



STEPHAN BALKENHOL

28 April—8 August 2010

Stephan Balkenhol is an internationally acclaimed German artist best known for his figurative wooden sculptures and reliefs, which are both painted and hand-carved. Since the mid-1980s, Balkenhol has developed a highly recognizable style rooted in traditional craftsmanship and a contemporary take on the human figure.

He studied at the Hamburg School of Fine Arts from 1976 to 1982, where he trained under the sculptor Ulrich Rückriem and was taught by influential artists such as Nam June Paik and Sigmar Polke. In response to the dominant abstract, minimalist, and conceptual approaches of his time, Balkenhol turned toward the

portrayal of the everyday person—eschewing heroic, idealized imagery in favor of ordinary, anonymous figures.

By the 1990s, his visual vocabulary expanded to include animals, hybrid beings, and architectural motifs, along with increasingly complex reliefs. His totemic sculptures, often evoking the spirit of folk art and medieval statuary, depict men and women in modest, plain-colored clothing, standing in relaxed, neutral poses. These figures convey no overt emotion, narrative, or socio-political commentary, yet they possess a quiet presence—timeless, familiar, and resolutely human.

Balkenhol works with a range of woods, including poplar, Douglas fir, and wawa wood. Each figure is carved by hand from a single block using hammers, chisels, and power saws, with chips and tool marks deliberately left visible. The natural characteristics of the wood—knots, grain, and cracks—remain part of the finished work. Color is applied not for expressive enhancement but to define anatomy and form, emphasizing structure over sentiment. The surfaces are deliberately left rough and imperfect, reflecting the individuality and vulnerability of real people. Beneath their apparent detachment, his sculptures carry a latent energy—a belief in humanity’s quiet resilience.

“Figurative sculpture is often misused as a bearer of messages. In my vision, my sculptures become a question, a mirror. And it is the viewer who fills it with meaning.”

Selected Public Collections:

Hirshhorn Museum (Washington, DC, USA);
Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA)(Los Angeles, CA, USA);
The Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), (Los Angeles, USA);
The Art Institute of Chicago (Chicago, IL, USA);
Museum of Modern Art Frankfurt (Frankfurt, Germany);
Seattle Art Museum (Seattle, WA, USA);
Carnegie Museum of Art (Pittsburgh, PA, USA);
The Broad (Los Angeles, CA, USA);
Chase Manhattan Art Purchase Program (New York, NY, USA);
Johnson County Community College (Overland Park, KS, USA);
Birmingham Museum of Art (Birmingham, AL, USA);
Le CEAAC (Strasbourg, France);
Mission Bay Community Center (San Francisco, CA, USA);
Pasadena Museum of California Art (Pasadena, CA, USA).

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