

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Art in America

Monsters on the Lawn: Thomas Houseago at Storm King

David Ebony



Thomas Houseago's hulking and menacing bronze and aluminum figures currently command the usually serene and bucolic setting of Storm King Art Center in Mountainville, N.Y. Organized by museum director and curator David R. Collens, "Thomas Houseago: As I Went Out One Morning" (through Nov. 11) features 14 recent large-scale sculptures by the Los Angeles-based artist, plus a survey of 13 smaller sculptures, installations and two-dimensional works inside the museum building. Though Houseago has recently garnered significant international attention, "As I Went Out One Morning" constitutes his first major U.S. show.

Born in Leeds in 1972, the artist became a U.S. citizen last year. He titled the exhibition after a 1967 Bob Dylan song whose lyrics refer to Thomas Paine, the revolutionary English writer who assisted the early Americans in their struggle to overthrow British rule. In an interview in a brochure accompanying the exhibition, Houseago says that he was thinking of Dylan because in the '60s the musician lived in the Hudson Valley, not far from Storm King.

Houseago's distinctive transmogrification of the human figure is based on a long tradition of modernist figurative sculpture and painting. His work is full of references to Giacometti, Picasso and Ernst, and to sculptures by German neo-expressionists such as Georg Baselitz and Markus Lüpertz. While Houseago's grotesqueries touch upon existential angst, they are also playful. The outdoor figures in this show, accompanied by several large, stylized plaster lawn chairs, an aluminum snake and an 8-foot-tall bronze owl, seem to be characters in a phantasmagoric melodrama-like a bewitched Shakespeare in the Park.

Houseago discussed the show and his work with *A.i.A.* in a recent phone interview.

DAVID EBONY What attracted you to Storm King as the venue for your first major U.S. show?

THOMAS HOUSEAGO It's an ideal setting. I've long been interested in works in a landscape, and admired those at Storm King: Calder, LeWitt and especially David Smith. I was thinking of Smith's outdoor sculptures at his Bolton's Landing studio [not far from Storm King]. I was attracted to the sense of history of the place, the connection between American artists and the European avant-garde.

EBONY Your outdoor installation suggests a narrative. Is there one? How did you determine the placement of the works?

HOUSEAGO It's not really a narrative in a literal sense. I had in mind the overall idea of the studio process, the activity of art making. The relationship between what is inside the museum and the outdoor works is important. I was thinking of reintroducing the idea of the studio as a place for sitting and looking at art, an idea which the avant-garde in recent years had all but abandoned. I'm referring to Brancusi in his studio practice, but not in a retro way. It's more like Bruce Nauman's example, in works from the 1960s and '70s, or the video installation he made of his empty studio at night [*Mapping the Studio (Fat Chance John Cage)*, 2001]. The Storm King installation is all about this dichotomy of inside and outside. I'm also dealing with notions of-and contradictions between-public and private space.

EBONY You appear to exploit the tradition of figurative art while moving it forward and advancing its possibilities. Is that your aim?

HOUSEAGO I feel that you can't go forward into the future without knowing the past very well. You can't produce something extraordinary if you don't know what's come before you. You can be sure that Judd, Serra, Andre and LeWitt all studied Rodin's work. You can't fake it.