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## Thomas Houseago *Almost Human*

15<sup>th</sup> of March – 14<sup>th</sup> of July 2019

**Press preview: 14<sup>th</sup> of March 11am – 2pm**

**Official opening: 14<sup>th</sup> of March 6pm – 10pm**

The Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris is presenting Thomas Houseago's first retrospective in France.

Now a major figure on the international art scene, sculptor and painter Thomas Houseago was born in Leeds (UK) in 1972. He has lived and worked in Los Angeles since 2003 and his work is represented in numerous museum and private collections.

Through his use of materials including wood, plaster, iron and bronze, he is part of a sculptural tradition – Henry Moore, Georg Baselitz, Bruce Nauman – focusing on the human figure in space.

For the artist, the monumental spaces housing the exhibition are an integral part of *Almost Human*. The building itself, the Alfred Auguste Janniot bas-reliefs of 1937, and the Eiffel Tower contribute to the exhibition, anchoring the works in this architectural setting. Often large in scale and displaying the traces of their making, Houseago's sculptures fluctuate between forcefulness and fragility.

*Almost Human* follows the ongoing evolution of Houseago's work from the 1990s to the present. In addition, the exhibition will include *Striding Figure II (Ghost)*, a monumental work in bronze installed on the museum's esplanade.

For the most part chronological, the presentation is arranged into four rooms that represent both the artist's major geographical phases and his intimate relationship with his materials.

The exhibition begins with the dynamic, anthropomorphic sculptures that compose Houseago's early output and reflect the teeming atmosphere of his studios of that time. His use of raw plaster, at times tinted, heightens the impression of works in search of equilibrium.

The second room centers on hybrid and experimental pieces that bridge the gap between the early figuration and the immersive, architectural sculpture included in his current work.

The third room is home to monumental and darker visions. *L'homme pressé*, a towering bronze colossus stands in opposition to the horizontality of *Wood Skeleton I (Father)*, a carving of lying figure, while the massive *Black Paintings* series, rife with the sense of isolation and brooding introspection, line the walls in a frieze.

The fourth room is devoted to the immersive sculpture, *Cast Studio (stage, chairs, bed, mound, cave, bath, grave)*, made especially for the exhibition. Accompanied by a film and photographs that document its making, this work, cast from clay, acts as a transcript of the artist's movements and actions, marking Houseago's return to the performative dimension present in his early work.

A catalogue, edited by the artist, will be published by Éditions Paris Musées.

With the sponsorship of

**GAGOSIAN** Xavier Hufkens



### Thomas Houseago

*Serpent*, 2008

Tuf-Cal™, hemp, iron rebar, Oilbar, graphite, wood

244 x 155 x 120 cm

Collection Baron Guillaume Kervyn de Volkaersbeke

© Thomas Houseago

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Photo: Fredrik Nilssen Studio

### Museum Director

Fabrice Hergott

### Exhibition curator

Olivia Gaultier-Jeanroy

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Open Tuesday – Sunday

10 am – 6 pm

Open late : Thursdays until 10pm

### Admission

Full rate: 10€

Concessions: 8€

### Cultural activities

Information and bookings

Tel. 01 53 67 40 80

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# Biography

Thomas Houseago was born in Leeds, UK in 1972. He studied at Jacob Kramer Foundation College, England, from 1990 to 1991, and then received his B.A. in 1994 from St. Martin's School of Art, London. He then studied at De Ateliers, Amsterdam, from 1994 to 1996.

"Thomas Houseago", Stedelijk Museum Bureau, Amsterdam, The Netherlands (1996)

"Thomas Houseago, I am Here, Selected Sculptures 1995–2003", S.M.A.K., Gant, Belgium (2003)

"The Artist's Museum", MOCA, Los Angeles, USA (2010)

*Whitney Biennial*, Whitney Museum, New York, USA (2010)

"What Went Down", Modern Art Oxford (2010), traveled to Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, UK; Museum Abteiberg, Germany; and Centre International d'Art et du Paysage de l'Île de Vassivière, France (through 2011)

"The Beat of the Show", Inverleith House, Edinburgh, UK (2011)

"The World Belongs to You", Palazzo Grassi, Venice, Italy (2011)

"Where the Wild Things Are" and "Hermaphrodite," Sainsbury Centre for the Visual Arts, Norwich, UK (2012)

"Striding Figure/Standing Figure", Galleria Borghese, Rome, Italy (2013)

"As I Went Out One Morning", Storm King Art Center, New York, USA (2013)

"Studies '98–'14", Gemeentemuseum Den Haag, The Netherlands (2014)

"Masks (Pentagon)", Rockefeller Center Plaza, New York, USA (2015)

*Canadian Biennial*, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Canada (2017)

"Rodin: The Centennial Exhibition", Grand Palais, Paris, France (2017)

# Exhibition layout

## Introduction

*Almost Human* is Thomas Houseago's first retrospective exhibition in France. It retraces the different phases in his artistic career and development with works from the 1990s to his latest productions, which mark a return to a performative practice. The title of the exhibition—as is the case with many of the artist's exhibitions—comes from a song, and in this particular case *Suzanne* by Leonard Cohen. Throughout the exhibition, Thomas Houseago's work is revealed through the representation of forms or figures that resemble the human presence. From the anthropomorphic sculptures of his early career via the sculpted and painted silhouettes of monsters up to *Cast Studio (stage, chairs, bed, mound, cave, bath, grave)*, where only the trace of the artist remains, his work focuses on a vibrant inscription of the human figure within space.

