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Sculptor Thomas Houseago's shape-shifting world

The L.A.-based artist is generating buzz in the art community with hulking pieces, like the Whitney Biennial's 'Baby,' that are placing a fresh dynamism on monumental sculpture.

By Jori Finkel, Los Angeles Time
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Artist Thomas Houseago in his Los Angeles studio. (Brian van der Brug / Los Angeles Times)

It's hard not to think about Picasso when visiting Thomas Houseago's studio near the Los Angeles River. The main space is filled with monstrous figures and heads that look like they could have walked, or tumbled, out of the groundbreaking, proto-Cubist painting "Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. Version O)." "It's probably because Picasso was the last really credible figurative artist of the 20th century, so any attempt to bring the physical or sensual back into sculpture goes back to him. But I think there are as many references to Rodin as Picasso in my sculpture," the artist says, pointing toward some

A 38-year-old, British-born, L.A.-based artist, Houseago has been getting the comparison a lot lately from writers and collectors alike.

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thick, trunk-like legs that look as firmly rooted as Rodin's "The Burghers of Calais."

What the talkative, verging on manic, California transplant doesn't say: Picasso is also art-world shorthand for big or bold ambition. And Houseago's large, hulking but oddly vulnerable sculptures, drawing strength and frailty from the human form, seem to fit the bill.

"Having seen the work develop over the last decade, I think Thomas' work has never been better than it is today," says MOCA chief curator Paul Schimmel, who helped the museum acquire his work this year. "And it's never been more ambitious than it is today."

Schimmel sees echoes of Michelangelo — "the bulk and awkwardness" of David — in the monumental sculpture that Houseago is currently making for French collector Francois Pinault's Palazzo Grassi on the Grand Canal in Venice. It's a standing bronze figure, more than 30 feet tall, to be installed before the Venice Biennale next summer. The MOCA curator anticipates that this sculpture, like his others, will have a dynamic, "almost performative quality."

"When I saw the Palazzo Grassi, I had a vision of a large striding figure walking out into the sky," says the artist, a burly figure who looks like he could work construction, and once did. "It will stand on a platform, on a plinth that's in the water, so it will rise out of the water like Poseidon."

By far his largest piece, it's also in some ways his most challenging. Although he generally starts all of his sculptures with a sketch, he made at least five heads before finding the one that works for this piece. He considers the massive heads stand-alone artworks and has placed examples cast in different materials in his current show at the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford, England, and a gallery show that opens Jan. 22 at L&M Arts in Venice, Calif.

The L&M show will have a black bronze head worthy of Darth Vader — with cavernous eye sockets and a grill-like mouth. The show also features more abstract sculptural panels done in aluminum that his L&M dealer, Sarah Watson, calls "more architectural than any of his other work." As for his career trajectory, she says, "I've worked with young artists a long time, and I haven't seen anything like this."

But Houseago is clearly uncomfortable with the role of hot young artist. "I'm being viewed as a sudden success," he says. "But I'm 38 — I left art school 14 years ago, and I'm from the [bowels] of the world, the north of England. My journey has been long and complicated."

A rough start

Houseago was born in Leeds, England, which he compares to Gary, Ind. He was raised by his mother; his father was institutionalized for schizophrenia when he was 6. He claims not to remember much of his schooling because he was "drunk like everyone else there starting at the age of 12." But he always liked to draw and picked up skills from a middle-school program in CDT: Craft, Design and Technology."

It was about teaching you how to do things — welding, car building, some kind of craft," he says. "I've always known how to arc-weld, and I know how to mix concrete. You weren't really a man unless you knew how to do these things."

In 1989 he got a government grant to attend a local art school for a year. "I was doing performances, shamanistic things inspired by Joseph Beuys." For one early work he made sculptures out of trash and set them on fire. He went on to attend Central Saint Martins College of Art & Design in London and De Ateliers in Amsterdam, where he met artist Matthew Monahan and his future wife, painter Amy Bessone.

