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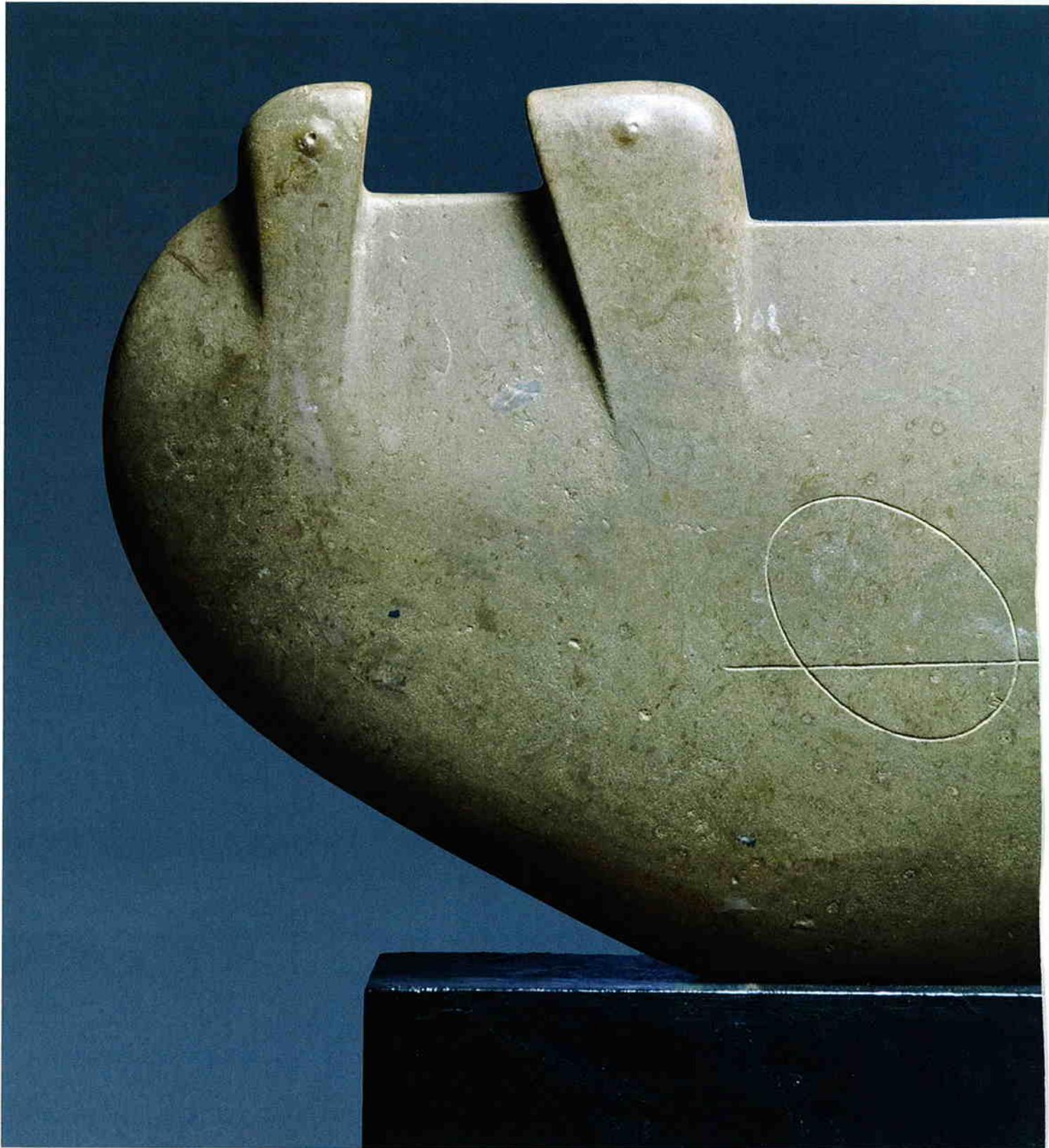
# Art in America

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# NEW IMAGES OF THE




# OLD MAN

BY CHRISTOPHER BEDFORD

A Henry Moore survey at Tate Britain invites a reassessment of the late sculptor's approach to the figure as well as his influence on later generations of artists.