Born in Leeds (Great Britain) in 1972, Thomas Houseago came from a modest family who nevertheless placed a great importance on art, whether music, architecture, or the visual arts. He grew up in the 1970s in an industrial town undergoing great change against the backdrop of Margaret Thatcher's England. At the age of sixteen, he experienced two events that had a profound influence on him: the *Late Picasso* exhibition at the Tate Gallery in London presenting the Spanish painter's late canvases, and his discovery of images from Joseph Beuys's iconic performance *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, realized in 1965. Influenced by the German artist, but also by others like Chris Burden, Houseago's early works were performative.

In 1989 Houseago began his studies at Jacob Kramer College, the school of art in Leeds. The following year he was accepted and received a scholarship to Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design in London, an event he considers 'a miracle that would change his life'. This was the beginning of a life completely devoted to art. He travelled throughout Europe to hone his skills and settled in Los Angeles in 2003, where he still lives. Today Thomas Houseago is one of the few sculptors of his generation and one of the most recognized.

## Human Figures

When he enrolled in Saint Martins in London at the age of nineteen, Thomas Houseago took his inspiration from artists like Henry Moore, Francis Picabia and Jacob Epstein. Human forms gradually emerged from his sculpture, which was initially rather architectural in appearance. After three years in London, he decided to continue his studies in Amsterdam at De Ateliers Institute, where his professors included artists Marlene Dumas and Jan Dibbets. It was here that he truly developed his own style and he executed his first large sculptures. Following his studies, Thomas Houseago moved to Brussels where he attempted to live from his art. He enjoyed a first solo exhibition in 2002 at the Xavier Hufkens Gallery. He had met the gallerist in the mid-1990s. Despite this first commercial experience, his early years were financially difficult and he decided to abandon everything and begin afresh. In 2003 he moved to Los Angeles, where after several difficult years, including working in construction to make ends meet, he succeeded in making a name for himself.

In this room, examples of his plaster technique can be seen alongside the anthropomorphic sculptures that seem to be searching for equilibrium. Thanks to the raw materials and a technique anchored in drawing, Thomas Houseago reinterprets the human form through an exploration of anatomy and exaggerated scale.

## Hybrids

In 2005 Thomas Houseago met the American gallerist David Kordansky who offered him representation and a solo exhibition in Los Angeles. Years later, the artist presented masks on wooden pedestals and a monumental sculpture called *Untitled (Red Man)*. From this point on, his reputation grew considerably and in 2010, he moved into an enormous studio space in Los Angeles where he still works today. This studio provides him with the space he needs to experiment different techniques, motifs and scales. Some of the sculptures presented here could be considered transitional works. They serve as a bridge between the figurative works at the start of his career and the architectural, immersive ensembles that today constitute the majority of his production. Cubism, futurism and various manifestations of Primitivism, as well as popular culture are some of the art history references that inform his work, which Houseago has never refuted. He transposes these references into contemporary sculpture using his own vocabulary. Tuf-Cal, a type of plaster

specifically designed for construction, is omnipresent. The artist develops new motifs where the figure disappears in favour of more architectural elements.

### **Fiends and Demons**

2010 was a turning point in Houseago's career with the notable presentation of his work *Baby* at the Whitney Biennial in New York. The following year at the Venice Biennale the artist further cemented his reputation with *L'Homme pressé* presented in front of the Palazzo Grassi on the Grand Canal. This work can be seen here. Over the course of this decade Houseago became an international name and was represented by prestigious galleries such as Michael Werner as well as Gagosian, who still represent him today. As the works in this room show, Thomas Houseago's universe is imbued with a certain darkness and its themes reflect the demons that have haunted the artist for many years. His representations of the human figure resemble skulls and his massive metal structures are the stuff of children's nightmares. Nevertheless they do not seek to frighten the viewer but are instead a retranscription of the artist's vision of man and reality. Even when monumental, his sculptures always retain the traces of their fabrication and oscillate between force and fragility. By including the museum's architecture in the exhibit, particularly in this room, the artist seeks to anchor his works in dialogue within a specific environment. The canvases hanging between the windows echo the large bas-reliefs created by Alfred Janniot, visible on the exterior esplanade (1937); while the forecourt's central pool is occupied by the immense sculpture *Striding Figure II (Ghost)* which stands opposite the Eiffel Tower. Houseago challenges contemporary notions of sculpture with works that incorporate the sense of immediacy associated with the artist.

### **Mood board**

'On the walls of this space hang two large mood boards—or inspirational paintings—updated almost daily by Houseago. [...] The largest one, located close to the small living room, is an anthology of his different sources of inspiration, ranging from popular culture to historical references creating pairs of images. For example the Incredible Hulk rubs shoulders with a frame by Alberto Giacometti, along with photograms of 2001: A Space Odyssey and A Clockwork Orange by Stanley Kubrick, terrifying 19th-century Mexican masks, images from Fitzcarraldo by Werner Herzog, Wall Paintings by Sol LeWitt, a comic book page from his childhood and black and white photographs of Inca architecture... The ensemble is completed by images of Houseago's various works in their different exhibition sites dating from the 1990s to photos of his more recent installations, shot during their assemblage in his studio or in situ all around the world. [...] All of these elements are clues that enable us to open the door to the following space where we are physically confronted with creative places.'

Excerpt from Olivia Gaultier-Jeanroy, 'Keyhole in the Door', Thomas Houseago, *Almost Human*. Paris: Éditions Paris Musées, 2019.

