

Who's been carving here, then?

In an elongated gallery of the foyer in the Staatlichen Kunsthalle in Baden-Baden, a magnificent Icarus lies prostrate. He measures about five metres from the top of his head to the soles of his feet, which are turned towards us. Dangling from his arms are the remains of his flying apparatus: thin branches attached to the limbs with ropes and adorned with feathers. A few of them hang down loosely, but it is hardly surprising that the artificial pinions failed to support this colossus. The body is made from heavy cast iron and the wrecked frame from bronze.

'Icarus' is a sculpture created by Stephan Balkenhol especially for the exhibition. He has been two-timing his first love, wood, for a few years now, especially with his large-format figures; his bronze giraffe rider in front of the Hagenbeck zoo in Hamburg measures seven and a half metres and his 'Man with a Fish' fountain statue in Chicago, also made from bronze, weighs in at a modest three and a half. However, in contrast to these monumental statuary antecedents, 'Icarus' remains unpainted, and the dark metal allows one to feel the enormous weight, which must have dashed him to the earth and likewise informed Balkenhol's decision to depict the shattered man in preference to the more typically featured fall itself. And thus Balkenhol, who also teaches sculpture at the Academy in Karlsruhe, has devised a new piece, which slots into the tradition of his work: one may allude to art history, but the medium takes precedence over the form.

Balkenhol became famous through his revitalisation of representational sculpture, which he has subsequently made the central focus of his creative work since 1982. Naturally, it forms the main emphasis of this most comprehensive retrospective to date. Despite the fact that his style is so well known, scant regard is paid to his habit of thinking in groups or 'constellations'. It is no accident that there are several groups of sculptures in his oeuvre, '57 Penguins' for instance, which caused such a furore of excitement amongst the public in Frankfurt, or the two cycles of the 'Tanzenden' (Dancers) from 1996 and 1999 which are now almost completely reunited here in a delightful space devised by the artist himself. Both the apparent monotony of his choice of motif and as far as modern sculpture is concerned the wholly untypical statuary stoicism of his people and animals, emphasise a residue of serial thought, which finds its boundary in each individually fashioned motif.

One cannot speak of gestures or personalities where Balkenhol's sculptures are concerned, but rather of different respective demeanours and dispositions. And domiciles. It is worth making the journey to Baden-Baden for this degree of diversity alone. It is an opportunity to reappraise the artist, see him anew, because the less well known aspects of his work also come to the fore more prominently here. Two years ago Balkenhol made a series of sculptures, which he displayed in front of some reliefs. And so his strikingly painted men and women stand on their pedestals facing us and behind them, Balkenhol has carved abstract and geometric patterns into coloured panels. The situative aspect of art has never been more apparent than here, where new constellations emerges from each and every perspective.

Then there are his reliefs of famous buildings, originated at the same time; the Kloster Murbach, the Cathedral of St. Michael in Brussels, the Dresden Hofkirche are all represented here in Baden-Baden. Hung next to one another and by virtue of the almost monochrome palette and picture-postcard camera angles, these powerful representations embody a degree of austerity, which in turn makes neutral perusal of the pure form of an object possible once more. One can appreciate this measured

aesthetic only after having taken a step closer and carefully traced the tracks of the chisel and knife in the wood, which are never covered, never concealed in Balkenhol's work. As the architecture and the surrounding countryside is carved into the surface of the wood, the sky itself suddenly becomes a protruding plane standing proud of the actual motif itself. Balkenhol is able to correct this technical fault by means of his illusionistic painting, reversing our perspective without completely erasing any lingering perplexity in our minds. This is quite a different Balkenhol to the one once lambasted for complacency and absence of a critical standpoint. An artist has taken to the stage here in Baden-Baden, assured in his handling of materials and aware of how to gauge them in the most minute detail. He doesn't need to carve gills under the cap of a toadstool beneath which one of his little men is reclining; instead, he leaves the skin sections unpainted so that the wood may display its natural structure and in so doing, allows an apparent shadow to fall on the face and hands as it would through slightly opened gills. The way in which a natural phenomenon and a modern, visual topos can overlap and perfect an illusionistic picture, which is realistic in neither element well, that is artifice in the truest aesthetic sense of the word.