

REGEN PROJECTS *

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A Mind at Work in Chiseled Features

ART REVIEWS

By DAVID PAGEL
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Artists, like other people who do manual work, often say that they like to keep their hands busy so that their minds are free to do other things. At Regen Projects, a wonderful group of carved wooden figures and reliefs by German sculptor **Stephan Balkenhol** embodies this complex experience of hands-on distraction.

When your attention is absorbed by the immediate physical activity in which your body is engaged, it's impossible for others to know just what you're thinking. Even more astonishing is that when most people get caught up in the task at hand, they have a very hard time describing what happens to their minds. For fairly long periods of time, human consciousness loses track of itself—and sometimes seems to disappear altogether—

without one's performance being in any way compromised.

Balkenhol's fascinating sculptures invite viewers to bear witness to a similar phenomenon. Swiftly chiseled from large chunks of wood, without the benefit of models, photos or preliminary drawings, these uncanny works evince an artist thoroughly absorbed in the physical demands of his craft.

The surfaces of Balkenhol's figures are never sanded or smoothly finished. Instead, every square inch reveals myriad cuts and faceted chisel marks formed when Balkenhol chipped away at the wood.

The speedy spontaneity with which these works were clearly carved complements the casual demeanors of the people they depict. Set on rudimentary pedestals or cut from thick pieces of lumber, these sculptures of ordinary individuals wearing everyday expressions and run-of-the-mill clothing stand, sit and stare as if they've got all the time in the world.

Despite the rough, unfinished quality of Balkenhol's figures, none seem crude or unsophisticated. Each appears to have the capacity to express a wide range of emotions, although at the moment none are moved to do anything more than patiently convey cool nonchalance.

As a result, Balkenhol's sculptures have the presence of people keeping their hands busy. Not truly self-possessed, they seem more like individuals so fully absorbed in what they're doing that their minds have drifted off.

As viewers, we do just the opposite: Our minds are kept busy as our hands are left free. Slightly envious of Balkenhol's intriguing figures, we realize that losing track of one's mind is both pleasurable and productive.

■ *Regen Projects, 629 N. Almont Drive, (310) 276-5424, through Jan. 25. Closed Sundays and Mondays.*