### **The Studio**

This space immerses visitors into the universe of Thomas Houseago's studio. Created and realized specifically for the exhibition, *Cast Studio* represents a return to a work that is much more performative. The artist also attempts to make it more participative. On this platform of raw clay, various actions have been performed whose traces are reproduced in plaster. Designed as a living space at the heart of his studio, the artist invited figures from the world of art and his family and close friends to come and interact with the studio. Produced in the artist's studio from the summer to the autumn of 2018, the work is composed of several large zones corresponding to the different actions that have taken place there: the sleeping area, with the bed; the discussion area, with the chairs, and the performing area, with the stage. Photographs by Muna El Fituri, Thomas Houseago's companion, and a film she co-produced with the artist, mark their first major collaboration and allow the public to better understand the physical activity behind this artwork, but also to gain a greater insight into the creative atmosphere in which the sculptor works.

# Contents of the catalogue

**Bilingual Catalogue**  
**Éditions Paris Musées**  
**40€**

*Preface*

Anne Hidalgo

*Almost Human*

Fabrice Hergott

*Wearing His Heart on His Sleeve: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

Penelope Curtis

*Keyhole in the Door*

Olivia Gaultier-Jeanroy

*Gutbucket: A Biography*

Flea

Exhibited works

Jan Dibbets

Garry Barker

Lorna Simpson

David Hockney

James Gray

Brad Pitt

Rudi Fuchs

Kamasi Washington

Conversation Paul McCarthy & Thomas Houseago

List of works

# Catalogue extracts

## ***Almost Human*** **Fabrice Hergott**

Seeing and understanding never happen simultaneously. Today's art is pluralistic, unpredictable. Truly new works cannot be measured or reduced to a formula. In the course of its long history of exhibitions, the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris has pursued and followed as closely as possible the emergence of these new creations, sometimes discreet, sometimes dazzling. It is a considerable and sometimes complex task, both in apprehension and in enthusiasm. Have we seen clearly? What does this work contribute? How to move from intuition, from an encounter, to the organization of an entire exhibition – extending from the first conversations with the artist to a detailed plan, from a few succinct words in front of a work to the contents and layout of a catalogue?

Since the 2011 Venice Biennale, during which it was difficult to avoid his monumental *L'Homme Pressé* at the prow of the Palazzo Grassi, which was being inaugurated, there have been too few occasions to see works by Thomas Houseago. Even though the artist had already been part of the artistic landscape for over ten years, one couldn't escape being affected by this new form of sculpture mixing monumentality and fragility, like an energetic affirmation and its collapse, a ruin and its reconstruction. Xavier Hufkens, who had met him in Brussels through his professor Didier Vermeiren, was the first to show Houseago's works in his gallery. He was then shown in several other galleries, such as Michael Werner in New York. The physical presence of his sculptures was haunting and fit easily among the descendants of A.R. Penck, Georg Baselitz, even Markus Lüpertz. But there was more. His works, clearly figurative at a time when artists of his generation had deliberately turned away from that, drew their main references from a wide range of historical sources, from Jacob Epstein, of course, with his disturbing and dominating *Rock Drill*, to Bruce Nauman and his body measurements. But those were only his serious references – serious as in serious music, intended for an audience of connoisseurs. They in no way excluded sources from pop culture, like the Hulk – that melancholy and irascible superhero who survived radioactive exposure – or the electrifying procession of the living dead and their decomposed bodies, the fashion for which would rise dramatically in the early 2000s. In the large divide between museum culture and popular culture, Houseago demonstrated a desire for synthesis that went well beyond the usual territory of contemporary sculpture. What was exciting wasn't so much that Houseago allowed himself an outrageously figurative sculpture based on a formal vocabulary drawn from minimal art and performance, but that the resulting works were in no way incongruous, they seemed to have been there all along.

I first met Thomas Houseago in Venice in 2011, the very day his *L'Homme Pressé* was presented in front of the Palazzo Grassi. We knew of each other through mutual friends and interconnected reputations. I saw him at the bar of the Hotel Bauer and approached to congratulate him for his sculpture, and, opting to be completely frank, told him that even though I had long had some reservations about his work, the sculpture towering above the Grand Canal had completely convinced me. What ensued was the initial, rather animated discussion, sometimes heated, sometimes high-spirited, which would be followed by many others. Houseago spoke only about art and more specifically sculpture, a major question that constantly returned to our conversations without us really being able to define it.

We met again several times when he visited Paris. But it was only in March 2016, when I visited his studio with Christian Langlois-Meurinne (president of the Society of Friends of the Museum), Eva Dichand, and Lauren Taschen (two other Friends), that plans for an exhibition took shape. I had promised Houseago that I would visit when I was in Los Angeles. As I entered his immense studio, I didn't really know what to expect. The modular elements of his large installation *Moun Room* – a tribute to his partner Muna El Fituri – that I had seen in photographs, echoed the Art Deco architecture and decor of the Musée d'Art Moderne, while being new and contemporary. They seemed to confirm, 10,000 kilometres away, the curious impression of vivacity I get from the museum's 1930s architecture, thanks, no doubt, to its geometry and rhythmic interplay. We agreed to do a show within a few years, but the partial renovation of the museum accelerated our plans. The clearing of the permanent collection galleries through loans to South Korean and German museums created

the possibility of a dialogue between Houseago's sculpture and the sculpted and architectural complex that separates the Palais de Tokyo from the Musée d'Art Moderne: the large permanent collection galleries with their view over the museum's inner esplanade, as well as the magnificent *Légende de la Mer* and *Légende de la Terre* created by Alfred-Auguste Janniot in 1937 that compose the two great high-reliefs with the conviction that "sculpture and architecture must only form a single whole".

