculptures' apparent gruesomeness and their pathetic decay, they are affirmationist and vital in their excited contemplation of human corporeality – Houseago's big hit, *Baby* (not on display in this exhibition), was developed in response to the growth of his own child; he witnessed his offspring learning to crawl, stand and walk – getting to grips with his new body – and was impressed by the unanimity of this process. Each of us has gone through the same small but monumental adventure; every beginning the same but different. Houseago hasn't stopped being delighted in the observation of human gesture, childishly finding his way about the form like a kid stumbling around on new legs.

Houseago, therefore, connects himself to an ancient and profound process – the exploration of naked human experience – but still values the role of the individual in the making of art. He is content to employ the unfashionable notion of 'expression', feeling apathetic in the face of the academic art that dominates British art schools and hoping always to put something of himself into the work. Houseago is undeniably informed by his heritage in this respect, he was brought up in Yorkshire among the football hooliganism of 80s Leeds, Northern DIY punk and post-punk, and the Beatles' popular avant-gardism. This heady mixture of male violence, anti-establishment rhetoric, rough-and-ready creativity and an avant-garde sensibility seems to underpin much of Houseago's practice. The roughness in his sculpture goes beyond the knobbed surfaces of a Giacometti and into a radical territory that connects his aesthetic to a manifesto of sorts: a punk attitude is at the root of these creations, sacrificing the bland sheen of the finished article for the raucous energy of process and, thereby, collapsing the assumption that art is about 'icy virtuosity' or big finance.

The atmosphere of violence and masculinity (drawn from his immersion in a masculine Northern England) is pervasive but, as well as being energetic, monumental and monstrous, these sculptures are fragile, sensitive, primitive and human. Their masculinity is derived from both stature and pose – the triangular bodies and chunky muscular legs suggest a characteristically male physicality, while many of the pieces snarl and lunge in vaguely threatening positions. These qualities lend the sculptures their urgency and vitality, although Houseago's method – and the way in which he lays it bare – is more crucial to this invigorating energy. All the pieces on display at the SCVA (and almost all of Houseago's sculptures that I have encountered) are rough-shod, seemingly 'unfinished' and executed with an evidently energetic process; some of the sculptures are lumpy like swamp monsters or *The Thing*, with big maggots of clay and dollops of plaster having been slapped into place. Others are teetering constructions of flat, roughly-cut plywood supporting heavy plaster masks, limbs and appendages – these are especially interesting since they are covered in rapid pencil lines that seem to have been drawn directly on to the wood but are, in fact, evidence of the original 2D drawing that Houseago has subsequently cast in plaster. Consequently, Houseago removes the disconnect between swift, immediate drawing and laborious, manual sculpting and, in leaving this process exposed to the viewer, he imbues his work with life, demystifies his art and undermines any preoccupations with banal craftsmanship. His work, in this way, suggests an urgency. Each sculpture has a proposal to make and Houseago is content to cobble together these rugged incarnations, get his point across, and move on to the next – no time wasted on polishing or preening.

The qualities of fragility/sensitivity and strength/power are presented simultaneously, recalling the faded monumentality of classical statues: absurd in their pomp but also profound in their defiant uselessness. The headless bodies don't strike us as emperors or popes, but as slightly melancholic figures; determined in their posture, but tragic in their disfiguring corrosion, they possess a certain romance. Like battered statues from bygone eras, the figures stand as 'monuments to nothing' in Houseago's words, championing the glory of public sculpture for its own sake. One piece, entitled *Hands and Feet III*, takes this proposition to its extreme: a rough plaster base supports a cluster of fossilised limbs, broken off at the knee or wrist and preserved in a late stage of decay. They are human ruins – nothing much left to see, but important in their implication: there used to be an abbey here, imagine the splendour.

The SCVA hasn't had an exhibition of sculpture for a long time and this show seems like a quiet departure from the gallery's previous focus: the relatively new director, Professor Paul Greenhalgh, has been keen to emphasise Robert Sainsbury's original affiliation with the modern and is, therefore, determined to keep the SCVA from becoming a museum. Houseago's sculptures are oddly prescient in this regard, since their modernity is elusive and disarming. The metal works in particular can look like classic modernist sculptures at first glance, only to reveal themselves on closer inspection. The hallmarks of their construction, the rugged composition, the pop culture aesthetics – all these things remind us of their freshness. *Rattlesnake Figure*, for instance, stands aloft in the sculpture garden with its totemic composition formed by a Picasso-esque figure; its arm raised like a *Demoiselle d'Avignon*. Look closer, however, and we can see chainsaw marks – the scars of production that embody Houseago's characteristic procedure: he fucks up the fucked up, in this case taking Picasso's once-shocking distortions of the human form and whacking them with a chainsaw.

Considering Houseago's modernity leads me to conclude with a remark about his position in the contemporary art world. Houseago defiantly swims against a great many currents in contemporary art, particularly in England: his work is not conceptual, overtly wrapped up in theory, coldly explicable or, crucially, abstract. I don't mean these trends to be taken as negatives that should be opposed; in fact, it is testament to Houseago's work that I should be gripped by it at all – I am fond of the theoretical and the abstract, and have been seduced by the academic rigour of minimalism as well as the philosophical hunt for grand artistic narratives that modernism and postmodernism both colluded with in their contradictory ways. The old tussle between ideology and poetry (in Barthes' terms) is in a very confusing place in 2012 – formalism made its point, conceptualism made its point and now, it seems, no-one is sure what their point is. Embracing figuration and creating these 'monuments to nothing' is, in a sense, a throwback to that awkward modernist/postmodern fusion that the likes of Beckett and Bacon perfected. Beckett moved towards the abstract and the conceptual in his later works, foreshadowing Kosuth's argument that, in the 20th century, art must take the place of philosophy as the principle forum for radical ideas. I've always been suspicious of the efficacy of art in this regard and felt art to be more of an *emulation* of philosophy – just as philosophy might be considered an emulation of science or, at the other end of the scale, craft an emulation of art. Houseago's approach is therefore welcome, since it makes no attempt at philosophising. It rejoins a grand tradition of conscious failure, desperate communication and sheer humanity as opposed to the arrogant ideas factory that the contemporary art world can sometimes resemble.

It is difficult to shake the feeling that Houseago's practice is somehow *retrogressive*, but thinking in these terms would clearly be to miss the point. Upon seeing Houseago's work, I immediately wanted to understand how it would fit into the 'story of art' and felt unsure about the directions it suggested. Viewing this exhibition, seeing him talk and reading his interviews made me not care and, beyond that, reminded me of some things I'd perhaps forgotten about. Houseago got me dewy-eyed about Brâncuși's serene beauty and viscerally excited about Boccioni's brilliant madness. Above all, he invited me to look again at the human form and see in it the beauty, power, vulnerability and tragedy that has always been there. Houseago is a vivacious, infectious and voluptuous

human being who conveys his enormous enthusiasm for art and humanity through these energising sculptures, and he makes it as difficult as possible for us not to feel the same.