



## Alone with a sense of history

Hans Josephsohn's first UK show reveals how the octogenarian sculptor turned solitude to his advantage. By Jackie Wullschlager

I hate to say this, but one day sculpture might be over. At some point, it may no longer be around despite its long history. When someone attaches five wires to the ceiling and hangs something on them, then this may be something, but it is not sculpture... You shouldn't call this a new form of sculpture and the others an old one."

Many artists in old age feel that they stand at the unravelling of tradition, after which will come chaos. But what sculptor, in an art world hooked on the young and new, today dares speak like this about the death of his own medium? Only one who has worked a lifetime in splendid isolation, refining a version of modernism into a fresh, unexpected, uncompromising, contemporary achievement.

Hans Josephsohn is 87 and for 60 years has worked, from the model, on sculpture's most timeless, constant themes: representations of the human figure, standing, sitting, reclining, and portrait heads, or half-figures, made in plaster, some then cast in bronze. Installed on white plinths across all three floors of Hauser and Wirth's Piccadilly gallery for Josephsohn's first UK show, they are lumbering, ungainly, material presences that command the space around them with monumental authority. Confrontational,

they also invite intimacy, their rough encrusted layers as seductive to the sense of touch as the shifting play of light on their agitated surfaces is to the eye.

"Untitled (Ruth)", one of the few named works, half waits by the door as you enter the gallery: head erect, hands languidly clasped under pulpy breasts, serpentine curves, a semi-figure with a languid, attentive sensuality. On the other side of the door, a two and a half metre female form, limbs condensed into the beginning of abstraction, tilts slightly forward, unstable despite the towering, solid mass. A large reclining figure in the centre is bulbous, sleepy, indifferent, caught in a momentary pose.

"I remember my girlfriend was lying in a particular way in bed, she had propped herself up, that appealed to me, and I thought, 'I would like to make something similar one day'." Josephsohn says of beginning to make such figures. All around are enormous heads such as "Angela" - frontally placed, built up from block-like, vigorous marks, emerging into cohesive form. Everywhere, facial features are simplified in the concentration on overall structure; absence of eyes and eye sockets increases the introverted tone.

Like a handful of other significant European artists - Louise Bourgeois; Maria Lassnig; Joash Woodrow - born in the 1910s and

1920s who worked in obscurity until their discovery in the 21st century, Josephsohn turned solitude to the advantage not only of an independent vision but of a gravitas that comes from ceaseless debate with history.

Born in 1920 in Königsberg, Prussia - now Kaliningrad, Russia - to prosperous Jewish parents who perished in the Holocaust, he has lived in Zurich since 1938 and was internationally unknown until exhibitions in Amsterdam, New York and Paris in the past few years. He admits that "sculpture became my home; sculptors throughout history have become my real relatives": thus his work evokes all at once prehistory, ancient stone steles and romanesque figures, but especially modern sculpture's pioneers Maillol and Giacometti, and modernism's insistence on an art of human experience and perception.

"Maillol, like the Antique masters, proceeds by volume," commented Matisse, and so does Josephsohn; he recalls too Maillol's classical impetus and voluptuousness, though as a late-20th-century artist, he lacks the same serenity. Giacometti, on the other hand, is an influence the stronger for being resisted. Giacometti's wiry thin people, disappearing into non-existence, are only superficially the opposite of Josephsohn's bulky half-figures depicted in a state of com-

**Voluptuous** Some of Josephsohn's work on show at Hauser and Wirth's Piccadilly gallery (above); 'Untitled (Ruth)', 1975-78 (below)

ing uneasily into being. Giacometti modified figures by reducing, peeling away; Josephsohn adds layers, enlarges, expands; both turn on absence and presence, being and chaos. Both deliberately reveal the traces of working processes, prioritise scrunched, lumpy surfaces and an unfinished look.

Josephsohn's expanded heads look particularly striking upstairs in Hauser and Wirth's American Room: a gallery of coarse-grained, oddly scaled stumbling-block portraits whose aesthetic of ruin and fragmentation is offset by the formal panelled ceiling and parquet floors. When Josephsohn visited the British Museum in the 1940s, he remembered bombed-out London as much as Egyptian art. Like Giacometti, he is an existentialist, shaped by the postwar collapse of spiritual possibilities, the absurdity of a late humanism that, nevertheless, informs his art. "It's quite a remarkable thing when you have a model in front of you," he says, "and instead of approaching the woman, which would actually be the normal thing for a man, you stand at a distance of one or five metres and make a figure. I am often asked why I make such large semi-figures. I then say that I don't know."



Hans Josephsohn, Hauser and Wirth, London, to July 26. Tel: +44 (0)20 7287 2300