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FÜR MODERNE KUNST

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STEPHAN BALKENHOL
at the MKM Museum Küppersmühle für Moderne Kunst
29.09.2006 - 28.01.2007

From 29 September 2006 to 28 January 2007, the MKM is presenting the most comprehensive overview of the work of the sculptor Stephan Balkenhol yet to be seen in Germany. The museum's collection includes such significant pieces as *Hexagon* and *Frieze* of 1988, which are on display in their entirety for the first time since their year of execution.

Stephan Balkenhol (b. 1957), who teaches at the Karlsruhe Art Academy, explores ever new facets of the aesthetic and substantial potentials of contemporary figurative sculpture. What can sculpture achieve today without positing one-dimensional meanings? Although Balkenhol's focus is primarily on the human figure, he repeatedly takes animals and architecture as points of departure. He creates certain basic prototypes – such as men and women in neutral clothing – that appear in diverse and continually new variations. His sculptures seem to derive from the reality around us, and their attire and posture can be clearly defined. And yet these figures, seemingly emotionless, remain strangely enigmatic, anonymous, and fictitious. They move along the thin line between recognition and doubt, proximity and distance – which is exactly what makes them so fascinating to the viewer.

Balkenhol's most important material is wood, carved and given a polychrome finish. Wood blocks simultaneously function as pedestals for the figures, and traces of the working process remain clearly visible in the final result. The character of the original tree is still present, its material being part and parcel of the sculptures' effect.

Balkenhol has succeeded in infusing fresh life into figurative sculpture, and this in a both compelling and unpretentious way. His sculptures are portraits without being true likenesses, monumental without being true monuments. They retain a calm reserve while definitely calling attention to themselves. Most importantly, the sculptures are determined neither emotionally nor narratively. Their underlying concept has been described by Andreas Franke as an "impulse counter to intellectually ironic designs."

The human beings, animals and buildings depicted generally stand for themselves alone, rather than for some covert situation or story waiting to be told. Their scale is reduced or enlarged, and the figures' attire, expressions, and frequently gestures are undramatic and neutral. When attributes appear, they are more confusing than explanatory – a *Man with an Amanita Mushroom* is simply a man with an amanita mushroom. The figure purposely leaves it up to viewers whether or not they wish to see more in him.

This open-endedness is fundamental to Balkenhol's art. As he once explained, "I want everything at once: sensuousness, expression, but not too much; vitality, but no superficial garrulousness; instantaneousness, but no anecdotes; wittiness, but no puns; self-irony, but no cynicism. And foremost, a beautiful, quiet, moving figure that says everything and nothing."

At the same time, Balkenhol's figures are deeply rooted in art history. Formal issues can provide the basis for a figure as much as an involvement with sculptural traditions or famous predecessors. The exhibition reflects both the artist's masterful craft and the references he makes to the history of ideas and cultures. It presents his comprehensive oeuvre on the basis of sculptures and reliefs, as well as related drawings and serigraphs ranging from the 1980s to the present day. The most recent work represented is the 4.60-meter-high bronze *Icarus*, created expressly for the present exhibition.

Curated by Matthias Winzen, the exhibition was conceived in close collaboration with the artist. It was previously on view at its first venue, the Kunsthalle Baden-Baden, and will subsequently travel to the Salzburg Museum of Modern Art. Due to the special facilities of the MKM, the Duisburg presentation is the most extensive of all.

The exhibition was enabled thanks to the generous support of the National-Bank AG Essen. Its organization lay in the hands of the Stiftung für Kunst und Kultur e.V. Bonn. The catalogue publication (German/English, hardcover) comprises 304 pages with numerous full-color illustrations (EUR 38.00).

