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Thomas Houseago's sacred monsters

By Jonathan Griffin

The British artist lists Picasso and Star Wars among his influences. As he prepares new works for two shows in London, he talks about living in Los Angeles, and how he got there

Thomas Houseago in his studio in Los Angeles

At Thomas Houseago's studio building in east Los Angeles, which spans a full city block beside the giant concrete trench known as the LA River, the road is closed to traffic. The mechanical arm of a refuse truck is lifting metal dumpsters and tipping their contents into its hopper. White plaster dust billows across the street. Houseago's team is cleaning up. Once a week, the piles of plaster, hessian, clay, broken sculptures and cracked casts that accumulate in the studio are swept together and cleared out. Houseago used to do this himself; then, when it began to take two days out of each week, he delegated it to assistants. Now he employs a staff of 20, and has five foundries in the US working to cast his prolific output of sculptures in high-strength Tuf-Cal casting plaster or clay into dark bronze or pale, silvery aluminium. Galleries in New York, London, Zurich, Brussels and Glasgow try to keep up with the demands of a growing network of private collectors, as well as those of museums, including the Stedelijk

in Amsterdam and the Museum of Contemporary Art in LA.

The building is divided into offices, a drawing studio, an outdoor yard and two sculpture studios – one messy and one for finished (or nearly finished) works. The latter, a barrel-vaulted hangar that used to be a shooting range, is filled with heads on plinths and masks on walls, columns, cats, owls, disembodied limbs, wall reliefs and statuesque bodies. Everything is larger than life. Some pieces, such as a pointing plaster finger as tall as a man, are almost comically huge. Another, an 8ft seated woman, was inspired by a photograph of the singer Rihanna, spotted by Houseago on the cover of Esquire magazine. In many sculptures, the iron rebar that undergirds their construction can be seen hanging out of their untidy backs. Others retain the pencil lines of Houseago's drawings, imprinted into smooth white plaster.

That it is often hard to tell whether they are finished is part of the point. Sculpture, he says, has a long and intimate relationship to performance. It was a shaman's role, for example, not only to make sacred objects, but to use them in transcendent rituals and ceremonies. By leaving works unfinished, an artist draws attention to the process of their making, and, obliquely, to the ambition and struggle involved in the artistic pursuit. "Michelangelo," he explains, "was saying, 'That counts. More than the finished object.' That's what you respond to, in front of 'The Dying Slave', or 'The Rondanini Pietà', to this idea of him, and this mystical activity with the material."

Houseago's failure rate is high – many potential works are trashed. He says his assistants have learnt to accept it when a piece they have been working on for two weeks is consigned to the skip. As a child growing up in Leeds, he remembers his mother telling him, "If it's easy, it's not worth doing." The advice must have stuck. His was a rough environment for a boy who only wanted to draw. He talks about drinking two cans of Special Brew in the morning before school and other classmates sniffing glue and telling the teacher, in Houseago's words, "to go f*** himself". The school closed in 1992.

Thomas Houseago's studio

He left Leeds for London in 1991, at 19, enrolling at Central St Martins College of Art, where his work quickly began to evolve. The Joseph Beuys-influenced performances that he'd made on his foundation course in Leeds gave way to sculptures of human bodies. At a time when Marcel Duchamp was widely regarded as the most significant artist of the 20th century, Houseago was interested in such unfashionable figures as Henry Moore, Jacob Epstein, Francis Picabia, William Blake and Picasso. After London, he moved to Amsterdam, to the De Ateliers institute, where he made what are now considered to be his first mature works. Visiting artists such as Thomas Schütte, Luc Tuymans and Marlene Dumas – all of whom make figurative sculpture or painting – were a huge influence on him. ("Marlene goes deep into the cave and comes out with the severed heads," says Houseago, admiringly.)

From Amsterdam he moved to Brussels, "a place where people go to lose themselves," he says, citing Rimbaud and Verlaine's famous "lost weekend" as a classic example. Houseago and his new wife, the American artist Amy Bessone, lived there until 2003 when, bankrupt after an unexpected tax bill, they left for LA. "It's become a mythical thing to me – I hardly believe it any more – but we really had nothing." That's not to say their years in Brussels were fruitless (the pair had a joint exhibition in 2002 with gallerist Xavier Hufkens, who still represents Houseago), just frugal and dislocated from other artists, which was hard on the gregarious Houseago.