The Houseago exhibition will be in dialogue with the last architectural example of that ambition – the last one before Houseago himself created his *Moun Room*, which would prove impossible to show in Paris because of its size. But the suitability of the space – underscored by the plan to place one of his large sculptures in the pool – would give his Paris exhibition a scale that it wouldn't have had in another part of the museum. In recent years, the Musée d'Art Moderne has regularly shown sculpture. Carl Andre and Georg Baselitz, but also Didier Marcel, Gelitin, Ian Kiaer, David Altmejd and Mathieu Mercier have been striking examples – as diverse as they are distinct – of what can still be understood as sculpture today: works in three dimensions. In the space of a century, the notion of sculpture has expanded so much that the word itself no longer seems able to include everything that now constitutes sculpture, that is creation in space, from carving to the void, from ready-made to social sculpture.

Considering this definition of sculpture, which has continually broadened for more than a century, Thomas Houseago's work seems to be the most sculptural of all in the strictest sense, the one that most directly addresses the question of sculpture, a question that seems to arise today much more than in the past, like a need to compensate in the face of the marked increase of digital images. Houseago's sculptures present themselves like a registry of figures ranging from heads to full bodies. Many of them are produced as clay models that are then moulded in plaster or bronze, but some rarer ones, are carved in wood. He is a superlative sculptor, a creator of figures, of monsters with distraught faces, of masks, and, more recently, of almost decorative constructions. He is also an assembler: of wood panels for models, or of beams as bases that are integral parts of the work. He knows modern sculpture inside out and seems to move through it like a fish in water. The Frogtown studio, with its concrete floor, is like a vivarium. Houseago moves from work to work as if he were going to feed them, whisper a few words to them, comfort them with a caress. Within that permanent but changing installation of both recent and more or less older works, he circulates through his history like on the wall of his moodboard in his drawing room. His assessment of the works evolves according to the conversation or the attention the visitor grants them. It is not uncommon for Houseago, listening to the visitor, to approach one of his sculptures and, with a furtive gesture, to stroke it, speak to it, comfort it. They live around him and protect his rebellious hideout in which they have followed him since Leeds, Amsterdam and Brussels, first as in the form of thought and obsession before materializing here, in the shade of the tall palm trees of the City of Angels.

The exhibition at the Musée d'Art Moderne reflects in part the set-up of the studio. It plays with the relationships between the works, but also with the way, as in the studio, the works seem to eclipse each other, like chess pieces on a board. Appearing and disappearing, showing themselves only with contradictions of material, form or structure, they reflect the experiences of a being in the world where dimension is essential. Why is a sculpture a sculpture and not a model or a toy? What is the necessary scale between the bodies of the artist and that of the spectator to create a bridge through which sculpture is incarnated or simply a simulacrum, an image? They are high strong. The *Masks* are faces much more than masks, they reveal, betray and confide much more than they conceal. The work as a whole is also an admission and functions much like a stolen letter. The artist's character, an ogre in the midst of ogres, can be found in each of his works, like so many little secrets.

Houseago's first sculptures, the ones that derived from performances he did in nature, are like coatings, moulted skins left by insects in metamorphosis. More than a work, the result is him. A him that is not an individual with a history, because he is not interested in himself, but an artist, a machine for producing works that are also not strictly speaking works, but phases of a personal evolution very much connected to his body and to any body, whatever it might be. His work distils the body to its essence and seeks to establish that through the hypothesis of its disappearance. It is not sculpture in the sense of an exercise in declension of forms in space, but a way of to take possession of it through dilation and contraction, in an experimental, but in fact, a vital battle with his environment and without a doubt, with himself.

Houseago came to sculpture through performance, which has, deep down, never left his work. He is a total



sculptor, physically very engaged, seeing himself not as an image but as a physical, organic and mental extension of himself. In the space of twenty years he went from figures to masks, from masks to constructions, from doors and architectural environments to installations. With the museum's exhibition, a new dimension seems to have emerged within the work itself: the integration of performance and the relationship to the body, to his own body. A dimension that has, in fact, always been present. Founded on impulse, sculpture is, for Houseago, a way of acting. His *Walking Man*, presented in 2017 at the Grand Palais on the occasion of the exhibition dedicated to Rodin's centenary, is none other than the artist marching toward and with sculpture. He reclaims an ancient principle of dematerialization, which is perhaps the most important aspect of sculpture: to be present while disappearing, to take up space without crushing it, to be anchored to the ground, to the wall, while floating. Clay allows him to modulate and model space, plaster to halt it and to bind it. While his methods are numerous, making each of his works an equation with different and contradictory terms, the tactics are always intended to pass from one state to another, one reality to another. And indeed there is something incredibly active about his works. They penetrate the bodies through the gaze in a way that is much different from objects or images. They act as nothing else acts, except for an internal recognition of violence. Now that we have endless images, we should realize that reality is not only in two or three dimensions, that the world cannot be reduced to planes and volumes, that these images are only colourful ghosts. The world is made of tensions that course through, penetrate, scrape the planes and reliefs, pierce, belabour our bodies, our faces, our souls – meagre words to describe what we are. Mounds, agglomerations of sensations and thoughts, of fears and dreams that we drag through reality as chaotically as if we were crossing a minefield, and that need to be embodied so we can protect ourselves against them and live better, stronger, sturdier, like the sculptures that are in us and that we are when we consciously take stock of the power of our living bodies.

As we prepared the exhibition, we were surprised to find a great diversity of techniques and approaches in the context of a relatively restricted group of subjects. It is striking to see how the works of a prolific artist like Houseago are methodically linked to one another and are constructed in many combinations. The expressive, spontaneous, raw and impulsive character hides an activity that is, deep down, much more methodical. In the titles, often borrowed from song excerpts or titles, flourish “ghosts” and “monsters” that invest the works into a protective dimension, an incantation or warding off. The owl, the animal figure that to date appears most often in his work and gave its name to his studio, is a nocturnal bird of prey, whose large eyes indicate a form of clairvoyance; a bird, of course, but a bird with the head of a cat and whose hooting is surely the most guttural of birdsongs, one with almost human tones. Perhaps that is partly what the subtitle of the exhibition indicates. When she proposed “Almost Human”, exhibition curator Olivia Gaultier-Jeanroy recalled that Thomas Houseago told her he often listens to Nina Simone's version of Leonard Cohen's *Suzanne*. She selected those two words, perfectly evoking the movement, the questions, and the answers that run deeply through these sculptures, with the implacable energy of any metamorphosis.

