

Artist of the week 120: Thomas Houseago

This LA-based sculptor's hulking macho figures look back to modernism through a 21st-century lens

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Thomas Houseago's *Baby* 'looks ready to take its first infant steps—except that it's almost three metres high'. Photograph: Edmund Blok

Thomas Houseago's sculpture has guts. He makes huge, disheveled macho figures from gobbets of gloriously messy plaster, built around visible armatures of rusty metal rods. Squatting, crawling or standing proud with legs astride, their provocative postures and goeey materials suggest sex, violence and shit.

They might be idols of a primal cult, recalling the sex workers depicted in Picasso's "Les Femmes d'Alger" with their primitive masks and distorted, angular bodies. At the same time Houseago's monumental work looks like a scuffed version of the snowy marble of classical statues or Henry Moore's massive, polished smoothly curving forms.

Born in 1972, the Yorkshire-raised Houseago studied art at London's Central St Martins college in the early 1990s and then in Amsterdam, before moving to Los Angeles, where he is now based. Alongside artists like his sometime collaborator and LA neighbour Aaron Curry, he's part of a new generation looking back to modernism and older kinds of sculpture through a 21st-century lens.



Houseago's sculptures 'have a Frankenstein's monster quality'. Photograph: Edmund Blok

Giants, round-eyed masks like the heads of robots and versions of triumphal arches (he calls them "gates") recur throughout Houseago's work – not just in his sculptures, but with bronze, wood, hemp and pencil drawing. While their titles and forms gesture to mythic creatures such as the Minotaur and Cyclops, his works have more of a Frankenstein's monster quality. Their seams are left showing.

The focal point of his current show is a crouching brute called Baby, which first made an appearance at last year's Whitney Biennial. Half its muscular form is rendered from messy rivulets of plaster, half from flattened surfaces that bear the imprint of heavy pencil-marks. It looks ready to spring into action, or at least learn how to take its first infant steps – except that it's almost three metres high. Figurative work on this scale is usually confined to war memorials or statues of dictators. For Houseago, however, it becomes a way of exploring sculpture for sculpture's sake: of making by hand, of volume, mass, physical presence and gravity, or as he once put it, something that looks like it might fall on top of you.

Why we like him: For "Untitled (Red Man)" of 2008, a Paolozzi-esque towering russet bronze with wonky eyes and limbs.

Feel the force: Houseago's first taste of modern art was filtered through pop culture. He cites Darth Vader and his mask as influenced by Jacob Epstein and African art.

Where can I see him? Houseago's solo show, What Went Down, is at Modern Art Oxford until 20 February.