Work in progress: a reclining figure, 84 x 214 x 161in

Though he never expected it, LA was a good fit. “LA encourages eccentricity. You have to be extremely independent here. And in a weird way, you have the room, space, loneliness, whatever it is, to build these quite eccentric stories for yourself.” He found his first studio by calling the number outside a building advertised as a movie location and persuading the owner to rent it to artists instead. When Houseago admitted he wouldn’t be able to pay for the first six months, the canny landlord drew his rent in art works.

Through the young gallerist David Kordansky, Houseago was introduced to Miami collectors Don and Mera Rubell – famously generous supporters of young artists – who included him in an exhibition of LA artists titled Red Eye in 2006, and soon he was finding a peer group of artists such as Aaron Curry and Mark Grotjahn, who shared his interests. He remembers being invited to the Rubells for dinner (he took his five-month-old daughter Beatrice strapped to his chest) and being starstruck when he was introduced to fellow Angeleno, the artist Paul McCarthy, one of his heroes.

In 2008, Kordansky chose Houseago to inaugurate his new premises in Culver City with an exhibition of masks on redwood plinths and a 13ft bronze golem called “Untitled (Red Man)”. From there, his reputation grew rapidly, and in 2010 – a breakthrough year – his large sculpture “Baby” stole the show at the Whitney Biennial in New York. Eli Broad, Steve Cohen, Bob Rennie, Charles Saatchi

Sketches for various works

and François Pinault – who placed a vast striding sculpture outside his foundation at the Palazzo Grassi during the 2011 Venice Biennale – are all now collectors of his work.

“What I saw in LA, and what accepted me in, was the idea that they were looking into different histories,” Houseago says. “Everyone I met who’d been through art school in Los Angeles in the 1990s was hyper conceptually aware, very theory savvy, very post-studio. But they were feeling this dark urge to mix the pot a little bit.”

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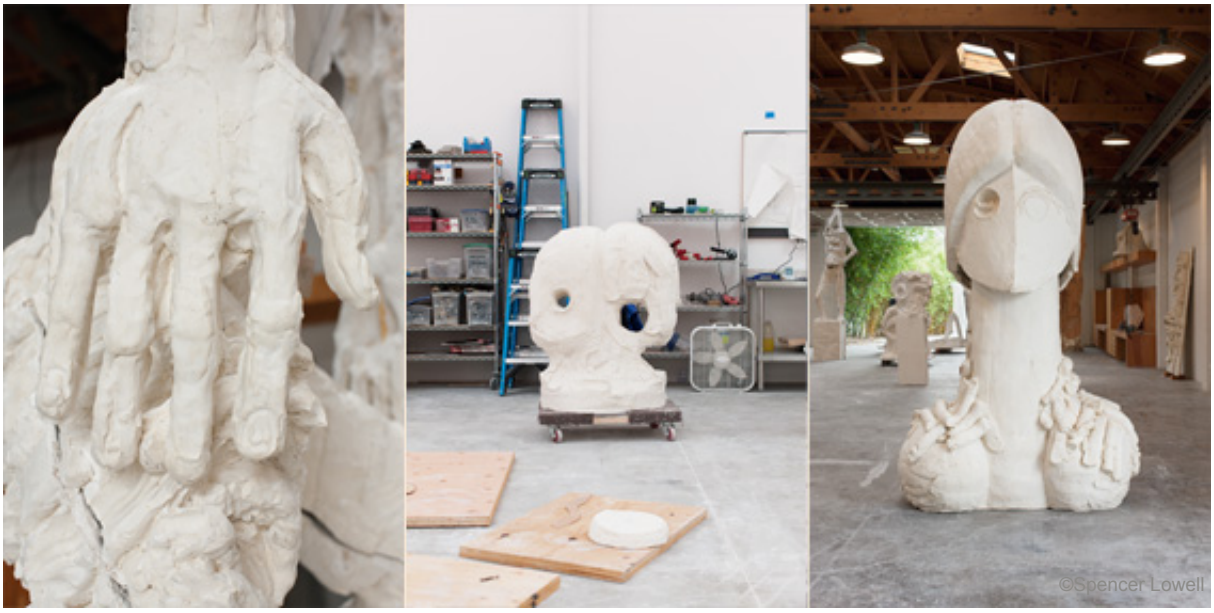
Into his own pot, Houseago stirred African tribal art, Japanese Kamakura period sculpture, science fiction, Hollywood special effects and the Hanna-Barbera cartoon imagery he absorbed from television as a kid. He recognises the influence of Picasso, for instance, on the Flintstones, or of Epstein’s “Rock Drill” on the design of Warhammer space marines or Star Wars droids. “That’s where the waves of the avant-garde and pop crashed,” he says. “It’s strange water.”