ASK YOUNG SCULPTORS whom among the masters of the 20th century they routinely look at, and few will invoke the name Henry Moore (1898-1986). Where Duchamp, Brancusi, Beuys, Bourgeois, Rauschenberg, Judd, Morris, Andre, Serra, Hesse and Tony Smith all boast avant-garde credentials of the most unimpeachable sort, Moore carries quite the opposite baggage. Conservatism, humanism, populism and commercialism are among the most damning labels that have been deployed in recent decades to situate Moore at the margins of an art history committed to the mantra of "radical" formal innovation. He has been left to observe the action from a pasture in southern Scotland, from the sculpture garden of many a regional American museum or, worst of all, from outside the House of Lords.

A sea change in the artist's critical reception, however, may now be under way. Henry Moore may, in other words, be "contemporary" for the first time in many years. Indicators of this shift are few at the moment, but notable nevertheless. Until about seven years ago, art historians had not looked kindly or seriously upon Moore and his reclining bronze figures (cast in editions of six) for a couple of generations. That changed with the publication in 2003 of a collection of new writings, *Henry Moore: Critical Essays*, which, as the title very straightforwardly suggests, examine Moore's work with more topical and theoretical determination. That volume, part of a series called *Subject/Object: New Studies in Sculpture*, edited by Penelope Curtis, the current Tate Britain director and former Henry Moore Institute curator, along with major articles and book-length studies by influential art historians like Anne Wagner (the newly assigned research curator at Tate Britain, known for her work on Eva Hesse), who in 2005 published *Mother Stone: The Vitality of Modern British Sculpture*, and sculpture specialist Alex Potts, began to cast Moore and his influence in a more appreciative and pertinent light. The shift reached the level of popular discourse this year with an exhibition of the artist's work at Tate Britain, organized by the museum's curator Chris Stephens, which featured more than 150 sculptures and works on paper spanning the early 1920s to the late '70s. The show aimed to unveil a fresh and persuasive account of an artist not adequately



Henry Moore:  
*Carving*, 1936,  
Hornston stone,  
approx. 14 by 19  
inches. Private  
collection.

THE EXHIBITION OFFERED A METHODICAL REEVALUATION OF THE IMAGE OF MOORE AS A DISENGAGED APOITICAL HUMANIST.

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Simon Starling: *Project for a Temporary Public Sculpture (Hiroshima)*, 2009, bronze, wallpaper. Photo Cary Whittier. Courtesy Casey Kaplan, New York.

understood, or, perhaps, not understood at all. Much hinges on upending the common conception of Moore as the quintessential establishment artist. Accordingly, Stephens opens his catalogue essay as follows, diving headlong into the central question of Moore's reputation:

The need to recuperate Henry Moore's critical reception has been felt for a long time by those close to his work. There is, some would say, a persistent sense that his art lacks the critical rigour that would earn it respect from contemporary practitioners and critics. . . . The Moore of the popular imagination is an easy-going, avuncular figure—typically English—who produced an equally easy-going form of modern sculpture. Gently rounded female figures, abstract forms based on bones and pebbles, enlarged and sited in a beautiful landscape or park—the comfortable language of nature: that is what one expects to get from Henry Moore. The aim of this exhibition and its catalogue is to assert a different Henry Moore: a Moore whose work is darker, edgier, and more complex than the familiar Moore, redolent with undertones of morbid and sexual energy.<sup>1</sup>

The exhibition offered a methodical reevaluation of the image of Moore as a disengaged, apolitical human-

ist. This was achieved by highlighting, on one hand, the artist's progressive engagement with the formal and conceptual concerns of avant-garde movements in the early 20th century and, on the other, his response to events of pressing sociopolitical import, eschewing in turn and by consequence the popular vision of Moore as a cloistered formalist. Significantly for an artist strongly associated with figuration, the show established Moore's capacity to *disfigure* the human form and displayed the myriad applications he found for this trope. The exhibition underscored Moore's intersection with so-called Primitivism during the 1920s through rarely seen works (such as *Figure*, 1923) as well as through strains of international modernism during the '30s, highlighting some of Moore's most spare, almost minimal compositions (*Carving*, 1936, for example). Moore's World War II period was represented by a group of his justly revered Shelter Drawings, created in bomb shelters during the Blitz (*Woman Seated in the Underground*, 1941). Outstanding among his works of the Cold War era of the 1950s, *Girl Seated against*

*Square Wall* (1957-58) is a rendering of a figure that registers the most acute signs of distress. This image, a view of the body as damaged, fragile, broken and attenuated, flies in the face of the standard account of Moore that has rested on another set of descriptors entirely: soft, sleek, sensual, undulating and nurturing.

