

# NZZ

## ***Shocking incident in the museum and a critical image of society - the new exhibition at the Fondation Beyeler***

*Hyperrealistic figures by the American pop artist Duane Hanson are currently sitting, standing and lying everywhere in the museum rooms of the Fondation Beyeler. An anniversary exhibition.*

Philipp Meier



*The hyperrealistic group of figures "Old Couple on a Bench" by Duane Hanson in front of a painting by Mark Rothko.*

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Are we too early? The exhibition at the Fondation Beyeler in Riehen doesn't seem to be finished yet. In any case, in the large entrance, a museum employee is painting a wall, while next to it a female nude by Pablo Picasso, still half-wrapped, squints out of its wooden box. The flat painter is taking a break and looking thoughtfully ahead of him. He is in the process of painting a piece of wall gray - the same color as Picasso's *Reclining Woman*. This staged ensemble by Raphaël Bouvier is intended as a grisaille still life. With Picasso's work, the curator has placed a highlight of the collection next to a naturalistic wax figure by the American artist Duane Hanson - which is on loan for the current exhibition.

With the presentation, Bouvier also wants to illustrate the processes behind the scenes that lead to an exhibition. The anniversary exhibition of the Fondation Beyeler, celebrating its 25th anniversary, is also intended to pay tribute to museum employees who usually work invisibly: packaging specialists, for example, or craftsmen such as the painter. For the curator, the artist Duane Hanson (1925–1996) was just the right fit with his hyper-realistic, life-size human figures. Bouvier integrated numerous works by this pop art artist into the collection presentation he designed, as an exhibition within an exhibition, so to speak.



*“Nu couché jouant avec un chat” by Pablo Picasso. © Pro Litteris, Zürich / Peter Klaunzer / Keystone*

## Expensive gift

Duane Hanson's lifelike characters primarily reflect the American middle class and the working class. And Hanson is a master at blurring the boundaries between art and reality. The somewhat exhausted-looking “Delivery Man” in the first exhibition room, for example, appears so realistic that you almost feel like you are watching him. Everything about him is real, the clothes, the Sprite can in his hand, his little cart with the wooden box on it. Only the figure itself is made of polyester resin. This elastic material even allowed the artist to create deceptively realistic hair growth on the body and head.

Has the Delivery Man just delivered the new work to the collection? In any case, that's the curator's idea: to hint at the museum's acquisition of a Pierre Bonnard piece. And it is remarkable that the Fondation Beyeler was able to afford this at all: the narrow portrait format work with a woman emerging from a bathtub was acquired by the foundation of the museum founder and legendary gallery owner Ernst Beyeler, who died in 2010, from a private collection. Such works by Bonnard fetch prices in the millions at auctions today. The Fondation Beyeler gifted itself a nice birthday present with the work. The painting also fits perfectly with works of bathing motifs by other masters such as Paul Cézanne or Edgar Degas in the collection, as the ensemble in the first room clearly shows.

The Fondation Beyeler not only enjoys international reputation because of its top-class collection. Renzo Piano's architecture is a highlight in the museum building. The water lily pond now glitters in the autumn light in front of the large glass front. And its sparkle is captured inside the museum by Claude Monet's nine meter wide triptych “Le bassin aux nymphéas” (around 1917–1920). In front of it, a man sits on a lawn mower, as if he had driven from the park outside directly into the exhibition hall. This too, is a sculpture by Duane Hanson. Just like the older couple sat pondering on a museum bench in the room with the contemplative pictures by Mark Rothko.



*“Window Washer” by Duane Hanson in front of the window front facing the pond in the Fondation Beyeler. © Pro Litteris, Zürich / Peter Klaunzer / Keystone*



*“Man on a Mower” by Duane Hanson in front of Claude Monet’s “Bassin aux nymphéas”. © Pro Litteris, Zürich / Peter Klaunzer / Keystone*

The setting looks no less lively with a Duane Hanson figure as well as a large standing man and a walking man by Alberto Giacometti. As if alive, a visitor with a stroller walks through the room crossing the towering bronzes. If you take a closer look, you realize that this woman is an American from the 1960s. According to curator Bouvier, the placement of this Hanson work is also intended to draw attention to the fact that the Fondation Beyeler's visitors also include mothers with small children.

### **Shocking group of figures**

The effect of the group of figures is different, with a defenseless black man lying on the ground and a police officer hitting him with his baton. It immediately becomes clear that these are fictional figures frozen in their movements. Hanson was a political artist. He had repeatedly addressed controversial issues in American society and thereby criticized social injustices. He was interested in the socially disadvantaged, marginalized and oppressed. "Policeman and Rioter" is probably his most dramatic example of this. The work was created in connection with the American civil rights movement and the rebellion against racist police violence committed against African Americans. Today it is once again uncomfortably topical in the context of "Black Lives Matter".

The work, which is difficult to bear, is one of the very few that lives from its dynamism - otherwise Hanson's introverted, motionless figures are of static stillness. With brutal realism, the artist has shown a social evil of the worst kind, which he condemned in the strongest possible terms: "My goal is to enable the viewers of my work to see the world as it is, and perhaps also to look for ways to improve it." A simple yet strong statement with which the artist once commented on his work: The quote can be read on the wall next to the work. Without this curatorial measure, this work could easily be misunderstood as racist. The shocking work is in line with Picasso's "Weeping Woman" in the next room - this is also a successful contextualization by the curator.



*"Policeman and Rioter" by Duane Hanson.  
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“Old Lady in Folding Chair” by Duane Hanson next to Paul Cézanne’s “Madame Cézanne à la chaise jaune”.  
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“Anniversary exhibition – special guest Duane Hanson”, Fondation Beyeler, until January 8, 2023.