

## GAGOSIAN

whitewall

### Houseago and Rodin: A Colloquy of Classic and Contemporary Sculpture

Ophelia Anderson



*Installation view, "Houseago / Rodin," on view at Gagosian Davies Street; courtesy of Thomas Houseago, Musée Rodin, and Gagosian.*

This fall in London, the Davies Street paired with the Musée Rodin for a second joint project, this time juxtaposing Auguste Rodin's posthumous bronzes in dialogue with those of British contemporary sculptor. The installation, on view through December 18, speaks to the powerful sensuality of sculpture — revealing two artists separated by a century whilst connected by a mutual fascination for the human body's physical and emotional dynamism.

As Rodin's curvilinear forms arouse present sentiments, Houseago's visceral creations, like the *Gold Walking Man* (2021) which strides across the gallery, seem to flesh out our primordial past by their sticking anatomical structure. Surrounded by white floors, walls, and focused by daylight, a theatrical scene unfolds between the interactive creatures, mid-movement yet frozen in time, mining transitional moments — "between being alive and dead," as Houseago puts it.

In his own words, "there is in Rodin a very pagan concern for the life-death continuum: clay as a manifestation of life and death... a way of reminding us about the complexity of being in a body, of being alive." On such a note, *Whitewall* spoke to the Los Angeles-based artist, inquiring about his recurrent fascination for the past in his practice, his chronic address of death, and the role trauma plays in his process.



*Portrait of Thomas Houseago.*

**WHITEWALL:** You show a recurring fascination for delving into humanity's past from the artists that inspire you such as Rodin, Picasso, and Gauguin, to the classic materials you use and the eternal themes you address. Why are you drawn so ardently towards the past in your process?

THOMAS HOUSEAGO: The history of art is in us, whether we like it or not. You can't really look at things without it. You either look at things not knowing that it's in your system, or you look at them knowing it's in your system. I got really interested in knowing it and figuring it out. Like how Rembrandt changed the way we deal with light, and Pierro Della Francesca changed the way we look at Italian landscapes.

And Rodin..., he demands that viewers understand sculpture. What I loved about Rodin, was that I came to him by accident...I made a walking figure in Amsterdam when I was a student, it just came out, just popped out of me, it was kind of a distressful experience actually, ... so from that moment on I kind of had that obligation to research him, to understand why, figure out why this had also happened to him.

When I got asked to do the show at Gagosian, I wasn't making sculptures anymore, and I felt that if anyone was going to get me out of bed to do sculptures, well in a way it had to be Rodin. It was a bit scary, also, because it's such a heavy duty. I don't really mind if I look terrible or good, or whatever, that's not the point. The point is to say we can still do it.



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**WW: You talk of clay as a “manifestation of life and death” and yet chose to cast your sculptures in bronze, zinc, and brass. What drew you towards the use of these materials?**

TH: My work, right now it’s super vulnerable, the originals are glued together and there’s a lot of objects & materials in them that start to rot. I realized that if I was going to show these and they were going to have a life outside of me, maybe more than I’ve ever needed they need to be cast. So that they could sustain throughout time, go into people’s lives. I made my sculptures for people.

Every sculptor knows, Rodin knew it, there is something magical about the transformation of material from something super unstable like clay to something stable but still vulnerable, to like a material that is solid, and you can hold in your hand.

It wasn’t a question of going back in the day, revisiting Rodin’s process and the classic sculpture methods. I care about art, it moves me. I care about people, poetry. I was reading a lot of poetry lately, more than I was looking at art, Basho and Issa, and all these Japanese haiku, and then I was feeling that my sculptures were also that, because they are constantly talking about chance and these weird little moments and some of the sculptures are like that, I thought the rocks talked to me. I was on a real haiku thing. Linking the words into the sculptures, affecting me as much as Rodin. It’s all the same, I mean I really believe it’s all the same in its genesis.



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**WW: The ubiquitous theme of death seems ever-present in your works, what draws you towards such a point of focus in your creation?**

TH: Because as soon as I was born, shortly thereafter I died. My spirit and my body were taken from me, they were crushed, and I died in a way. And death, once you've gotten that close, it's constantly pulling you ba

I was wrestling with this my whole life, without really knowing it. Then once I realized... once I was ok with that ... I understood my obsession with death.

And once I freed myself and understood that I had died, I had to go through the mourning, I had to go through the sadness and the realization that everything is impermanent. Nothing is permanent, and there's a release in that and there's a terrible tragedy in that. But then there's a love in it because you realize that in impermanence you get down to these truths which are, honestly, love, beauty, grace, creativity, which seem to live outside of time.

I went through intense revelations and now I'm more conscious of how I use the image of death. Much more careful about it, and mindful about it. I don't want to scare people, I don't want to upset people, but nor do I want to shy away from it.



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**WW: Long back when you first came to art as a performance artist in the streets of North England and today, although a renowned sculptor across the globe, you continue to qualify your work as a “performance.” Can you explain how your creations, although static installations, live and breathe as an ongoing performance?**

TH: I believe in Joseph Beuys’s “Thinking is Form.” So, Joseph Beuys, the way I take it, was implying that sculpture is a manifestation of thought. And that thought and action, go together to make sculpture. Because you’re thinking, you do an action. That helped me look back at sculpture and realize this very important strand that runs through all of it which is that sculpture is a physical manifestation of actions and thoughts, put in the world, in an object.

The key is that it has no use. Right? Everything in this room except for the artwork has a use. The chair, table...etc. But why is that there? (pointing towards one of his own). There’s no reason for it to be there, yet that is a form of thought, and a form of material manipulation that I’ve argued has a place. And maybe it doesn’t, but it doesn’t matter it’s the act of doing it that matters. That’s a performance in itself, an intervention in a social situation. It’s an interruption. And in that interruption, whatever that interruption means, if it’s pleasant or unpleasant, it doesn’t matter, it’s an interruption in a system of fear that’s telling you not to think, not to feel.

**WW: You have famously stated ‘I didn’t think I’d survive’ and have talked about facing trauma in your childhood. How has trauma transcended itself in your artistic process? What role would you say trauma plays in art?**

TH: We’ve all been traumatized by being born, by being put on earth, and how do we deal with that trauma ... with hope and gratitude, and truth. I think trauma plays a role in art, and can also destroy art.

You have to surround artists with hope. Hope drives art whilst trauma kills it. If you don’t have hope, you don’t create, as it destroys creativity. A struggle against it though is hope. So even when art is bleak it’s super hopeful. It’s always hopeful. There’s a great Francis Bacon dialogue where he talks about his work, and he tells someone that it’s really hopeful, and someone asks well hopeful about what, and he says: hopeful about nothing. And I remember hearing that and thinking about what it means and realizing it’s about faith.

WW: Would you say the creative process can play a part in healing?

TH: It's exactly the same.



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**WW: What projects do you see on your horizon? What is your next obsession?**

TH: I've been working on this sculpture, it's been years and years and now I'd like to finish. It started because Donald Trump campaigned with, "I am going to make the most beautiful wall at the border with Mexico," which is like the most perverse thing that you've ever heard. It was like he was demanding me to make my own beautiful wall.

So, I started making this wall and it grew and grew and grew like a mural but free-standing. It's got seats and steps on it and it's got a womb in it, it's this huge interactive thing, and at one moment Michael Govan said that it would make the perfect outdoor work for LACMA. So, I want to finish that, it's my gift to LA.