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"The best sculptures come from a struggle":  
a Q&A with Thomas Houseago



Thomas Houseago  
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**Thomas Houseago's** monumental figures have taken the art world by storm. Away with the shiny collectable, the witty take on this or that historical movement, and the understated sculptural presence. Houseago does big and messy. His beasts and humanoids burst with raw emotions and twisted inner conflicts. The unlikely heroes of a confused era, Houseago's sculptures are deeply anchored in the present, and yet they are redolent of a sculptural practice harking back to the dawn of humanity.

The artist has only recently become a household name. The story goes that Houseago left Europe for Los Angeles in 2003 with \$300 to his name. Collectors **Don and Mera Rubell** popped by the studio a few years later — and the artist's career turned American dream. As he takes over **Hauser & Wirth's** two galleries on Savile Row, Houseago talks to **ARTINFO UK** about making, thinking, and feeling.

**You've separated your exhibitions in Savile Row's North and South galleries by giving them two titles: "I'll be your sister" and "Special Brew". How did you conceptualize the relationship between the two shows (or the two parts of the show)?**

I'm originally from the North of England, but I haven't been here much for a long time. When I began to really work on the show, I realized that it was going to be a psychologically loaded experience. I'm officially an American now, but the UK and the North are so much part of me. I realized pretty quickly that I couldn't avoid that, and that it that it was better to go with it.

The title "I'll be Your Sister" for the North Gallery show comes from a Motörhead song. It's a very raw song, but it's also very emotional, the lyrics are very poetic. I have this sister, who I'm very close to, who lives in England, and she is very important to me. I realized a lot of stuff about my family, and about their bodies, and the way I remembered them, and the way my kids look, and the way I look. All these things are going on in the show.

The South Gallery is called "Special Brew," which is a very strong drink. When I was young, before I would go to school, I would drink Special Brew. It was a dangerous thing to do, but it also freed me and as an artist, I needed this kind of elixir, a special kind of shamanic potion. I would get drunk with this beer, and draw to avoid doing the normal school stuff. It allowed me to float above the pressure of being at school and to become "civilised" or "programmed" — to step outside in a weird way.

### **When you start on a sculpture, do you have a precise idea of how it should look like or does the figure evolve during the making process?**

Sometimes I have a really precise idea, and I like it better when it works like that. It's easier on your nervous system, and it's easier with your energy. I spend a lot of time drawing, planning and processing ideas before I start. But then, in my opinion, the best sculptures come from a struggle. You have a strong idea and you try to do it, and then you realize that your idea was bad. Usually the idea you have is bad, but it gets you started and then you go into the fog and you have to find your way out. Mostly I want to avoid that feeling but, you kind of have to. I don't look for that chaos of work becoming in the process, it's very painful but it happens quite a lot. But every now and again, I carry a sculpture out exactly as I imagined it. That's always great.

### **Do you see your sculptures as totems of sorts?**

I have looked at totems, I really like the idea, but in this case, the works are more based on architecture: lighthouses, factories, buildings, and also on lamps, jars, cups, things like this.

### **How do you relate to the idea of fragment?**

The fragment is something I don't really go out to do. People say the works look fragmentary, but I never look at it like that. I always think of a fragment as something happening by accident: like it gets broken, or blown up, or it's hundred of years old. The sculptures are not fragments in my opinion, they usually have the full form that they are meant to have.

**I was thinking in particular of your panel with hands and fingers ("Untitled," 2012)**

When you work with clay, you use your fingers, you use your hands, and you use your feet. It struck me that those were like my tools, and I like the idea of using my fingers to make a finger out of clay, looking at my own finger as I was making it. So they are more like studies of the process, a meditation on the making of sculpture, and the nature of clay. It's strange because clay becomes a kind of extension of the body. It's a really weird material, really bodily. In this case, it looks fragmentary, but it's more about focusing in. The panel tells a story about the act of working, the act of thinking, the act of making.

**Do you work in the same way for indoor and outdoor exhibition spaces?**

I'm really lucky because in LA my studios are kind of indoor-outdoor spaces. You can see the sky and you can see other buildings, so I work mostly now with the idea of outdoors. I like the idea that in that space in Saville Row, you have these giant windowsills. The sculptures kind of merge with London in this very unusual way.

**I remember your "Homme Pressé" outside François Pinault's Palazzo Grassi at the last Venice Biennale.**

That was after the **Whitney Biennale**. The piece in the Whitney was pushing the edges of what you can put indoors. In a weird way, when Pinault and the group gave me this opportunity — because obviously, they commissioned the piece for the outdoors — that was the beginning of me being fascinated by how a work operates outdoors, how it works in an environment, and how to keep the sculpture vulnerable, or weird, or mysterious, or difficult, and yet still be a monument. After that, the genie was out of the bottle.

**In a conversation with your friend and fellow artist Enrico David you said: "we are hyper realists" — which is not exactly what comes to mind when one thinks of your work.**

I feel that it's very important to be realist and honest about how things look, how things feel, what it means to be a human. And Enrico is a very similar person. He is a very attractive person, but he has this really big desire to lay it out on the table. I felt that there was a little bit of a moment in the art world when there was art that looked good — post-pop, post-conceptual — but didn't feel real. People always say to me: your work is so violent. I can't believe that people haven't realized that the West has been at war for 11 solid years. I don't think it makes sense for me to make a shiny, sleek thing. The realm of feeling really dropped out of the field of artistic discourse. But of course we all do feel, so it's a very realistic position to say: look, we do feel, we fall in love, we feel angry, we long, we fear ... all these things. As an artist I wanted to make the point that I'm not in control. It's just not that kind of period.

**Isn't there something anachronistic in the very idea of monumental sculpture — or indeed of the monument?**

I guess that it's always dramatizing your relationship to the world, particularly to the social world. I think it's a real tragedy that — with all the wealth we've got, and all the sophistication we've got — we don't have art more centrally in society visually. I'm amazed that we give over cities to all this fucked up advertising and ugly architecture — which is ok, but I really believe in the idea of art being part of the everyday life. That you should be able to look at things that have no purpose. If you walk around in your life as a Westerner, every object you come across has a really strong economic purpose. The monument doesn't. It's a weird thing, and mine are secular, they are not religious. I'm really kind of meditating on where an artist is in society, their function in a society or their lack of function, and the impossibility of doing it. And I also like the idea of the pointlessness of it.

*Thomas Houseago, "I'll be your sister," September 7 – October 27, 2012, Hauser & Wirth London, Savile Row, North Gallery*

*Thomas Houseago, "Special Brew," September 7 – October 27, 2012, Hauser & Wirth London, Savile Row, South Gallery*

*Thomas Houseago, "The mess I'm looking for," September 1 – October 2012, Hauser & Wirth Zürich*