

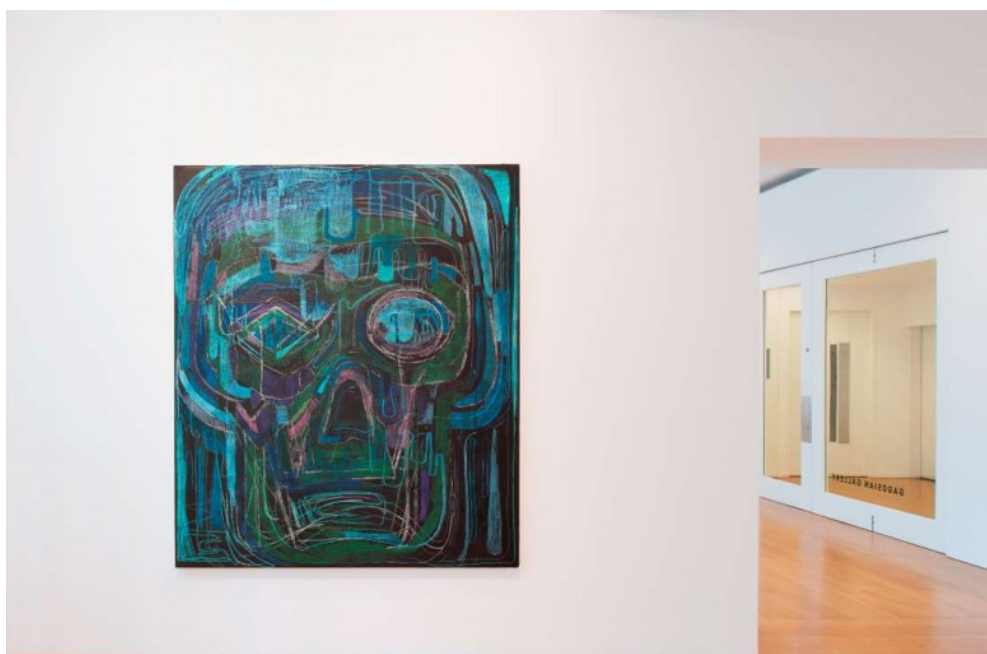
## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

### South China Morning Post

#### Gagosian Hong Kong shows first paintings of much collected sculptor Thomas Houseago

*Yorkshire-born, Los Angeles-based artist's paintings blend futurism, cubism and modernism. Knowledge of Houseago's sculpture, inspired by primitivism of African and Oceanic art, provides a better understanding of exhibition*

John Batten



*Thomas Houseago's Psychedelic Brothers- Drawn Paintings exhibition.*

*Picture: Courtesy of Thomas Houseago and Gagosian Gallery*

The paintings of Yorkshire-born, Los Angeles-based Thomas Houseago glide through a blend of 20th-century futurism, cubism and modernism. These are accomplished and informative studies accurately described in the title of the exhibition at the Gagosian Gallery. Despite a carefully unfinished quality, the nine large paintings exhibited as “Thomas Houseago: Psychedelic Brothers – Drawn Paintings” are not rapid-fire drawings or sketches, but fully resolved works in elaborate layers of pastel, crayon, pencils, oil and acrylic on canvas, particularly the complex “*Psychedelic Brother III (blue architecture) (2016)*”.

Houseago is a figurative sculptor who studied at Central Saint Martins, in London, and at De Ateliers, in Amsterdam, and lived in Brussels before relocating to LA in 2003. Sought after by collectors, his sculptures are generally large and completed with a team of assistants in an extensive warehouse in LA. His bronze pieces are cast in foundries across the United States.

At the 2011 Venice Biennale, his “*L’homme pressé (2011-2012)*”, a huge bronze of a man in a hurry, was displayed on the Grand Canal, outside the Venice museum of Christie’s owner François-Henri Pinault, as part of his collection.

Knowledge of Houseago’s sculpture, rarely seen in Hong Kong, provides a better understanding of this exhibition. The artist draws inspiration from the long history of sculpture, from Greek and classical human forms to stripped-down, simplified interpretations of the human figure and architecture in cubism and minimal modernism. Equally influential are his sculptural elders – Henry Moore, Jacob Epstein and Eduardo Paolozzi – and popular culture, including characters such as those from *The Flintstones*, Japanese anime and science fiction, often in the familiar profile of *Star Wars*’ Darth Vader.

However, it’s the “primitivism” of African and Oceanic art that is most clearly seen in his sculpture and in these drawn paintings.

One of Houseago’s favourite sculpting materials is Tuf-Cal, a high-strength plaster, which he leaves to dry rough, white and bare. Often, his distinctive figures feature a Tuf-Cal mask as a stylised face on exposed plywood or a metal armature underbelly. The drawn paintings exhibited here have a similar mask-like quality and the beginnings of these two-dimensional renderings of the mask can be seen in a 2009 sculpture, “*Mask (black hill/red hill)*”. In the work, Houseago prepared a raw, flat outline of a face in Tuf-Cal, but instead of working the plaster, he drew over the surface, depicting deep eye sockets, one clear eye, an open, almost-smiling mouth and black hair covering one side of the face.

The mask motif was settled on years ago, but his use of crayons and pastels came about recently, when Houseago was drawing with his young daughter. These paintings are the first he has publicly shown and each uses a skull-like mask as the basis of a universal, egalitarian, homogenous, full-faced portrait. They appear anonymous, but each is personal.

“*Drawn Painting – Fathers Ghost I (astronaut) (2016)*” is a highly worked and layered portrait of the artist’s father, who was diagnosed with schizophrenia when Houseago was a young boy. The painting’s vigorous swirls of lines intimate an anguished man, and in its execution, an artist reflecting on himself as a distressed child.

In each painting, the “psychedelic” linking of minds between family and friends – indeed, all of us – is intensified by repetitive and obsessive lines across the canvas and shafts of colour in a narrow palette, often in shades of purple and blue.

The primitivism of these paintings is reminiscent of outsider art: naive, self-conscious and honest, but with a wholeness of form that has both a child-like quality and an uncanny maturity and insight into the fragility of human nature.

Each of the nine portraits depicts an aspect of the mask as a skull – a *memento mori* (Latin for “remember you must die”) – a classical and artistic symbol reminding us that life is tempered by death and we should be humble in our lives. It is always a sobering message and makes this exhibition more powerful than most painted portraits.

“Thomas Houseago: Psychedelic Brothers – Drawn Paintings” will be on display at the Gagosian Gallery, 7/F, Pedder Building, 12 Pedder Street, Central, until August 13.