

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST
THE INTERNATIONAL MAGAZINE OF DESIGN

Five Massive Masks Take Over Manhattan's Rockefeller Center, Thanks to Artist Thomas Houseago

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[Thomas Houseago. *Masks (Pentagon)*, 2015. Tuf-Cal, hemp, iron rebar, steel, redwood. 18' .75" x 23' 1.125" x 24' 3.5"
Courtesy of the artist and Gagosian Gallery. Photo: Jason Wyche, Courtesy Public Art Fund, NY
Organized by Public Art Fund and Tishman Speyer]

Fierce yet fragile, and hauntingly human, sculptor Thomas Houseago's skull-like masks could be ancient relics from a future civilization. So to stumble upon five of the monumental faces in the middle of Manhattan's bustling Rockefeller Center is a shock. Houseago's powerful new site-specific installation, *Masks (Pentagon)*—on view from April 28 through June 12—is the latest work in the Public Art Fund's stellar contemporary art program.

Arranged in a pentagon that creates a room visitors can enter, the installation, two years in the making, is an urban experience as much as an artwork to observe. "Public art can feel so icy and fabricated," says the British-born, Los Angeles-based Houseago. "I wanted people to feel a human quality and struggle, and to think about what a face looks like."

Houseago has a history with faces. His oversized *Baby* in the 2010 Whitney Biennial, with its huge mouthless skull-head and sunken eyes, still stands out as a compelling image of the isolation, awkwardness, vulnerability, and confusion that sums up the human condition. Here, at Rockefeller Center, his five giant masks, one more abstract and intense than the next, are similarly raw, both materially and emotionally. Houseago made them in his L.A. studio,

intentionally leaving the plaster, rebar, and hemp somewhat unfinished so that “the process of making” and “human fallibility” are visible. Each mask is about 15 feet tall, so viewers can peer out through the gaping eyes.

The works are a visceral foil to the polished granite and spiffy Art Deco detailing of Rockefeller Center, whose owner, Tishman Speyer, worked with the Public Art Fund to organize the piece. “I love the idea of the individual in a city, and I’m trying to make a small crack in the slick urban space,” says Houseago, whose concurrent show, “The Medusa and Other Heads,” is on view at the Gagosian Gallery’s Park Avenue outpost from May 12 through June 13. The best part about the Rockefeller Plaza arrangement, he says, is the view from behind the masks. “Sculpture has this protective, magical function. It’s a great moment when you look out and see the building towering up beautifully. The gestalt changes for a moment with this view of the city.”

Through June 12 at Rockefeller Plaza, between Fifth and Sixth avenues and 49th and 50th streets in New York; publicartfund.org