After school, the couple moved to Brussels, where he struggled with what it means to be a figurative sculptor today. He also struggled financially, taking a range of odd jobs: retail, construction and sculpture commissions ("giant rabbits, weird stuff") for children's parks.

After being hit with an unexpected tax on one of his projects, he ended up filing for bankruptcy. Los Angeles, where Monahan now lived, was looking good. "Now everyone thinks I was being canny and strategic by moving to L.A., but in fact it was an act of desperation." He says he arrived in town at the end of 2003 with \$300 to his name.

His breakthrough came in April 2006, in the form of Don and Mera Rubell. The Miami collectors were looking for more work for a group show about the L.A. art scene called "Red Eye." As Houseago tells the story, the studio

visit took place three days after the birth of his daughter.

"We were just starting to absorb the massiveness of having a child when we got word that the Rubells wanted to do a studio visit at 6 a.m. the next morning, before they flew back home. Just to tell you how crazy it was," he continues, "I got a friend to loan me a studio. It had no electricity, so I set up in the dark. The sun came up just in time for their visit."

The Rubells were struck by the physical presence of his work: "We're living in a moment when so much art is conceptual and virtual," says Mera, mentioning Jeff Koons. "But with Thomas you feel the hand, the body, the mind and the psychological struggles of the artist."

That year alone the Rubells bought eight sculptures by Houseago — almost everything he had — and nearly a dozen works by Bessone. It was arguably the height of the contemporary art boom, and Houseago felt the art-market machinery kick into gear immediately.

While maintaining a relationship with Brussels dealer Xavier Hufkens, he soon began showing with New York dealer Michael Werner. He also had a solo show with David Kordansky, inaugurating his expansive new space in Culver City, before decamping to L&M. (There, his work is priced from around \$100,000 to \$500,000.)

Multi-dimensional

Today, Houseago's studio is bigger than just about any L.A. gallery: a 20,000-square-foot complex spread over three buildings in the industrial Frogtown area near downtown. There's enough space for several assistants, a kitchen, a small screening room, Bessone's studio, his own workshop, and a showroom for sculptures that are getting larger and larger.

Last year one of his sculptures loomed over the 2010 Whitney Biennial — a large, crouched figure with gaping eye sockets that he tenderly titled "Baby." A sculpture that came together "in two feverish weeks," it captures some of the vulnerability of being a new parent and some of the Frankenstein-like monstrosity of creation.

Circling a more recent piece — which looks a bit like "Baby" standing up — in his studio, he remembers the "insanity" of working on the Whitney piece

in summer 2009. His wife was nearly nine months pregnant with their second child and their house in Tujunga was threatened by the Station fire. He was working late into the night at his old studio in Boyle Heights when gunshots rang. He found a man dead in his car outside, "his head blown off," and found bullet holes in his studio walls the next morning.

"I felt very vulnerable, like something was going to get me during that period," he says. "The Whitney Biennial usually makes you conservative, but I did a weird and intense piece."

"Baby" is also one of the best examples of how Houseago combines drawing and sculpture, the two-dimensional and three-dimensional, in a single work. Along with his standard practice of making plaster casts out of clay molds, he also likes to make drawings in charcoal on melamine boards on the ground and then pours a super-strong plaster (called Tuf-Cal) on top. The drawing is lifted onto the plaster, not unlike the way a newspaper comic strip can be lifted onto silly putty.

In the case of "Baby," the left arm and leg are drawn in this manner, while the rest of the body is more dimensional. As in so many of Houseago's sculptures, the process creates an unsettling experience. What appears hulking from one angle turns out to be anorexic from another.

"I really like the idea of a sculpture that becomes invisible at some point," says the artist. "A lot of my work has to do with movement: It appears, disappears. I'm especially fascinated by pieces that shape-shift."

It's a way for Houseago to test assumptions about the solidity and reality of art. And it's a way for him to resurrect the lofty tradition of monumental sculpture, while bringing it down to earth.

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