

# Hans Josephsohn's Lateness

BY JOE FYFE



Edward Said's posthumously published book *On Late Style* (2006) addresses not only advancing age but also exile, solitude and a contradictory relationship to the established social order. Late styles, such as we find in Beethoven's final compositions, Said writes, "undermine our pleasure, actively eluding any attempt at easy understanding." Late style is not necessarily something that appears only toward the end of a life of creative production. Referring to the essays of Theodor Adorno, Said writes that the philosopher is "lateness itself, hell-bent on remaining untimely and contrary, [embodying a style that is] permanently on strike from and at odds with everything that is fashionable."

This theme seems an appropriate way to approach the remarkable, elusive art of Swiss-based German artist Hans Josephsohn, who, at age 87,

has recently been making some of the strongest work of his career and may well prove to be our most important figurative sculptor. It requires time to become accustomed to Josephsohn's stunted, encrusted and mottled forms before one can discern their tender particulars and subdued emotional tenor. At the most recent Basel Art Fair, two Josephsohn sculptures installed in Galerie Buchmann's booth seemed unwaveringly present but relatively uncommunicative amid the art surrounding them.

Josephsohn works with the traditional sculptural materials of plaster, clay and bronze, and addresses one of the oldest of sculpture's tasks—the representation of human beings. He considers himself an artist of this time, though his esthetic refuses connection with most contemporary art, thus exemplifying Said's notion that "late style is *in* but oddly *apart* from the present."

*A solitary figure among European modernists, Hans Josephsohn has produced imposing works in bronze for more than six decades. At 87, the German-born, Swiss-based sculptor remains focused on the expressive possibilities of the human form.*



Rejecting the underlying naturalism that worked in tandem with many earlier Western artistic movements, Josephsohn seems drawn to art in which the blindest groping takes place, before an attitude or style fully establishes itself. His own work seems to be always in a state of becoming; it is simultaneously roughed-in and eloquent. His sculptures frequently convey a sense of buried feeling. This is particularly true of his half-figures, with their small mouths and noses attached to huge heads and squat chests that seem shaped from mounds of humus or dried lava. The absence of eyes or eyeholes in most of the artist's work adds to the general mood of profound introversion.

Josephsohn is an artist of the particular and the contingent. His art relies on his perception of the model in front of him or on a remembered experience from his life. He does not depict types or essences. The work

is not metaphorical or abstract. He is interested in the appearance of the body as a communicator of experience. (When Ulrich Meinherz, who works closely with the artist, arranged a studio visit, he told me that before he was to meet me, Josephsohn only asked about the shape of my head and some other surface characteristics.) Josephsohn received his first show in the U.S., at Peter Blum SoHo, in 2006 [see *A.L.A.*, Sept. '06]. While he is better known in Europe than here, his professional career was slow to develop. His apprenticeship ended during World War II, but solo shows, chiefly in Zurich,

*View of Hans Josephsohn's work at Kesselhaus Josephsohn, outside St. Gallen, showing half-figures made over the past 15 years. Photo Katalin Deér.*

## Josephsohn's high reliefs, with their rhetorically postured figures, often depict personal encounters and explicit love scenes.

only began in the 1960s. Larger museum exhibitions in the nearby cities of Schaffhausen and Aarau took place in the 1970s, and he has subsequently exhibited in museums throughout Switzerland. International stature officially arrived with his exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum in 2002.

A German Jew from Königsberg, Prussia (now part of Russia), Josephsohn was 17 years old in 1937 when he traveled to Florence to study sculpture. He was furnished with a scaffold and a booth, and spent time copying—at full scale in clay—a reclining figure by Michelangelo in the Medici Chapel. As Swiss-based art and architecture critic Gerhard Mack tells it in his wonderful 2005 monograph on Josephsohn, after an idyllic summer in the Apennines, where he was accepted by local people into everyday life and “visited gatherings where he saw beautiful girls dancing with simple peasants, whereas in Germany he had assumed that a man had to learn Latin for a girl to show an interest in him,” he ran afoul of Fascist laws that drove all foreign Jews from Italy.

Josephsohn entered Switzerland just as it closed its borders in 1938. Travel in and out of the country became extremely difficult for non-Swiss Jews. While being shuttled among relief agencies and sponsors, he had an internal debate as to whether he should be a writer or a sculptor. (In a Swiss relocation camp, he sent some of his poems, typed by a friend, to Hermann Hesse. The writer replied gently suggesting that he study music.) Eventually, he began an apprenticeship in Zurich with the Neo-Classical-influenced sculptor Otto Müller.