Curiously, for an exhibition so committed to debunking received understandings, the show closed with a large room full of reclining female forms carved in elm spanning the 1930s to the 1970s, inexplicably restoring the trivializing image of Moore as the avuncular artist so effectively refuted elsewhere. Nevertheless, the inclusion of the recumbent forms did suggest that there is some truth to the prevailing understanding of Moore as the friendly humanist, but that it is not the *only* truth. The revisionist thesis was received loud and clear, though not always positively, by Britain's never bashful press. Writers for some of the country's most influential platforms contested the exhibition's reclamation of Moore

as an avant-gardist, apparently unwilling to concede that Moore might be gaining traction among a new generation of curators, art historians and even artists. Laura Cumming in the *Observer*, for instance, notes:

The artist the curators are hoping to advance is darker, more anxious and disturbing. A left-winger, a pacifist, a veteran of the first world war, horrified by the second, a partisan of the Spanish republican cause, a founding member of CND, he is also presented as a political radical. This is mainly a matter of biography (though can he really have been a member of the Communist party, as suggested?) until it shades into the interpretation of his work, when it becomes fairly absurd.<sup>2</sup>

One of the most significant aspects of the catalogue that accompanied the Tate's show was the inclusion of statements by a group of living and, in some cases, very eminent British artists, each testifying to Moore's historical significance. Anthony Caro, Antony Gormley, Bruce McLean, Lucy Skaer and Simon Starling are represented. Gormley, for instance, asserts that "Henry Moore gave



Moore: *Reclining Figure*,  
1939, elm wood,  
37 by 79 by 30 inches.  
Detroit Institute of Arts.



Moore: *Woman Seated in the Underground*, 1941, gouache, ink, watercolor and crayon on paper, 19 by 15 inches. Tate, London.

## MONAHAN, CURRY AND HOUSEAGO RELY ON THE *FORMAL* INNOVATIONS OF MOORE AS HEAVILY AND UNABASHEDLY AS THEY SUMMON THE LEGACY OF, FOR INSTANCE, PICASSO.

back to sculpture a presence that it had lost in becoming a representation. He sought an authenticity that at first came from a celebration of materiality; the texture and geological time of stone, the grain and annular rings of wood."<sup>3</sup> Caro's assessment is unreservedly reverential: "In the 40s and 50s Henry Moore was beginning to be known as the best avant-garde sculptor in England. He rose above any narrow provincialism. He had a breadth of vision, and his sources encompassed the art of all sorts of places and periods."<sup>4</sup> Skaer addresses the show's thesis candidly: "Thinking about Henry Moore's sculpture is difficult, because seeing the sculptures as unfamiliar or new is hard, despite them being modern."<sup>5</sup> Finally, and perhaps most powerfully, considering the concerns that sustain contemporary art discourse, Starling offers the following:

Thomas Houseago: *Baby*, 2009-10, Tuf-Cal, hemp, iron rebar, wood, graphite, charcoal, 102½ by 90 by 81 inches. Courtesy Michael Werner Gallery, New York.



"It is at these points of intersection between global politics, big business, and art practice, at a moment when the Cold War has morphed into something altogether more elusive and our understanding of nature is so radically challenged, that Moore seems to be once again a fruitful subject for further investigation and redeployment."<sup>6</sup> These testimonials are distributed evenly throughout the book, so that the history lessons supplied by each of the six scholarly essays are offset by the living, breathing legacy of Moore as affirmed by an artist's voice.

Yet the most convincing measure of an artist's current status is not the way he or she is *written* about, but the way that artist's achievement resonates in the work of young practitioners. That aspect of Moore's legacy, long dormant, has reappeared in the last few years, particularly in the work of sculptors

such as Matthew Monahan, Aaron Curry and Thomas Houseago. Earlier artists—most notably Bruce Nauman with *Henry Moore Bound to Fail* (1967-70) and Bruce McLean with *Reclining Nude (Fully Draped)*, 1969—focused critical attention on Moore by engaging not so much with his esthetic contributions to the history of art but with his critical standing within that history. Starling uses Moore in a critique of modernism, but Monahan, Curry and Houseago rely on the *formal* innovations of Moore as heavily and unabashedly as they summon the legacy of, for instance, Picasso.

