

Art in America INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

THOMAS HOUSEAGO

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DAVID KORDANSKY By Paul Foss



CULVER CITY Thomas Houseago's first U.S. solo exhibition, "Serpent," was a promising start for David Kordansky's new digs in Culver City. Offering partial, exploded views of one of the most sublime works of Western antiquity, LAOCOÖN AND HIS SONS, Houseago has taken a metaphorical chisel to the many myths, theories and satires associated with this Hellenistic sculpture depicting the demise of the ill-fated Trojan priest. Houseago reduces the pyramidal grouping to base units, resulting in nine fragments (all 2008). Except for a small mask in the office, all were located in the main gallery—chunky, disjointed, gouged figures in a variety of mediums (plaster, hemp, iron rebar, redwood, bronze), some standing fully upright but most lying about on plinths. Laocoön's line from THE AENEID, "Do not trust the Horse, Trojans," comes to mind.

If it were not for their brazen similarity to modernist warhorses, you'd swear these odds and ends belonged in an institute of antiquities—or in a museum rummage sale, a Cecil B. DeMille prop house or some art forger's stash of unfinished masters. The figure that truly takes you aback is the tottery, 14-foot-tall bronze UNTITLED (RED MAN). But for the trace of Laocoön's face, it looks like a hastily completed version of Rodin's headless, armless WALKING MAN. The contorted limbs of a second standing figure, a reference to Picasso's LES DEMOISELLES D'AVIGNON, revives a famous Renaissance quarrel over the exact orientation of the Hellenistic statue's missing arms. Michelangelo thought they were originally bent back over the shoulder, but the official opinion, endorsed by Raphael and enduring up to the last century, opted for a more heroic, outstretched gesture. It was not until 1957, when Laocoön's right arm was discovered in a builder's yard in Rome, that Michelangelo was proved right and the statue restored accordingly.

Given his Frankenstein-like endeavor to spark new life in the dead corpus of modernist art, one easily gets Houseago's Laocoön obsession. "Serpent" is a metaphor not just for the fate that befell Laocoön for attempting to expose the Greek ruse, but for all those writers, philosophers, poets, art critics and con artists through the ages who have found themselves similarly bitten by the theme, from Pliny the Elder, Lessing and Napoleon (who stole the statue from the Vatican) to Clement Greenberg and Ad Reinhardt. But what gives this show real bite is the challenging idea that deep inside every monumental revelation is an attempt to restore something that never existed in the first place. Is this the sting in "Serpent"'s tail, one wonders, or was it hidden inside the LAOCOÖN all along? Houseago makes us eager to investigate further.