In 1943, when he was 23, Josephsohn established a studio in Zurich, the city where he remains to this day. From the outset, he worked in plaster of Paris on figures, most of them modestly scaled, such as *Seated Figure* (ca. 1950), which is only 30 inches high. Impressed as he was with Maillol's “great calm,” he saw that figurative sculpture was a problem of spatial coherence. Josephsohn's sculptures initially departed from Neo-Classicism through simplification. As the sculptor permitted himself to respond emotionally to his subjects, his closely observed heads and standing nudes developed a deceptive plainness.

The experience of death and exile came early. With his parents and other family members lost in the Holocaust, he decided not to return to Germany after the war. He survived on meager sales and exhibited to mixed reviews. Steady money came from his first wife's salary as a teacher and several grants from the Canton of Zurich. Any extra money went to pay for casting the sculptures from their plaster state into bronze. Notably, Josephsohn has never relied on studio assistants. A shorthand methodology never developed. This would seem to account for the peculiar intimacy that emanates from every sculpture.

As he began making return trips to Italy after the war, Josephsohn was drawn to art in which a certain ungainliness is infused with human experience, as in archaic Greek sculpture and the unrefined figures of the Etruscans. He found that the High Renaissance, which had first drawn him to Italy, now repelled him. What was most alive was Romanesque art—the sculpture and architecture that flourished in Christian Europe around 1100. This pious, yet open and inventive, model became a touchstone for him.

Between 1947 and 1953, at the same time that he was producing simplified standing figures, heads and half-figures (a head connected to a semi-naturalistic upper torso), he produced a series of low reliefs that represent an inadvertent adventure into nearly complete abstraction, which had long-term repercussions for his work.

In the plaster sculpture *Relief (Seated figure in front of an object)*, ca. 1947, he attempted to represent a woman sitting in a chair. Josephsohn found that he could resolve the problem of the space between the chair legs

by simply covering it up. He filled it in with plaster, ultimately covering the whole figure, which thus became a quasi-abstract planar form. This activated the figure-ground relationship, as Josephsohn understood, because it made the background more present. Josephsohn's first low reliefs (such as *Seated Figure with Table* or *Seated Figure with Standing Figure*) were blocky squares about 2 feet high. As the series progressed, the low reliefs more than doubled in size. The figures, which had become flat, stylized quasi-geometric shapes, multiplied within oversized planar tablets. Though they look like fragments from ancient Egypt or Assyria, Josephsohn insists that they are derived from Cézanne's principle that all parts of a motif must be interrelated.

The low reliefs are an example of how Josephsohn buries perceptual observation in indistinctness, a by-product of his preoccupation with sculptural mass. His praxis involves misdirecting naturalistic representation. Perception is only part of it; other doors are left open for more evasive impressions. “You cannot create sculpture if you are too close to reality,” he has said.

From the group of low reliefs, he returned to the freestanding figure. His “Worker” series (1954-62) depicts a man from a nearby factory who posed for him. It was the man's well-worn pants, which assumed the shape of the body inside them, Josephsohn said, that most interested him. The worker, Ernst Baumann, sat during his lunch hour for a small fee. He was Josephsohn's chief model at this time. Josephsohn produced diminutive “Workers” (approximately 2 feet high) in this series as well as some half-figures and several life-size figures. The compacted massiveness of the full-scale figures makes them seem larger than their actual height of a little over 6 feet.

The artist's recognition of the innate sculptural quality of the worn trousers—in essence an abstracted sculptural form discovered in the everyday world—helped lend subtle power to the series. Appearing like roughly creased stone columns, they provide a rigidity that counters the crumbling vulnerability of the worker's feet, upper body and head. The critic Adolph Max Vogt wrote in 1955 that these figures “assert themselves by a strange sleepiness and sluggishness of attitude . . . devoid of pathos. . . . There is no firm attitude and no pose, no exaltation whatsoever. Our old-fashioned idea of the statue is disappointed.”<sup>1</sup>

Josephsohn began making high reliefs in the late 1950s and continues to this day. The high reliefs have never attained the dimensions of the earlier low reliefs—the largest rarely exceed 2 feet in height or width, and many are considerably smaller, but they can approach 18 inches in depth. Unlike the larger works, which always originate in plaster, for the high reliefs there exist numerous maquettes or sculptural sketches made from modeling clay that are not much larger than a human hand; these are also often cast in bronze.

