Opposites show each other off
Sculptors remake the figure in contemporary art

By Nancy Tousley, Calgary Herald
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Evan Penny, *Self* (2009), silicone, pigment, hair, aluminum.
Photograph courtesy of TrépanierBaer Gallery

Evan Penny & Stephan Balkenhol, Sculpture, On View At TrépanierBaer Gallery, Through June 20.

Evan Penny and Stephan Balkenhol, who could hardly be more different artists, has each in his own way been responsible for giving figurative sculpture a new lease on life at the top tiers of contemporary art.

During a period in the 1970s when abstract sculpture was dominant and both artists were in school, one in Calgary and the other in Hamburg, Germany, figurative sculpture was seen as a moribund tradition. It was revived only briefly, and suspectly, by the super-realists who made body casts of their subjects. Yet both artists, who work either smaller or larger than but not at life size, were drawn to the human body as the source and subject matter of their art.

What interested Yves Trépanier when he first thought of showing their work together in the early-'90s was their differences. This undoubtedly will be the point of entry for viewers of the show, which has been beautifully put together, one might say curated, by art dealers, who usually leave this to the museums and public art galleries.

As opposites, the two artists show each other off and they have things in common as well, which Trépanier cites. One is their common regard for the ordinary individual. Two is their interest in the body's gesture. Three, they both know their history and refer frequently to the history of figurative representation.

A sculpture of a standing figure immediately reaches back to ancient Egypt and Greece and the two artists make this implicit in figures like Penny's *Kim* (circa 1982), a standing female nude, and Balkenhol's *Mann mit rosem Hemd* (Man with Pink Shirt, 2009), a small standing male figure carved from the single block of wood that is also its base.

Stephan Balkenhol, *Mann mit rosem Hemd* (Man with Pink Shirt, 2009)
Photo courtesy TrépanierBaer

The nude female stands with her bare feet directly on top of the pedestal; this figure has no base. The male figure wears dark pants and a shirt. The far deeper difference between the two works is that Kim is a refined, very specific, full-body portrait arrived at through hours of observation and a casting process, while *Man with Pink Shirt* is an archetype, a present day everyman, which has been roughed out pretty quickly by comparison.

Penny renders with detailed specificity, even when the busts are not portraits but instead *No One In Particular,* as his series of fictional composite portraits is titled. He works from a model (or not) in clay, makes a mould from the clay and casts the final material in the mould, polyester resin in the early work or silicone since about 2001. The laborious process is hidden.

Balkenhol makes figural archetypes from more generalized observation that focuses on gesture. He chips his standing figures and reliefs out of wood with a chisel and hammer. The work is direct and immediate; it shows the chops and splinters of the process, much like a painting shows the tracks of the tool in the painter's hand. He then paints the eyes, mouth and clothing of the figure, leaving its flesh as raw, vibrant wood.

His figures in bronze, like *Frau* (2007) and *Mann-janus* (2007), are coloured with patina. Penny's bronze standing female nude, *Camille* (2000/20007), has a patina that looks like bronze. But Penny renders the skin of his silicone sculptures, with all of its blemishes, wrinkles, creases and discolorations, in semi-translucent colour with dense with detail.

Where Penny is after a representation that increasingly refers both to the intensely real and to the intensely artificial within a world reimagined by Photoshop and digital imaging, Balkenhol adheres to ancient traditions that include medieval and folk wood carving. Where Balkenhol stresses rootedness and connection to a sense of a continuous past in a world that is not immune to instability, Penny registers an anxiety-producing disconnect in the contemporary world, where it becomes harder and harder to tell what is real from what is not real.

Both artists concern themselves with visions of the human condition, expressed through the human figure. And one work by each artist is distorted in a particularly telling way. In Balkenhol's *Verdrehte Manne*r (Rotated Men, 2003), the bronze figures, whose flattened bodies are like brackets defining a void, seem as if they are being pushed and pulled off centre by external forces that prevent them from standing up straight.

Penny's remarkable new work, *Self* (2009), a self-portrait made with the aid of a digital body scan, morphs radically as you move around it. By preventing one view in which the portrait snaps into place as a stable image, Penny embodies the contemporary understanding of the self as fluid and ever-changing.

The crux of the differences between the two artists, then, might lie in a difference of world view, a feeling for who we are, how we feel and how we live now. Perhaps the difference in culture has something to do with it.

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