Most of the works in this exhibition come from California, most from Owl Studios. They were chosen with the artist with care to adapt to the building, to the beauty of its spaces as well as its constraints and its fragility. Though the size of certain works forced us to make sometimes-painful choices, the result does not suffer. That is thanks in particular to the last piece in the exhibition, the most ambitious and extreme one, the one Houseago made especially for the exhibition and that demanded from him the most time and effort: *Cast Studio (stage, chairs, bed, mound, cave, bath, grave)*. It acts retrospectively upon the whole of the artist's body of work and illuminates many aspects of it that had escaped us. The nature of great works is to force the gaze that we can turn upon them, to create their own ecosystem. The exhibition is a delicate but objective cut through this system. It is not impossible that it will give an account of one of the most audacious oeuvres we have seen in twenty years, a new reading of sculpture, a synthesis as ambitious as it is unexpected, a new sculpture.

Some projects benefit from exceptional circumstances. Without the renovation and transformation of the museum that have forced us to close the building's upper floors, leaving only the lower floor open, it would not have been possible to conceive the Thomas Houseago exhibition in relation to the architecture and sculpture of the 1937 plaza. It was that opportunity that precipitated the consummation of an exhibition long in the planning phase, and in the end these unexpected circumstances gave rise to an equally unexpected form and space. And it was only in working with the artist and with Olivia Gaultier-Jeanroy that we realized how

sculpture would play with the space, occupy it and probably transform it, and just how much these works would take advantage of the large windows. Because sculpture, even more than painting, benefits from the light of day, from its revealing and unifying power. I would like to warmly thank Thomas Houseago and his partner Muna El Fituri for committing to this project with so much conviction and energy. In close collaboration with the studio, in particular with Natasha Garcia-Lomas and Chanel Von Habsburg-Lothringen, we were able to overcome the technical problems, which are always more numerous with sculpture, and resolve the many difficulties that such an exceptional project naturally poses. But none of that could have happened without the dedicated commitment of Olivia Gaultier-Jeanroy. Although one of her first exhibitions as a curator, it will certainly not be the easiest she will be called upon to do. I also thank all of the people who worked closely as a team with the curator to prepare this exhibition and produce its catalogue: exhibition registrar Anne Archenoul, Tatiana Titli and Jeanne Bossard from the Paris Musées Exhibitions Service, as well as the knowledgeable and patient catalogue editor H  l  ne Studievic. Finally, I express my gratitude to C  cile Degos, exhibition designer, and to the authors of the catalogue and the friends of Thomas Houseago whose support has been constant and enthusiastic. Those individuals formed a small group that, from Los Angeles to Paris, worked closely on the project without ever counting their time or effort. But that must not overshadow the incredible work accomplished by the entire staff of Paris Mus  es and the Mus  e d'Art Moderne, at every level of responsibility, to make the dream of this exhibition a reality within the beautiful spaces of our museum.

### ***Keyhole in the Door*** **Olivia Gaultier-Jeanroy**

The life of Thomas Houseago's studio is like his own life: endless hectic movement, masses of people dropping in and socialising. His way of imagining his sculptures and bringing them into being means he needs to visualize them concretely – giving them material form in space, but keeping a close eye on their interaction as well. Which is why Owl Studios opens as wide as the artist's arms when he welcomes you in.

Houseago's inspiration – his creative driving force – is his life and immediate surroundings. Illustrations include the recent sculpture *Daadist*, titled after the nickname given him by his son; the 2014 installation *Moun Room*, a homage to his partner Muna; the exhibitions whose titles are the words of his favourite songs; his Owl Studio, a reference to the bird he carved one day at his daughter's request and which has become one of his personal totems; and the scroll motifs of the Los Angeles freeways he drives on every day, which have started cropping up in his work of late. All of which means that visiting his studio is much more than just peeking behind the creative scenes: you're entering his world, gatecrashing his private life. Each of the buildings making up the studio represents a stratum of the sculptor's personality and the man behind him. So, this physical transcription of the studio for the exhibition at the Mus  e d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris – accompanied by a film of Houseago's daily round in his lair – bespeaks an urge on his part to provide the key to his art and reveal what it's made of. It is as if we were pushing the doors of the actual Owl Studios building open, one after another.

The first room the visitor enters functions as a kind of airlock – a decompression chamber enabling the transition from the outside world to that of Thomas Houseago. The members of his team call it the "drawing studio" because of all the tables there for him to use whenever the urge takes him; but mainly it's a rendezvous, home to a big soft sofa, a whole slew of armchairs and a low table permanently equipped with the paraphernalia for authentic matcha: a fanatical consumer, Houseago brews up like an expert. This is the venue for get-togethers, brainstormings and all kinds of relaxed exchanges. At the far end is another table, huge, for the meals he organizes when friends drop in: Brad Pitt, Flea, James Gray, Paul McCarthy, David Hockney, Kamasi Washington and Zoe Saldana are among those who have sat down to eat facing the artist's meticulous array of dozens and dozens of art history books. All these visitors, according to Houseago, have played a part in the making of *Clay Studio*, each in their own way and whether or not they actually handled the unfired clay.

[...]