The high reliefs most directly reveal the artist's admiration for and debt to Romanesque art, which Meyer Schapiro said is “imbued with values of spontaneity, individual fantasy . . . and the expression of feeling that anticipates modern art.”<sup>2</sup> Josephsohn's high reliefs and sculptural sketches often depict personal encounters and explicit love scenes. Utilizing deep shadow and the sculptor's characteristic handling of material in segments of rough, loose patching, pinches of wet material and adherences of dry offal from other sculptures, they frequently display puzzling stylistic alterations, proportional distortions and narrative discontinuities. Figures within the relief are often rhetorically postured, floating in a diagonal.

From the 1970s onward, many of the high reliefs have contained an architectural element along with the figures, most frequently a lintel-like slab on the upper portion of the sculpture. Often pieces of wall also appear, dividing the figures from each other. These chunks of architecture carry the suggestion that the relief might be a fragment of a larger sculptural frieze.

Josephsohn's reclining figures, which he continues to make, first appeared in the 1970s. They can evoke Etruscan figures, an association Josephsohn rejects, even though he greatly admires Etruscan statuary. An early example appears in a photograph of the artist's retrospective in the Museum zu Allerheiligen, Schaffhausen, in 1975 that is easily 7 feet long,



*A selection of the artist's sculptures, including busts, reliefs, a reclining figure, half-figures and a "Worker" piece.*

*View of original plasters and bronze casts. Photos this page Katalin Deér, courtesy Kesselhaus Josephsohn/Galerie Felix Lehner, St. Gallen.*



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larger than any other sculpture in the room. By the 1980s there is a decisive increase in materiality and scale.

Particularly significant for his work is the development of the half-figures. After making intermittent appearances throughout his career, by the 1990s they came to dominate it. These sculptures are characterized by their confrontational bulkiness, breadth of association and strangeness. Gerhard Mack compares them to the large heads of Easter Island. (Five of these works, dated between 1990 and 2002, made up Josephsohn's New York debut; Ken Johnson, when he reviewed the 2006 Peter Blum exhibition in the *New York Times*, wrote that they looked like prehistoric log forms made of mud.) The half-figures are, essentially, expanded portrait heads. As was the case earlier with the low reliefs, Josephsohn began to find that the tectonics of how the head balanced on the upper torso needed resolution. Sculptural material was added, and the portraits, now each about 5 feet high and mounted on approximately 2-foot-high platforms, began to look like big twisted cigar ends. With their small, scrunched-up facial features, they are both comic and serenely detached, unique presences in their stubby verticality and earthy demeanor.

Josephsohn's sculptures are best seen in Switzerland, where two permanent installations make a range of his works available to the public. One is Kesselhaus Josephsohn, an exhibition space and foundry outside of St. Gallen in northeast Switzerland (about an hour from the artist's studio in Zurich) that is a part of the Sitterwerk Centre for Art and Cultural Economy. The Kesselhaus functions as showroom, storage, archive, inventory and restoration facility for the artist's work; it is supported by Galerie Felix Lehner, also located at the Sitterwerk site, which represents the artist. While the Kesselhaus exhibition space is devoted exclusively to Josephsohn's sculpture, Sitterwerk also has an art library, a materials archive and a guest artist's studio that have no direct relationship to Josephsohn. Located in an industrial valley of the Sitter River, it takes up several buildings of an old dye works. (The German word *Kesselhaus* translates as kettle building, the site within a dye works where large vats of liquid are heated.) It was established by foundry owner/art dealer Felix Lehner, who was inspired by an early experience in another art foundry where he first began casting Josephsohn's sculpture. The foundry presently casts bronzes from the large number of plasters created during Josephsohn's 60-odd years of production. The foundry and its staff have also executed ambitious sculptural projects in diverse mediums for other Swiss artists—among them Urs Fischer, Ugo Rondinone, and Fischli and Weiss.

The Kesselhaus Josephsohn is a large squarish industrial space (some 55 by 62 feet, and nearly 40 feet high) with a catwalk at a neck-craning height that goes around three sides of its interior and crosses the space in midair. Long vertical windows, bathing the space in natural light, take up most of one wall. There is a changing selection of Josephsohn's bronzes and plasters from various periods. This is the only location where Josephsohn allows the work still in plaster to be exhibited. On the basement level of the building, long rows of shelving hold an inventory of the artist's smaller plaster figures and heads.

