

## MILAN

### Stephan Balkenhol

GALLERIA MONICA DE CARDENAS

Auguste Rodin famously studied the Belvedere Torso, and one of the primary lessons he learned from it was that an inert and fragmentary muscular posture can impart a profound sense of internal tension and intense psychological activity. This realization was Rodin's point of departure when he began working on sculptures and groups such as *The Thinker*, 1880–81, and *The Gates of Hell*, begun in 1880 and still unfinished at the artist's death in 1917. While in the first case he wanted to convey an intellectual drama through the representation of a male nude, characterized by a still body and tormented soul, in the second, he turned his attention to an investigation of the partial figure as an autonomous formal device—something that, over the course of the twentieth century, would evolve from the imitation of nature to the development of a new sculptural language, articulated in terms of form, syntax, and surface.

Stephan Balkenhol refers explicitly to Rodin in his early *Sitzender Mann* (Seated Man), 1990, and the allusion remains a valuable guide for thinking about the German artist's most recent production. For years, Balkenhol has been investigating figuration in sculpture through his preferred technique of carving directly into wood. His exploration of this technique is also aided by the addition of vivid colors, an analysis of subjects through drawing, and photography as a sampling of reality from which he can abstract an essential appearance.



Stephan Balkenhol,  
*Frau in schwarzem  
Kleid (Woman in Black  
Dress)*, 2013, painted  
wood, 67 x 7 7/8 x 7 7/8".

artist raises questions about a new monumentality in sculpture—questions that began with lessons learned from his teacher Ulrich Rückriem. This line of inquiry began as well with an in-depth and entirely ideological investigation of the “figure,” in the Latin sense of the word, which can be summarized as “plastic formation as historical and concrete fact that foreshadows another, equally concrete fact.” Even when the subjects are tied to the animal world (*Graue Katze* [Gray Cat]) or when the human figure emerges from a bas-relief (*Frau mit hellgrünem Hintergrund* [Woman with Light Green Background], *Mann auf schwarz-weißem Hintergrund* [Man on Black-and-White Background]), Balkenhol’s sculpture speaks of time and abstraction, stasis and psychological movement, history and its editing. (In this latter case, what might come to mind is the tradition of European wood sculpture and polyptychs as abstract compositions that begin with the staging of a figurative subject.) Finally, there was the odor of the show—wood and fresh paint—which helped give gallery visitors a perceptual dimension of the work and of the artist’s *modus operandi*, something not seen but sensed. It’s as if the gallery had become a continuation of the studio, but one cleansed of any distinguishing reference, an enigmatic space with a certain aroma and perceptual dimension.

—Paola Nicolini

Translated from Italian by Marguerite Shore.

All of these themes are profoundly tied to history, and in his recent solo show in Milan, they energetically reposed the question: What is sculpture? Indeed, the impetuous energy of the artist’s sculptural gesture; his interest in conveying the idea of a group of sculptures, beginning with individual pieces; his use of the pedestal as an integral part of the sculpture; and his attention to the relationship between sculpture as abstract structuring and as a language that emotionally organizes a space are all themes on which the observer can reflect, beginning with the view of three-dimensional human figures or partial figures. *Frau in schwarzem Kleid* (Woman in Black Dress) (all works 2013), for example, is an anonymous and disturbing presence, imprecise yet familiar, the portrait of a woman who is probably normal, yet extraordinarily distant and suspended in an indeterminate time. With her hair falling to her shoulders and her arms at her sides, she passively directs her gaze toward the viewer. Here, and in other partial figures such as *Kopf* (Head), the