It was only at the end of our tour that we noticed the soundtrack that had been with us all along. So taken up

had we been with the artist's infectious enthusiasm and balletic sculptures that we failed to notice this rhythmic backdrop until the cadence of his spectacle slowed down. Thomas Houseago lives amid music as a reflection of his mood of the moment, even if nothing seems to have a hold on him once he is in the studio. Constantin Brancusi said that a well-made sculpture had the power of curing the viewer; it would seem, in Houseago's case, that it also acts as a calmative for its maker: "My studio is a utopic place, even when I'm in full monster mode." There's still time to look at a few drawings with him, discover extra details of his sculptures – for example, the back of this little bronze owl that you could easily mistake for the back of Rodin's *Balzac*– when all of a sudden Houseago's gone. And we've scarcely had time to realise it when he's back with a sketch for a new work, made while our attention was elsewhere. As he puts it, "It's like a cat having kittens. You feed her, you know she's waiting for her litter – then suddenly she vanishes – and her kittens appear." In this exhibition, *Clay Studio* provides us with the key to the unique, ever-shifting space Thomas Houseago draws on for his inspiration. Like the actual place, this sculpture comprises four separate areas: for sitting, "performing", sleeping and creating. As if Owl Studios were there before our very eyes.

### ***Wearing His Heart on His Sleeve: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*** **Penelope Curtis**

There is no point trying to be clever in identifying Thomas Houseago's sources, partly because they are so numerous, and partly because they are so present. Houseago is shameless – in the proper sense of the word – in allowing them to be identified. He is an artist who for as long as he can remember, has been gathering images, more or less consciously.

The first set of images that he very consciously acquired was a classic Phaidon book full of black-and-white depictions of Ancient Egyptian art. He stole it from a library in Leeds. I was working in Leeds when I saw Thomas Houseago's first solo exhibition while visiting Amsterdam in 1996. When I saw it I said to my companion, with complete confidence, "You would never see sculpture like this in Britain. This is so Dutch." I was wrong, because Houseago is English, but perhaps I was also a little bit right.

That exhibition was and remains striking not just because it was his first, and because it was large and confident. More importantly, it was good. Twenty-five over life-size figures convened in a space, each individually active, but combining together to create an atmosphere of lively conviviality. It was a colourful show, especially for an artist who has become known for working in black and white, and its colours were rather beautiful, reminiscent in a way of early twentieth-century theatre. It mixed 3D and 2D, as all his work has ever since, and combined plaster shapes poured onto the floor with shapes made in plaster-soaked hemp. These effects combined to create a room that was both an image and an environment, something to look at and to walk around. It was like seeing sculptures and shadows, or a little like being in a zoo with real animals set against a diorama. At any rate, it was compelling, and it worked.

[...]

Houseago has copied lots of existing sculptures, so what makes him particular? I think it lies in the unusual way in which his sculptures confront us, and in which they are put together. The fact that parts are apparently joined together in ways that are deliberately clumsy might remind one of the surrealist *cadávres exquis*, in which bodies are built up by different authors in dissonant segments. The way in which parts made of different materials are more or less solidly slotted together is like a child's building game, or origami. This kind of casual building method is indeed very close to Picasso's late sculptures, and Houseago is open about the effect of that show. But in Houseago there is greater material variety. Sections with a stronger presence give way suddenly to sections that are almost as evanescent as the disappearing figures in a Piero painting. And disappear Houseago's figures do, leaving their costumes behind them, as if evacuating the stage. There is something more than absent about the characters he creates, and yet – or because of this – their after-image lingers on.

The role of costume, appearance, image, have been central to Houseago's sculpture until recently. And the central feature of the human image is the face, and its absence is denoted by the mask. And the mask is uninhabited, I think because the wearer has stepped off stage. In his earlier works, mobility was still strongly present, and this gave the initial shows – notably in Amsterdam – their vivacity. Early photos of his studios

similarly convey the group dynamic of his sculptures together. Over the years the figures have become much more static, more totemic, and much more isolated. Perhaps something of that static individuality was brought about by an increasingly elegant and commercial environment, which only encouraged a classic modernist presentation of the head on the plinth. Galleries require consistency, even from an aberrant artist.

Despite that sense of the figure's absence, and the developing stasis, Houseago's own physical comportment is strongly present, well balanced, one might even say grounded. Though he never trained in dance, it seems likely he would have been good. Instead he boxed – and danced alone in front of the TV, to Bowie – and his physical awareness is evident. He is not afraid of his own body, or of the space around it, and yet there is this abiding sense of his disappearing, leaving us with the mere accoutrements. The justly successful figures, that have made his name in the last decade represent figures of this type. They show us poses with which we are sufficiently familiar to be able to empathize, but sufficiently different as to enlarge our vocabulary. *Serpent* adopts a tripod-like position by dropping its head and pointing its arm down. *Baby*, shown in the Whitney Biennial of 2010, takes a similar pose. Walking in a manner that is characteristically Houseago, part-ape and part-baby, it balances on three points, semi-stable, apparently denying access. These sculptures are about as frontal as a free-standing sculpture can be. They hold their ground by looking at us, vacantly, through eyes but without eyes. Houseago emphasized to me that vision is bodily as well as visual, but nonetheless, it is striking how many of his bodies have no heads, and how many heads have no bodies. He describes their conjunction as a battle. I wonder if the characteristically disjointed head is not so much a reference to a famous artwork, but rather to his own reflection. [...]

### ***Gutbucket: A Biography*** **Flea**

[...]

Hollowed out enough to make room for the mighty river of creativity to flow through. Only by giving it all up could that wild coursing waterway surge through him unfettered. Sacrificing everything for love and death was the only chance for a working-class Leeds boy to be a true channeller of all the powers in the heavens/hells. A crazy-ass, ambitious Thomas still trying to figure out how to navigate through the pain and trauma of his childhood might not have known what he was doing ... but an unconscious Thomas with nothing left to give knew everything.

