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Jackie Wullschläger; Thomas Houseago: Hans Josephsohn (excerpt)

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Josephsohn



Making the case for the most important sculptor since Giacometti: *Jackie Wullschläger* and *Thomas Houseago* on the criminally passed-over master, who would have turned 100 this year. Photography by *François Halard*



Born to German Jews who would not survive the Holocaust, HANS JOSEPHSOHN remained stateless for much of his adult life. Having fled to Switzerland, he trained as a sculptor under Otto Müller and tirelessly worked outside the limelight until Günther Förg convinced Amsterdam's Stedelijk to grant him a late-career show. Now, eight years after his death, Josephsohn's work is archived at the Kesselhaus Josephsohn in St. Gallen, an industrial cathedral dedicated to his mundane yet spiritual practice—which, as Thomas Houseago predicts, will be revered in a more humanist time to come



Craggy as boulders they stood at the door, half waiting, half indifferent: a pair of lumbering female forms, their surfaces coarse-grained, scrunched, marked—brutal, but also vulnerable. One, unnamed, tilted forward slightly, off-kilter despite the towering solid mass; the other, described as *Untitled (Ruth)*, head upright, hands clasped, body a rough approximation of serpentine curves, was more languid. Entering the room, it was clear they belonged to a family that also included frontal, bulbous heads such as *Angela*: wedge-like features, lacking eyes and eye sockets, introverted, reclusive, but commanding the space around it—the portrait as stumbling block. That massive corporeality was visceral, fresh, shocking, yet it also carried the familiarity of the ancient, the timeless.

My memory of stepping into Hauser and Wirth's gallery in London, one day in June 2008, and first encountering Hans Josephsohn's sculptures is composed of a vast, welcome stillness. It was as if the incessant bawl of contemporary conceptual art hyped all over Mayfair had been silenced by the force of these archaic totems that take sculpture back to its origins—the figure as a volume in space, evoked in a language voluptuously responsive to lived experience. The play of light on these figures' agitated surfaces lent their robustness a mercurial, fragile character. It was a moment of revelation.

The immediate context of the show, followed the next year by an electrifying winter presentation in the garden of St. James's in Piccadilly—half-figures with heads buried in the bulk of their own bodies and a magnificent reclining nude eventually dotted with snow that blended into its raw encrusted layers, extending conversations about the body's relationship to nature—only enhanced the grandeur, pathos, solitude, and rarity of these sculptures. It was the year of Damien Hirst's *Beautiful Inside My Head Forever* formaldehyde zoo auction at Sotheby's and of Anish Kapoor's red wax cannon *Shooting Into the Corner* across the road at the Royal Academy.

Josephsohn bids for a different sort of engagement. Made in plaster—direct, vital, alert with imprints and traces of the artist's hand—then cast in brass, his figures are so tactile and sensual that they urge you to walk around and touch them. Simultaneously they are confrontational in their reserve, enveloped in their own realm: fleeting records of a moment, a stance, a pose; fragmentary witnesses to process, change, and the turbulence of their creation. In postwar sculpture, only Giacometti has comparable authority and expressiveness.

It was an influence Josephsohn admitted yet resisted. Whereas Giacometti's thin, spectral figures are always on the verge of disappearing, Josephsohn's fattened-up ones are depicted as coming uneasily into being. Giacometti pared down, peeled away; Josephsohn added layers, enlarged, expanded. Both are existentialists, turning on absence and presence, being and chaos, the unfinished look. Josephsohn explained, "If you

take anything away... nothing at all remains. The figure consists solely of relationships. It's the same with me. You can remove a piece and nothing is left."

Like all important artists, Josephsohn looked back—"sculptors throughout history have become my real relatives"—to move forward. He worked in seclusion for decades, probably enhancing his intensity and rigor, and perhaps the strength with which he evokes prehistory, ancient stone steles, and romanesque figures. But when, in his 80s, he began to be shown globally, the resonance for the 21st century was striking: his ability to make indefiniteness monumental, to incorporate doubt, to flirt with and assimilate abstraction, and to move away from mimesis while retaining the figure in an ungainly, surprising way. Seen outdoors, his work is a signal voice as we consider the human imprint on the natural world.

All this happens because of the work's materiality. Modeled by lovers, his wife, a passing hospital porter who posed during his lunch break, each figure carries the breath of human contact. Josephsohn's directness in explaining the physical, almost erotic impulse of the work is indicative: "I remember my girlfriend was lying in a particular way in bed, she had propped herself up, that appealed to me, and I thought, 'I would like to make something similar one day,'" and, "It's quite a remarkable thing when you have a model in front of you, and instead of approaching the woman, which would actually be the normal thing for a man, you stand at a distance of one or five meters and make a figure."

His insistence on this fleshy actuality is key to a deeper vision. Gerhard Mack described how to Josephsohn "human beings are bodies; everything is expressed in this body—thoughts and feelings, desires and anxieties, stories and expectations. There is nothing beyond this tangible human body and, most of all, there is no truth outside of it." Josephsohn's background goes some way to explaining this. Born into a Jewish family in Kaliningrad in 1920, orphaned and exiled by the Holocaust, he inevitably shares an outlook with other German-born artists growing up under Nazism, especially Gerhard Richter: an awareness of what happened when ideology and spirituality were co-opted, and the body, bruised, battered, sometimes destroyed, paid the price. Thus the refusal to believe in any philosophical system or conceptual game.

