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ARTNEWS

Over the Wall: Thomas Houseago's Latest Works Engage Builders, Breakers, and Climbers

Suzanne Muchnic



*Thomas Houseago, Open Wall (Beautiful Wall), 2016, installation view at Gagosian, Beverly Hills.
Fredrik Nilsen/©Thomas Houseago/Courtesy The Artist And Gagosian*

Thomas Houseago got his start as a rough-and-tumble performance artist in the gritty environment of northern England. “I would cover myself in dirt and then set myself on fire,” as he put it. Much has changed in the 26 years since he left his hometown of Leeds. Just recently, the master of a sprawling studio in north-central Los Angeles, Houseago was reveling in his first exhibition at Gagosian Gallery in Beverly Hills and looking forward to a mid-career survey at the Musée d’Art de la Ville de Paris in 2019 or 2020. But some things have remained the same. He is still bursting with youthful energy and, despite his international reputation as a sculptor of gigantic figures and room-size environments, he continues to see himself as a performance artist.

“Whether I’m an architect, a sculptor, a painter, I perform an activity,” Houseago said, plunging into a freewheeling interview at Gagosian. “And I like that my work contains a record of the activity. There’s a reminder of human ability to move and morph and push and shape and prod and break and build. But more than anything, it’s about the activity’s relationship to the world. And it’s asking the viewer to become part of the performance.”

No surprise, then, that his imposing *Open Wall (Beautiful Wall)*, is meant to be closely encountered. On the front side, children can sit on ledges that protrude from the Z-shaped structure of plaster, hemp, and iron rebar. They can also crawl through openings in the high-relief frieze of swirling, nested shapes that covers the outer surface. Viewers of all ages can squeeze through a narrow door in the 12-foot-high wall or simply stroll around to the back, where the artist’s process is exposed in a grid of metal support under rough plaster.

The piece can be appreciated as a play of opposites—outside/inside, front/back, finished/unfinished. But that’s not what was on Houseago’s mind when he started the project. It was Donald Trump’s campaign promise to build a wall between Mexico and the United States. “It was such a perverse idea: a beautiful wall blocking people out,” he said. And as his revulsion grew, it sparked a massive artwork that upended plans for the Beverly Hills show.

“I had this round thing,” Houseago said of an enormous walk-in sculpture that he intended to introduce at Gagosian. “It’s really a work about love and children and the intimacy of sex and the blending that occurs in love—the loss of your own body and having children and being in a family.” But as that sculpture neared completion, Trump’s gloom-and-doom rhetoric kept rattling around in Houseago’s mind, bringing back painful memories of his childhood.

“When Margaret Thatcher came in, she spoke in a certain way about the north of England—very disparaging, very humiliating, simplistic, rough,” he recalled. “And when Trump talked about building a beautiful wall, I started thinking about what I could make of that in sculpture. I’m a maker of forms. I do make walls.”

Eventually, after long talks with his partner, Muna El Fituri, he began to envision a new project. And that compelled him to stop working on the “round thing” and throw all his energy into realizing his vision of a beautiful wall in time for the show. Working on the floor of his studio, as usual, he made preparatory drawings and joined his team of assistants in a marathon-like effort. “We broke the wall out of the mold and installed it in my complex for one evening, the evening before shipping,” he said.

Topical as it is, *Open Wall (Beautiful Wall)* is aesthetically consistent with Houseago’s recent abstract sculptures and his architectural installation *Moun Room* (2013–14)—at least in terms of form off-white palette, and materials. Installed in an adjacent space, 12 nine-by-six-foot *Black Paintings* offered a sharp contrast.

The skeletal faces and brooding eyes that emerge in dark impasto recall those of Houseago's sculptural monsters and, like most of his work, the paintings are records of intense activity. But it took two years to produce the oil-on-canvas works. Conceived as a whole, not a sequence, they are an expression of lingering grief over the death of British curator Michael Stanley in 2012.

"In my life, what's significant is that I went through a transformation," Houseago said, recalling a bleak period in Brussels that led to a desperate move to Los Angeles, in 2003, and his subsequent struggle to establish himself in his new home. "I was going through a crisis. I was rootless," he said. "There's a dynamism to that; there's also something scary about that." He spent a few years making contacts and supporting himself with construction jobs before Miami collectors Don and Mera Rubell began to buy his work and dealer David Kordansky inaugurated his new gallery in Culver City with a Houseago show.

"I was also doing a lot of work in Europe, which is ironic because I left with my tail between my legs and then suddenly they wanted me," he said. "But Michael was the first English person to go, 'Hey, you are from the north of England. I want to make room for you.' He urged me to deal with the vernacular of the north of England, which I had been in denial about. So he was pushing me to think about Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth, the poetry of the north of England, the romantics, Ted Hughes, the music that was really big for me, all these things I grew up with. He was this voice saying, 'Don't forget that; don't throw the baby out with the bath water.'"

"I really loved him. I had a very tight relationship with him," Houseago said. "He gave me my first museum show, at Modern Art Oxford, and that changed a lot of things." A substantial monograph published in conjunction with the 2011–2012 exhibition—and recently reprinted—was also a career booster. But seven months after the Oxford show closed, Stanley was dead, apparently by suicide.

"His death shook me to the core," Houseago revealed. "When I lost him, it was a stark, painful thing. In many ways, I died also, and I went through a period of mourning and rebirth. So the paintings were a big part of that. They began as drawings, and then I realized that—because I hadn't taken time to mourn Michael, my relationship to England and all these things—I had to deal with that in paintings."

The title of the Gagosian exhibition, "The Ridge," referred to another troubling part of Houseago's past. A rock-walled passageway, built along the top of a cliff and known as "The Ridge," led from his school to his home in Leeds. It attracted criminals and illegal activity, but the only alternative was a much longer route through a frightening forest.

Such memories are not likely to fade away, but Houseago is ready to move on. "I just want to work," he said. "I love the activity. Being an artist is just the best thing in the

world. It's scary. You are always on the edge of collapse, but that seems to be the deal.”