

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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FROM TOP: STEVE REMICK FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL; RAMSAY DE GIVE FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Artist Unmasks Midtown Installation

By JENNIFER SMITH

The sculptor Thomas Houseago is known for creating monumental figures whose raw edges—rusted rebar, cracked plaster—reflect his passion for the imperfect.

His latest project invites viewers at Rockefeller Plaza to survey Midtown through his artworks' eyes.

"Masks (Pentagon)," set to be unveiled on Tuesday, consists of five upright plaster masks, each more than 14-feet tall, joined together to create a sort of open-air room. One mask resembles a winking skull, an eye socket heaped with broken cylinders. Another, formed by overlapping slabs that zig and zag like lightning bolts, is barely recognizable as a face.

The commission will be on view for six weeks on the plaza overlooking the Rockefeller Center ice rink. Viewers can duck inside the pentagonal space and see their surroundings through openings in the sculptures.

"It's as close as you will get,



Thomas Houseago, above, in his SoHo studio. Top, his sculptures are installed Wednesday night.

in a way, to having my studio in Rockefeller Plaza," Mr. Houseago, 43 years old, said in an interview.

Kinetic and voluble, with a shock of red hair, Mr. Houseago is originally from Leeds, England. He moved to Los Angeles more than a decade ago and counts Pablo Picasso and Darth Vader among his influences.

His work was included in the 2010 Whitney Biennial and has been shown in New York at Hauser & Wirth and Michael Werner Gallery, as well as

Storm King Art Center in New Windsor, N.Y.

The masks in Rockefeller Plaza were cast from clay forms created on the floor of Mr. Houseago's Los Angeles studio—at one point, sessions involved hurling lumps of clay down from a ladder. Each clay sculpture was then cast into plaster and inlaid with hemp and metal grids.

It took about a year and a half to create them all, working with a team of six to eight people, some of whom he met working construction jobs in Los Angeles before his career took off.

One mask was stored outside long enough that birds started nesting in it, Mr. Houseago said. Another is pocked with footprints from his 9-year-old daughter, Bea, who danced on the clay.

"We cast it the next day," Mr. Houseago said. "That's the mask that is facing Fifth Avenue."

The commission was organized by the Public Art Fund and Rockefeller Center's owner, Tishman Speyer, which

have teamed up on high-profile exhibitions there such as last summer's flowering topiary "Split-Rocker," by Jeff Koons, and a 65-foot skyscraper that the artist Chris Burden built out of toy construction parts in 2008.

"It was kind of a gutsy thing to do in the plaza," said Jerry Speyer, Tishman Speyer's chairman and co-chief executive officer, who is also the chairman of the Museum of Modern Art. "It's been an interesting way of educating the public."

Mr. Houseago's hulking pieces have been on display in public before, in places like Manhattan's High Line and City Hall Park to the Palazzo Grassi in Venice, Italy. But for sheer crowds, Rockefeller Plaza may beat them all, he said.

"It's so risky, and it's so terrifying," he said. "Hopefully kids will enjoy walking in it. And maybe one of those kids will think about being an artist, and that would be fabulous. That's always the dream, that you give people that space to wonder."