Works in progress: untitled pieces in Tuf-Cal, hemp, iron rebar. Detail from large figure with knees bent, 126 x 94 x 87in; sculpture in progress 84 x 214 x 161in; and portrait, 119 x 64.5 x 48in. All works 2012

Houseago’s work is fuelled by his excitement about this cross-pollination of high and low cultures. (Even that differentiation seems, these days, rather fusty.) The Beatles, he points out, absorbed the influence of Dada, expressionism, beat culture, Fluxus and John Cage’s minimalist sound works; the result was “people all over the world singing ‘All you need is love!’” In order for that sublime synthesis to take place, “weirdos need to do the groundwork”. I ask him if he feels like one of those weirdos. “I think I am. It’s arrogant of me to say, but yes.”

For Houseago, groundwork involves flirting with failure – in fact, not just flirting but jumping

headlong into bed with it. He shows me an 8ft clay sculpture of an owl. Just as his team was about to cast it, he says, the clay of the bird's proud chest just peeled off under its own weight. Against his own better judgment, Houseago went ahead and cast it anyway.

Often, he says, his weakness for doing the very thing that his conscience tells him is the least prudent can leave him feeling ashamed and disappointed. "So I'm driving home at night with a stomach ache," he tells me. But it's clear he enjoys this perversity as well. "You're like a surfer on a board waiting for a really good wave. And the buzz of that one wave is enough to have you sitting there for four hours in the fog."

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Houseago shares Picasso and Matisse's fascination with what was once known as primitive art: tribal objects from African and South Pacific peoples whose significance was unknown but to the artists seemed to resonate in profound ways with the subconscious. There is something similarly ancient and mysterious at play in Houseago's art.

"I never understood the word primitive. I sometimes think that watching reality shows is primitive. I've never thought that African sculpture from tribal societies is primitive. It strikes me as highly sophisticated, unbelievably well thought out, and very truthful." Does that mean he believes in universalism in art? "I think you'd be daft not to. I disagree with the whole 1990s idea that you have to understand the context to get the right thing out of it. Who gives a flying f*** about that? You can totally misunderstand the context of a work of art and it can still do something to you."

Maquette for 'L'homme pressé', the huge bronze-on-steel sculpture installed on the Grand Canal for the 2011 Venice Biennale

His plans for the future are characteristically grand in scale, and urgent. He sees himself as in a race against time – against his own mortality. "At 50, there's no way physically I'll be able to keep up the pace." That gives him a decade. "Anything could happen," he says. He wants to install a sculpture trail through the wild terrain of a property he owns in Tujunga, in the San Gabriel foothills north of LA. He also has plans to open up his current studio to the adjacent Rattlesnake Park (these days devoid of snakes, he assures me).

In January next year, the respected Dijon art centre Le Consortium will install a selection of

Houseago's sculptures around the streets of Aix-en-Provence. It is increasingly common for his work to be sited outdoors, perhaps because of its seeming toughness. On the contrary, Houseago still feels his art to be vulnerable. "If you make a monument for a society that doesn't want it, doesn't ask you for it, that's a very intense thing to do. The world treats them very, very violently."

There is an affecting tenderness in his garrulous character. "I sometimes sit down with my daughter, and she asks me what I've been doing. I'll say, 'I was rolling around in mud for the whole day, and it didn't work out.' You come to the end of the day and think: Jesus … that is a very odd way to make your living."

'I'll be your sister' and 'Special Brew', two exhibitions of new works by Thomas Houseago, run at Hauser & Wirth, 23 Savile Row, London W1, from September 7 until October 27