For the lonely émigré Josephsohn, "sculpture became my home." Through it he built on his distrust of everything except the real to create an oeuvre whose emotional power lies in its hard-wrought stoicism. "They must be enduring in their expression, in their stance," he said of his figures. They are. This is art that will endure, for it recapitulates sculpture's ancient function to memorialize, to console, and to celebrate human resilience.

JACKIE WULLSCHLÄGER is chief art critic of the *Financial Times*, London

I am a sculpture-history nerd, so I'd seen pictures of Josephsohn's work early on. But I didn't really understand it before I started to make my piece for Pinault, to float on the Grand Canal outside Palazzo Grassi in 2011. I was planning to make this sculpture with Felix Lehner at his foundry in St. Gallen, so I went to visit him. We were discussing my project, and I asked about the so-called "Kesselhaus Josephsohn," which was supposed to be nearby. Felix said, "It's here!" Having had no idea that the Kesselhaus was on the same property as the foundry, we walked a few meters and Felix opened a door.

It was early in the morning, the light was amazing, and I was just blown away. When you walk into the Kesselhaus, you're confronted with this unbelievable, almost comic, almost pathetic humanism, and when you slow down, walking around these works is profoundly moving. It's a very spiritual experience, one you can only have with the greatest of art. You might see a Josephsohn sculpture in a museum and not like it—that's OK. But I defy anybody who comes to visit the Kesselhaus to not immediately get how important he is.

I started to come more often, not only to work with the foundry, but also to visit Peter Zumthor, with whom I am collaborating for his new LACMA building, which incorporates a relief of mine. So, I had the privilege to see Josephsohn's work again and again, to study it in different light, different seasons, different moods of my own. Driving from Zurich toward St. Gallen, I realized that this group of form-makers I revere—Zumthor, Giacometti, Josephsohn—all come from this relatively small mountainous area. For all of them, form is incredibly tactile, and there's a deep spiritual presence.

When you watch the mountains in different light, they disappear and reappear. One minute they look dramatic, the next glimmering and unreal. I am sure that got into the systems of Giacometti and Josephsohn. With Giacometti, there is enormous drama around absence and reduction, and I realized that with Josephsohn, it's weirdly the same: very small pieces seem enormous, and enormous pieces sometimes seem small—the drama of adding and subtracting is connected.

Henri Gaudier-Brzeska famously said, "Sculptural energy is the mountain. Sculptural feeling is the appreciation of masses in relation." Think about mountains: they are extremely stable, ancient. They are formed through massive events, but there is a great slowness to them. For me, mountains are reassuring. When you meditate, imagining yourself as a mountain is considered one of the great stabilizers. The mountains survive us; they survive calamity. Sculpture has some of this permanence—Josephsohn's certainly has. Like Giacometti, he points way back, to even pre-classical Greece.

If I look at Josephsohn's work, I have to think of the *Venus of Willendorf*, of Neolithic art, or of comets or asteroids being sent to us from outer space. Increasingly, scientists believe that life on Earth came from an asteroid impact, so actually

our origin might be cosmic. When I think about sculpture at its best, when I think about Josephsohn, it feels like that. His work subconsciously reminds me of our cosmic origin. Of moon rocks, Martian landscapes, asteroids. His sculpture goes far back in time, not hundreds but hundreds of thousands of years, before there was life. Stanley Broun, with whom I studied in Amsterdam, taught that sculpture comes from outer space. Josephsohn, for me, is proof that he was right.

So why on earth is Josephsohn not widely considered one of the greatest artists of the 20th century? There are two reasons. Sculpture in general has lost its social space. After Nazism, after communism, after all the monuments that made a case for totalitarianism, sculpture (unless it completely submits to pop) has ceased to exist. Giacometti was lucky because he was historically tied to modernism and existentialism. But think about it: even Rodin doesn't get nearly the recognition he deserves.

Then there's the inherent corruption in a capitalism that pervades everything, the darkest side of which we see in Trump. We have to remember that the US started as a great spiritual project. What's left is a president who wants you to buy his shit. There's no spiritual aspect left, and the same is true for a lot of art made today.

I believe that art has to return to its reparative and, in many ways, utopian source. That's why I am so moved to look at Josephsohn. You could argue that his work is ridiculous, that you only need to look at the world today to see how little it has to do with what Josephsohn was trying to achieve. It is nearly as though we should pity him, repeating these few forms over and over again: the half-figure, the reclining nude, the standing figure, the relief. Poor guy—look at how outdated his efforts are!

I would argue the contrary. Because the world is as it is, Josephsohn's work is important. Great art always has a real relation to time. In a way, I'd be surprised if people today understood Josephsohn. His work will survive. It will be revered in a different, more humanistic time that will eventually arrive.

Thinking about Josephsohn, I am sitting here in Malibu with one of his small reliefs in front of me. After a year in which I went through hell, a year I thought I wouldn't survive, his art has become even more meaningful, because it points at this stillness, this quiet, this contemplation and permanence. Working these forms over and over again must have been like the life-long recitation of a mantra, and I have no doubt it was healing one. The relief in my hands looks like Adam and Eve, like pre-medieval sculpture. It is deeply moving. There's nothing more that art could do to me.

As told to Cornelius Tittel

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For further reading please see

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