When I first visited the site in September 2006, I saw a number of the low reliefs, some installed on the wall and others in a custom-built rack. The huge thick plates were hung in a row like clothes drying on a line. Within the reliefs, flat geometric shapes, resembling wide squared-off pancake forms, approximated figures. By the entrance stood a slightly larger-than-life-size, slouching, pot-bellied *Worker* in plaster. Nearby, a giant shelving unit stretched to the ceiling. Resting on each of its four shelves were four or five large half-figures in their plaster state. Some

recent half-figure bronzes were placed on platforms around the room among several reclining figures. Three of the four walls were lined with bronzes of the high reliefs. A number of the maquettes appeared to represent figures engaged in sexual play. I later studied reproductions of the artist's drawings and was able to determine that some of the figures in the high reliefs were interacting not with other figures but with versions of some of Josephsohn's figural sculptures.

During the same visit, I saw a series of photographs taken by artist Katalin Deér, Felix Lehner's wife, of a trip made with Josephsohn at his prompting, to the Cognac region of France, where they visited Romanesque churches. The region, Saintonge, had at one time over 700 churches from the period around 1100. About 100 remain. As I looked through the photographs, I said that I detected the sculptor's attraction to the worn and truncated figures on the facades of some of the churches. Correcting me, Deér said that Josephsohn was interested in the shapes of the churches, in their lack of symmetry or reasoned proportion, and in their seemingly arbitrary changes of scale. I began to get a sense of the churches as collections of blocky shapes that gradually cohered into wholeness, such as happens in his sculptures, particularly his reclining figures. Deér mentioned that Josephsohn often used the word *Baukörper* when he looked at these structures; it means "the body of the building."

The second permanent installation devoted to Josephsohn's work is a small museum in the southern Swiss Alps. The architect Peter Märkli, a widely admired and increasingly prolific Swiss architect (MIT Press published a book on his work in 2002), first approached Josephsohn 30 years ago as a beginning architecture student. The sculptor became his mentor and an advisor on the design of many commissions. Märkli eventually came to include a sculpture or relief by Josephsohn as an element in nearly every building he designs. It was Märkli who first proposed the museum, which is called La Congiunta, to Josephsohn.

Finished in 1992, the cast-concrete structure is situated on a plot of land in the Ticino region, near Italy, adjacent to the town of Giornico. It is on a two-lane highway that passes through a corridor of steep stone mountainsides with numerous waterfalls. A key to the museum is held for visitors in the local osteria. The approach leads past the old town's houses of slate and wood, over a bridge that spans a deep creek and along a path through a meadow. The museum is a simple, industrial-looking structure that contrasts with the surrounding craggy, mountainous landscape. From where one enters the museum grounds, the near face of the building is a bare concrete silhouette without doors or windows—a tall rectangle topped by a square. It is somewhat reminiscent of a chapel facade and perhaps makes a reference to Giornico's three 12th-century Romanesque stone churches.

The museum is situated so that one must walk its length to reach the entrance. A boxy concrete step juts out below the doorway. There are translucent amber skylights on the flat wooden roof and no electricity or heat. Inside, light, texture and materiality austere harmonize. There are subtle shifts in tone and color between the concrete walls and the warm, dispersed light falling from above on the gray and brown surfaces of the bronze sculptures.

The interior is divided into three chambers of unfinished cast concrete, connected by doorways with raised thresholds. The first room is about 15 by 20 feet with a 25-foot-high ceiling. It contains six low reliefs from the 1950s and '60s, three on each of the two facing long walls. The eccentric flat shapes raised on the sculptural slabs are in animated relationship to one another. These reliefs are very much a sum of corrections; their surfaces are covered with impressions of knife swipes and gouges.

The second room is longer, about 30 feet, but the ceiling drops to around 15 feet. Situated along one of the long walls are eight high reliefs, each measuring about 2 feet square and dated ca. 1970. All contain several figures. With Josephsohn's characteristic compositional ambiguity, the figures seem dissociated though they share a common plane.

It is the genius of the museum to place the viewer in isolation among the sculptures within walls without windows. The reticent works seem

to reveal themselves more fully under these circumstances. This becomes increasingly evident as one ventures farther into the building.