Common among these artists are a commitment to the human figure as their principal subject and an investment in mundane, rough-hewn materials whose worked surfaces forcefully declare the mind and hand of the artist. Both concerns were, of course, central to Moore. He explored three basic formats in his figurative work—standing, seated and in repose—with the last, the reclining form, developing into what he classified as an "obsession."<sup>7</sup> Monahan's, Curry's and Houseago's choice and manipulation of materials reveal another level of engagement with Moore's philosophy of art-making, particularly his well-known "truth to materials" ethos. Moore insisted that the materials he used retain their identity as matter, even when worked into the form of a completed sculpture. He wanted his chosen materials to be undisguised, and his labor, as he conceived it, was never aimed at transforming those materials into the appearance of something else. For Moore, a "sculpture in stone should look honestly like stone . . . to make it look like flesh and



Matthew Monahan: *Boskopp*, 2006, drywall, paper, acrylic, wood, plastic, metal, beeswax, 80 by 19 by 19 inches. Courtesy Anton Kern Gallery, New York.

of which remain discernibly anthropomorphic even when subjected to his most radical distortions, Curry's garishly colorful sculptures such as *Mr. Square in Flatland (Reclining)*, 2009, in Miami's Rubell Family Collection, are more biomorphism and geometry than human figure, and they rely on the viewer's desire to find a presence in the faintest suggestion.

Of the three, Monahan's concentration on damage and disfigurement is the most striking. Pedestal-bound human figures like *Rangoon Detour* (2008), shown at New York's Anton Kern Gallery in 2008, are composite forms, cobbled together from a motley array of salvaged and fabricated materials, conjuring an image of humanity hanging by a thread. Like Houseago and Curry, Monahan's interest in abjection is balanced by a commitment to the human form that is serious and sobering. And as with Moore, who produced some of his most powerful work in the period bounded by the aftermath of two wars—the early 1920s to the late 1940s—it is tempting to speculate that the resurgent interest in figuration seen in the work of these three sculptors emanates from a comparable impulse to preserve the possibility of representation in the face of the brutal toll exacted on the body by war. Whether or not this last conjecture passes muster, these contemporary images of humanity openly converse with those produced by an artist more than three generations ago, and in this return to the not-too-distant past may lie an exciting new beginning of an old story. ○

Opposite, Moore: *Girl Seated against Square Wall*, 1957-58, plaster, pigment, reconstructed wooden seat, 33 7/8 by 22 by 17 3/8 inches. Henry Moore Foundation.

blood, hair and dimples is coming down to the level of the stage conjurer."<sup>8</sup>

THE SAME IMPULSE cuts across the work of Houseago, Curry and Monahan. Their work is expressive and figurative, subtended not by an interest in mimesis or verisimilitude but rather in facture and physicality. Rough, muscular, ungainly and often comical, imposing figures such as Houseago's oversized *Baby* (2009-10), recently on view in the 2010 Whitney Biennial, are ad hoc constructions of deliberately inelegant materials put together in such a way that their brute materiality and primitive features and posture work in tandem. Houseago's figures elbow their way to the table of contemporary sculpture, forcing a conversation that feels radical precisely in its indebtedness to the past.

In Curry's abstractions, Moore's preoccupation with disfigurement through distention and attenuation is adopted and exaggerated. But unlike Moore's figures, all

<sup>1</sup> Chris Stephens, "Anything But Gentle: Henry Moore—Modern Sculptor," in Chris Stephens, ed., *Henry Moore*, London, Tate, 2010, p. 12. <sup>2</sup> See [guardian.co.uk](http://guardian.co.uk) <sup>3</sup> Stephens, *Henry Moore*, p. 19. <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38. <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51. <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65. <sup>7</sup> *Henry Moore on Sculpture*, ed. Phillip James, London, Macdonald, 1966, p. 264. <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

"Henry Moore" appeared at Tate Britain, London, Feb. 24-Aug. 8. Sculptures by Matthew Monahan, Aaron Curry and Thomas Houseago are included in "Statuesque," at City Hall Park, New York [see article this issue]. An Aaron Curry show is on view at Michael Werner, New York [Sept. 20-Oct. 20]. Recent works by Matthew Monahan are at Anton Kern, New York [Oct. 28-Dec. 11]. "Mineral Spirits: Anne Chu and Matthew Monahan" is on view at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, Sept. 15-Dec. 5.

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