

REVIEWS:

Europe

When one thinks of modern sculpture, many different paradigms come to mind – the readymade, the mobile, the monolith and so on. Perhaps the last one to do so is the tradition of semifigurative sculptures begun by the Italian artist Medardo Rosso. But it is from the lineage Rosso established that Hans Josephsohn's sculptures evolve. As a consequence, for more than half a century Josephsohn has occupied a niche that it has been all too easy to overlook.

Zurich-based since the late 1930s, Josephsohn for many years remained something of a local phenomenon. Retrospective exhibitions at Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum in 2002 and Frankfurt's MMK in 2008 have changed that. At the same time, inclusion in group exhibitions such as *The Third Mind* (Palais de Tokyo, Paris, 2007) and *Visible Invisible: Against the Security of the Real* (Parasol Unit, London, 2009) have served to situate his work within a more speculative contemporary framework, a gambit extended by his current flurry of exhibitions with Hauser & Wirth.

The present exhibition is curated by Swiss architect Peter Märkli, who has been in dialogue with Josephsohn for more than three decades. To date, they have collaborated on two large projects: La Congiunta, in the Swiss Alps, and Kesselhaus Josephsohn, in St Gallen, both of which are devoted to Josephsohn's sculptures. For the present collaboration, Märkli has made a selection of old and recent works. The sculptures have been sensitively – if somewhat conservatively – placed by Märkli around Hauser & Wirth's industrial gallery space in Zurich.

From a distance, the mottled surfaces of the most recent sculptures lend them the appearance of being constantly in a state of movement. Rather than a static solution, it's as if the current state of the sculpture is only transitory. Move in closer to them, though, and this reading is overturned: the sheer heaviness of the brass mass makes the configurations feel definitive, and the heavily worked, roughly hewn surfaces – with their panoply of trowel strokes – become more static. *Untitled* (1994) is a case in point. The sculpture demands that the beholder slowly negotiate a way around it, as the edges of each trowel stroke carefully construct the surface. Already pregnant with meaning because of their figurative leanings, this surface serves to push the sculpture's emotive dimension even further.

The high-relief wall-mounted sculptures featured in the exhibition recall those of an artist who later reworked Rosso's feel for surface: Henri Matisse, and particularly his *Back Series* (1908–31). There is a way the human form struggles to emerge against the background that recalls Matisse's own ongoing struggle between figure and ground. Josephsohn's *Untitled* (2005) is particularly effective in this regard. Two earlier portrait-format high-reliefs, *Untitled* (1978) and *Untitled* (1979–81), play with the same language but with a hint more figuration.

A much earlier series of low-reliefs strikes a marked contrast with the high-relief sculptures: they feel far too simplistic in the relationship they establish between form and ground. In both *Untitled* (1950) and *Untitled* (1952–3), there is no play between the two, and thus no formal tension established.

To see Josephsohn exhibited at a leading commercial gallery, one that exhibits sculptors such as Isa Genzken, does indeed lend them a sense of contemporaneity. This soon dissipates, however: for even though the more recent works are the most powerful and thus proof of his continued vitality, Josephsohn is a sculptor who is truly out of sync with the present – but his works are no less compelling for being so. *Alex Coles*

Josephsohn

Hauser & Wirth, Zurich

27 March – 29 May



Hans Josephsohn, *Untitled*, 1951. © the artist. Photo: A. Burger. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth, Zurich