That sanctuary from the chaos when he drew, the little boy of three finding peace drawing the face of an old woman. Existing outside of himself, all the tension of the world melted away for a little while. The discomfort of being in a body eased up and the spirit knew peace. Lost in the process, not trying to accomplish anything. Released from time. Shit was sublime. It was ok to be out of control. It would be the thing for which he yearned the rest of his life. The most painful punishment exacted upon him when they took his colouring pens away.

His father was drunk and crazy, speaking in tongues and would not come out from under the table. A father that was appeared and disappeared, sometimes leaving magic boxes and other times a legacy of volatility and pain. Thomas knew magic needed to be made, as a shield of protection, and to make sense of the senseless.

But before the police came and took his father away, little Tom got his hands on his father's book of the Middle Ages, a tome rife with pictures and shapes from another time, images so powerful and timeless that they got inside his little heart, opening him up to a dimension beyond the restrictions of a mortal life.

He drew and drew, drawing a world around him that was real. Realer than the scary and mundane north of England that birthed him. Teen Thomas wandered into the Tate museum, seeing late period Picasso. He knew what his home would be His instincts and highest self found a place to be. Mr Crow saw his spirit glow.

All the violence and pain he felt, saw, and experienced could have easily pushed him into a life of violent crime, being a dangerous person, a fucking psycho. But every deep thing he saw, every Goya, every Holbein, and every Joy Division song he heard, it all pushed him up. He lived to rise above and find the beautiful thing instead. He yearned to channel the light, his life depended on it. Art saved his life.

*Beyond thought, beyond achievement.*

Getting out of LSD and panic attacks and into art school at nineteen, he set that motherfucker on fire. He was the walrus, he saw the Chris Burden, the Joseph Beuys, Pablo P. wouldn't let him be and he knew there was a place to be free. An old ass Egyptian sculpture in a London museum are you fucking kidding me. Anxiety and depression were enough he didn't need a drug to excavate his innards into a physical manifestation of love.

Finding himself in Holland, he connected with real artists, gestating and giving birth to the *Pink Tongue*. The floodgates opened. The things that would live forever. Truly organic, they came from the deepest places within. Invisible made visible. Once they existed outside of him, they were no longer his, they went to live their own lives, develop their own personalities and build their own relationships.

*Art is the human language. It ain't tellin' ya what to wear; it's giving you fabric, needle, and thread.*

The panic had started early, his wrenched guts had been letting let him know about it since his first poopy diaper toddler steps. There was no distance between Thomas and his guts. Ever. His creations come straight from the gut bucket, dripping in love and survival.

THOMAS: *Art is evolution. When I make art, I have empathy. I pause when I make art and I make room for tenderness and kindness.*

QUESTION: *Do you love yourself ?*

THOMAS: *Not yet. I'm just learning to walk as a human.*

## **RUDI FUCHS, December 2018**

[...]

The plan, drawing the sculpture and setting the stage, shows how quite different movements of the body (pretending to be sculpture) were planned the flat space of the bed and for the soft, amorphous heap of clay. *Also — I decided to jump into the clay from the ladder I use to turn on the film camera on the roof which begins the jumping theme.* The artist is a dapper figure. When he jumps the weight with which he comes down on the mound must shift the consistency of the clay (not very stable anyway) and slightly change the mound's shape. Also, the body slides down. Imagine that jumping begins to create a hole in the soft top of the heap, something like a small crater. The jumping figure dancing on the slippery mound may stumble. Such incidents of instability are worthwhile in the scheme of the performance. I saw images of the body in backward movement. In another moment the sculptor, laid against the heap, is bending over with his head in the crater's dark hole, like a mole entering the earth. The drawing shows the section of a deep hole into which Houseago's body is then almost entirely hidden. How the continuity is of the performance, by the way, is presently unclear to me. But this is, like some of Samuel Beckett's pieces, a dramatic sequence without words. Then, however we begin *with digging into the stage/mound, creating a space inside — jumping in, burrowing inside & starting to create clay shapes on my head and face. Then the mound collapses and I have to climb out.* Most of the time there is some movement going on: the body moves and bends and curves or the moist clay, one way or the other, is moving and curling. The performance floats like a river and is heaving endlessly like waves. I do not know, nor do I want to know, what movements are performance and what are forms of sculpture. So, very protean, we see movements in the volatile mass of the mound, in various rhythms. The straight hollow bed is narrow and rectangular and the place, obviously, for the body stretched out or sitting up. In one passage the sculptor is lying on the flat bed, covered all over with a blanket of bulging clay. This a moving moment of the tired artist in repose. But then *the bed becomes a kind of sculpture area, where I make myself into sculptures.* That is to say, with hand and fingers he scrapes and scoops handfuls of

warm clay. With such clods he covers parts of his head and body — and makes himself into strange, wonderful figures. The sculpture performance becomes a bizarre fairy tale as well. The pieces of clay that were moulded as ornaments and figures to make a sculpture of him are now, in the meantime, left scattered around. Next to the bed that is the shaped fragments of sculpture left there to dry. Then, towards what I believe may be the end of the drama, *the mound has really become a stage with clay steps — where I dance & fall & roll. The bed becomes a bath and I make myself into sculpture/creature that makes its way onto the stage too.* As a headcover for this sculptural creature, quite a bizarre figure, Houseago modelled an amazing weird mask, its sharp profile resembling a fierce cock. On the top of the heap of clay, now in disorder, the grotesque creature sits there — he is there squatting, silent and watchful and taking in what sculptures have happened.

