Galerie Rüdiger Schöttle

Stephan Balkenhol

23 March 2013 – 11 May 2013

Why the dog behind the curtain? This is the question doubtless asked by countless friends and collectors of the artist Stephan Balkenhol, who has been exhibiting at the Rüdiger Schöttle Gallery since 1988 and has so far always chosen a classical motif for the invitations to his sculpture exhibitions. The reason gradually dawns on the visitor as he enters the exhibition room on the ground floor of the gallery, where three sculptures and seven drawings are on display. Standing in the centre background, on a round, table-like pedestal, is the largest of the three sculptures, *Femme burlesque*, exposing her nudity in a provocative pose, her hair and her pubic hair accentuated in purple, the colour of feminism. Opposite her, at the entrance to the room, are two smaller male figures. A man in a red jacket, naked from the waist down and bashfully holding his hand in front of his face, stands in front of a background relief painted like a prehistoric cave painting and depicting a warrior on a chariot[1], harking back to a time when nakedness was still something quite normal and one of the attributes of a heroic warrior. The third sculpture, mounted on a free-standing stele, is a small male figure dressed in a plain grey suit. The man is holding his collar tightly closed. This sculptural interplay of open nakedness and uptight prudishness is flanked on either side by two groups of three and four drawings respectively. The men and women depicted in the drawings seem to be observing the scene, their facial expressions varying between slight bemusement, scepticism, casual aloofness and meditative calm.

Stephan Balkenhol has yet again succeeded in creating from several individual sculptures and drawings a harmoniously self-contained ensemble devoted to the theme of revealing and concealing and its reception in society.

[1] **Freely painted after a prehistoric cave painting in Syria (Tadrat Acacus, 12,000 B.C. to 100 A.D.).**

Stephan Balkenhol's roughly carved, coloured wooden sculptures are unmistakable and world renowned. His world of motifs revolves mainly around the human being, but it is also populated by animals and fantastic hybrid creatures. Men and women are shown in constant variations, often dressed in nondescript clothing and hardly gesturing, but sometimes in surprising postures and with unexpected attributes. While no two figures are the same, the expressions on their faces, at once unmoved and moving, have a typically enigmatic quality that reaches beyond the individual. They make no reference to any specific persons, they do not illustrate anything and narrate no stories. They are freely open to interpretation. Seemingly modern in outlook, they are unimpressed by the hectic hustle and bustle around them, with its constant demands for new and spectacular sensations. Hardly any other sculptor of our time is able to depict the modern human being more exemplarily than Stephan Balkenhol.

The facial expressions of his sculptures seem to contradict the splinters, notches and cracks that cover their entire surfaces and testify to the artist's expressionist style of sculpture: the figures are roughly sawn, hewn and carved out of massive tree trunks with a chainsaw and other traditional carpenter's tools. It is precisely this apparent discrepancy that makes his sculptures and reliefs so fascinating and unmistakable.

While he also produces relatively small wooden sculptures and wall reliefs for presentation indoors, Stephan Balkenhol's mainstay are his sculptures for display in public spaces. One example is the new Richard Wagner Memorial, created by Stephan Balkenhol, which will be unveiled in Leipzig in May 2012. Another is the artist's large-scale presentation at the Church of Saint Elizabeth in Kassel in 2012.

Stephan Balkenhol (*1957) lives and works in Meisenthal, France, and in Karlsruhe, where he has been professor of sculpture at the State Academy of Fine Arts since 1992. He has been exhibiting regularly at the Rüdiger Schöttle Gallery since 1988.