

Art Review:

March 2011

Thomas Houseago: *What Went Down*

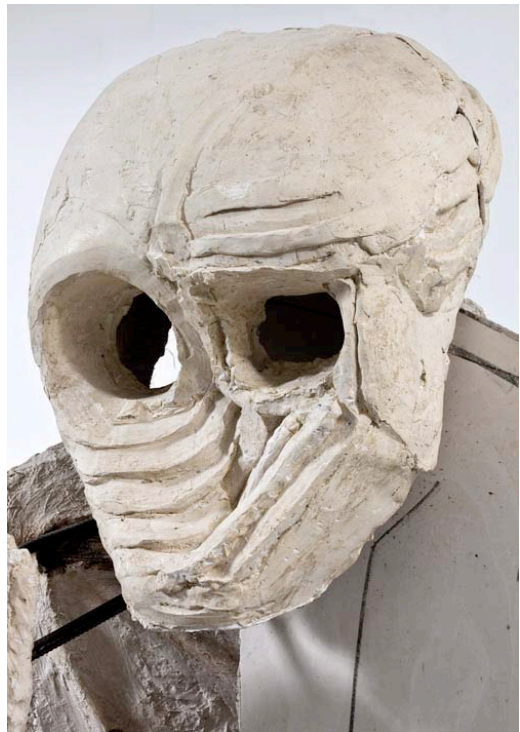
Modern Art Oxford & Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology, Oxford

11 December – 20 February

By Luke Heighton

My first reaction on seeing this show was, simply, surprise. Surprise, first of all, that I've not seen more of Houseago's work than I have (my fault), and surprise, too, that I enjoyed it so much. As I headed from Modern Art Oxford to the Ashmolean, where the second half of *What Went Down* is installed, it was hard not to feel a sense of renewed confidence in the ability of figurative sculpture to examine its own cultural and material history.

This is Houseago's first major solo show in a UK public gallery, though the broad shoulders of his figurative works are more than capable of bearing the weight (and the vagaries) of popular scrutiny while losing nothing of their vitality and intrigue. Appropriately, for an artist whose career has taken him from Scotland to England, from England to the Netherlands and Belgium, and then to California, where he is now, these works capture simultaneously something of the weighty confidence of European high Modernism, northern English phlegm and late-twentieth-century West Coast lassitude.



Baby, (detail) 2009

Courtesy Michael Werner Gallery, New York

None of which should leave anyone in any doubt as to whether Houseago's work is serious—it is. It is also large. Working principally with such traditional materials as wood, plaster, hessian, iron and steel, Houseago exploits the iconographies of classical and modernist sculpture in order to subvert them, mocking their and his pretensions at the same time as he cleaves to them. What is striking, too, albeit paradoxically, is these works' lightness, an effect achieved in part through the incorporation of drawing into his sculptural works, as in the case of *Baby* (2009)—the weight and scale of one half of this

enormous crouching Prometheus-figure contrasting powerfully with the sketchy outlines which form the other, drawn half.

Houseago has a deftness of touch, then, and sensitivity towards the viewer's encounter with the object and the space around it, which contradicts the apparent crudeness of his works' constructions. Thus on closer inspection their monumentality is thrown into question, their very physicality becoming both a physical and existential burden. As implacable, incomprehensible and uncomprehending as these figures may seem, however, the hollow gaze offered by works such as *Cyclops No. 1* (2009) may also embody something much softer, as if conscious, dimly, of their own cognitive limitations.

Decapitated figures and disembodied heads are a consistent feature of Houseago's work, making appearances here in *Crouching Figure* (1998), *Machine Mask I* (2010) and *Giant Mask (Cave)* (2010). Situated somewhere close to the heart of these works is the disjunction between surface, material and support, or between the immutable and ideal, and the imperfect, degraded and perpetually degrading actual, which nevertheless retains a trace of what was or could have been. If, as some critics have alleged, Houseago's work really does appear increasingly like public sculpture (*Giant Giant*, 2010, is currently installed in the forecourt of the Ashmolean), then this represents something of a much-needed municipal coup. Confident, ambitious stuff, *What Went Down* is the work of an artist for whom success has been hard won, yet who has had the courage to pursue his postmodern antic convictions irrespective of popular opinion.