My piece of writing comes to an end. Clay is a wonderful and supple material. In clay, sculpture can now better swing and curl. But previously, most of the time, Houseago made his volumes with a skeleton inside their shape. These skeletons, mostly made of wood, were eventually bent and cut with sharp outlines. That sharpness made these sculptures taut and tough. Because of their skeleton they stand firm on the ground. Sculptures should not fall down and collapse. That is an essential quality. But figures of clay are malleable and pliant. The good thing I think is that Houseago is very stable in his vision and will not surrender to gaudy beauty. In his formulation of shape, he is strict. *Now I am ready to tell how bodies are changed/Into different bodies.* Ovid's amazing poem about how bodies change begins with this line. I quote the translation of the Yorkshire poet Ted Hughes because I like the severe tone of voice in his poetry. Ovid is relevant too: the idea of metamorphosis of shape is always essential in art. In their art artists are looking for the unimaginable. But they must be very strict. The Yorkshire idiom of Thomas Houseago's sculpture is relentless as hell.

# EVENTS

**Friday the 15th March from 7.30pm to 8.30pm**

**Meeting / discussion with Thomas Houseago, Michael Govan (Director of LACMA, Los Angeles) and Fabrice Hergott (Director of MAM, Paris) in the exhibition.**

Open to all, sign up at [mamevenement@gmail.com](mailto:mamevenement@gmail.com)

(Limited places available, event in English)

**Thursday the 4th April from 6pm to 10pm**

**“REGARDS. Et si nous parlions d’art?” / “Points of View. What if we talked about art?”**

A group of students introduces you to the exhibition, discusses and exchanges ideas, impressions and questions about the artist’s works.

**Thursdays the 18th April, the 23rd May and the 13th June from 7.30pm to 8.30pm**

***Grabbing, Pushing, Thrusting*, choreography by Noé Soulier**

In the exhibition. Using principles of movement taken from Brazilian jiu-jitsu, two dancers form diverse configurations, evoking sculptural forms, natural structures and the sensual intertwining of bodies.

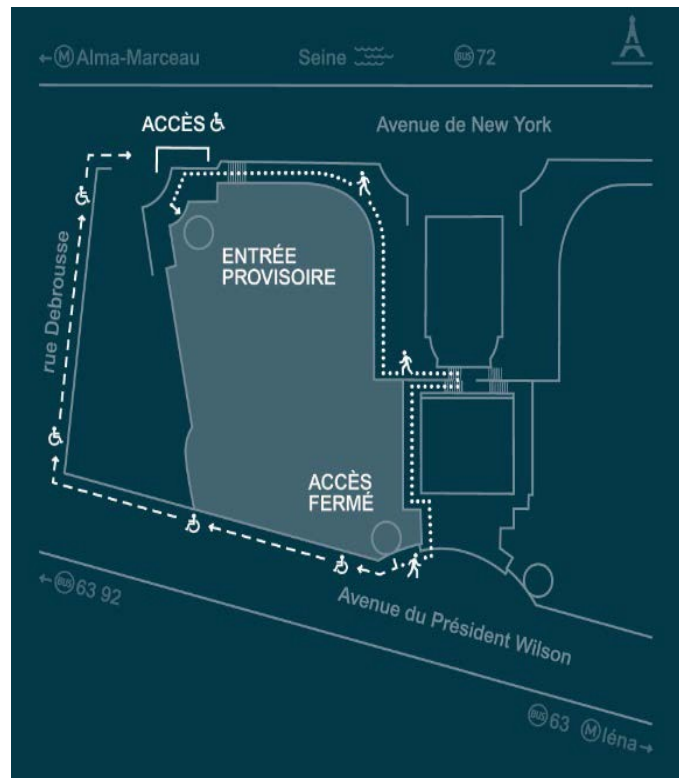
Free entry on presentation of exhibition ticket. Limited places available.

**Saturday the 18th May. Nuit des Musées (Museum Night) from 6pm to midnight**

Free entry to the exhibition. Northern Soul DJ set by Zelda and live concert by SheWolf on the museum’s esplanade.

More information at [www.mam.paris.fr](http://www.mam.paris.fr)

# Practical information



The Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris is currently being renovated to improve the reception facilities in the lobby and to create a greater ease of movement between the different areas.

When the renovations have been completed, the entire museum will be accessible to people suffering from impaired mobility. Visitors will also be able to enjoy the fully refurbished restaurant and the return of the bookshop.

These large-scale works have been entrusted to h2o architectes (Charlotte Hubert, Jean-Jacques Hubert and Antoine Santiard), Studio GGSV and, for access facilities, the Chiara Alessio Architecte agency.

**The Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris will remain open throughout the renovations.**

**Entrance (Seine side):**

12-14, Avenue de New York, 75116, Paris

Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris  
11, avenue du Président Wilson  
75116 Paris  
Tel: +33 (0)1 53 67 40 00  
[www.mam.paris.fr](http://www.mam.paris.fr)



### **Transportations**

Subway : Alma-Marceau or Léna

RER : Pont de l'Alma (line C)

Bus : 32/42/63/72/80/92

Station Autolib' : 24 av. d'Iéna, 33 av. Pierre 1er de Serbie or 1 av. Marceau

### **Opening hours**

Tuesday to Sunday from 10am to 6pm (ticket desk closes at 5.15pm)

Late opening on Thursdays until 10pm only for special exhibitions (ticket desk closes at 9.15pm)

Closed on Mondays and during bank holidays

### **Admission**

Full rate: 10€

Concessions: 8€

### **Ticket desk**

No-queue tickets available on [www.mam.paris.fr](http://www.mam.paris.fr)

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