The final room resumes the ceiling height and floor plan of the first space. It has three ca. 1970 reliefs and three ca. 1990 half-figures. Although they don't crowd the room, they seem to bear upon the viewer with their presence, like shy beasts. Four small side rooms with low, skylit ceilings flank the final room like niches in a church. Through open doorways one enters each of these rooms to view high-relief sculptures with dates that run from 1965 through 1980. These small (only about a foot square) sculptures have a recurring theme of figures in physical conflict. Josephsohn and Märkli seem to agree that sculpture and architecture must be realized through texture, materiality, an open attitude toward proportion and an engagement with the personal.

In a suburb of Winterthur, a small city near Zurich, I traveled out one morning to see a private house that Märkli designed which has a Josephsohn high relief on an exterior wall. It depicts a lone figure leaning on an oversized trunklike form. The sculpture counterbalances a square window opposite the entranceway door, through which an earlier Josephsohn relief made up of flattish figural shapes can be seen on the foyer wall. The L-shaped, cast-concrete house with its high, half-round windows is situated on a triangular piece of land on a gently sloping hillside. Even though much of the house was concealed by a thick, tall hedge, I could sense the building as a continuous mass. Like Josephsohn's sculptures it was benignly inert, but with a strong presence that seemed to promise that one could get to know it over time.

The oddest of juxtapositions of Josephsohn and Märkli's work that I visited was at a primary school in a new suburb of Zurich. There, along one side of a wide, sunlit concrete path, three of Josephsohn's reclining figures were placed parallel to the four-story school. Seen in proximity to successive waves of schoolchildren, the three ragged females hugged the ground and seemed to combine the serene elegance of reclining Buddhas with the chthonic silence of the Venus of Willendorf.

Later I met Josephsohn in the middle of his large, light-filled square studio in Zurich, where we sat at a distance from the brightness of the many plaster sculptures-in-progress. He pointed to a life-size head on a stand nearby, explaining that this simple portrait bust eventually would be transformed into a half-figure. By continuing to work and observe the model, he said, the problem of balancing the masses of material arises. Speaking of the large reclining figure in the yard outside—where there are also other figures and half-figures—he explained that the chunks of plaster that were sitting on the sculpture's arm were his notes to understand that this area of the work must be built up. It became clear that all of his sculptures were in part built from refuse from other sculptures. Last-minute, added-on chunks of material show up on the surfaces of all the plasters; corrections continue until the sculpture is cast.

When I brought up the sculpture of the past, he spoke of a visit to London after World War II and a trip to the British Museum. I asked about the Elgin Marbles, and he said that what really stayed with him as sculpture was how London looked after the war. He was speaking of the wreckage from the Blitz.



*La Congiunta, cast-concrete museum, designed by Peter Märkli and completed in 1992, located outside Giornico in the southern Swiss Alps. Photo Georg Gisel.*

*The second of three galleries at La Congiunta in 2006, with eight high reliefs from the 1970s. Photo Joe Fyfe.*



This comment most clearly revealed his ruthless rejection of a good amount of what civilization has to offer. Said uses the phrase "lost totality" to describe Beethoven's late work. He also asserts that one cannot transcend or lift oneself out of lateness but only endure it. This irreconcilability is built right into Josephsohn's work and makes it strangely ethereal, as if what is represented is hovering within its own materiality. □

1. Quoted in Gerhard Mack, *Hans Josephsohn*, Zurich, Scheidegger & Spiers, 2005, pp. 130-34.
2. Meyer Schapiro, *Romanesque Architectural Sculpture*; quoted in Willibald Sauerländer, "The Artist Historian," *New York Review of Books*, June 28, 2007, p. 57.

*Hans Josephsohn's work was on view at Galerie Reckermann, Cologne, in a two-person exhibition with Ernst Hermanns [Feb. 9-Mar. 31, 2007], and at the Literaturmuseum Strauhof, Zurich [Sept. 19-Nov. 25]. "The Third Mind," a group show curated by Ugo Rondinone, is currently at the Palais de Tokyo, Paris [Sept. 27, 2007-Jan. 3, 2008]. Josephsohn is slated to exhibit at the Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt [Feb. 7-Apr. 6]. The artist is also the subject of the recent documentary film Josephsohn Bildhauer by Matthias Kälin and Laurin Merz.*

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