

REGEN PROJECTS*

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Pagel, David, "Stephan Balkenhol," review, Los Angeles Times, January 27, 1994

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ART REVIEW

Sculptures With a Touch of Dignity

By DAVID PAGEL
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Stephan Balkenhol's carved wood figures initially seem to be nothing more than large-scale versions of the ubiquitous knickknacks sold in souvenir shops at popular vacation spots. His roughly cut sculptures, however, maintain a strangely humane dignity that makes it easy for us to confuse them with real people—if only momentarily.

The young German sculptor achieves this uncanny effect by forgoing strict verisimilitude. His variously scaled figures, busts and reliefs at Regen Projects share none of the cold, clinical precision of Thomas Ruff's seemingly endless cataloguing of anonymous Germans in his series of large, passport-like photographs.

Nor do Balkenhol's humble monuments partake of the creepiness relished and elicited by Duane

Hanson's unsettling, hyper-real manikins, whose latex skin, real wigs and everyday clothing give them the presence of alien clones or android stand-ins.

Balkenhol's statues sustain our fascination because they appear to thoroughly and comfortably inhabit their bodies. They create the impression that, over the years, they have grown used to the particular hang of their arms, the slope of their shoulders, the thrust of their hips. More generic than Alice Neal's outstanding painted portraits of her friends, Balkenhol's sculptures embody a similar sense of in-the-flesh vulnerability.

Although traces of resignation and resilience may be found in their features, the predominant attitude they convey is optimism. Almost always thirty-something, they look like they've never endured real disappointment nor made mistakes that can't be undone.

Still, Balkenhol's wooden people don't seem to be spoiled brats or sheltered white kids from the suburbs who only know the security of a stable, bourgeois upbringing. They exude a no-nonsense quality of working-class practicality.

This unflappable self-reliance is responsible for their optimism. It gives them their power and keeps us coming back to them, to try to read their passive features without doing violence to their stillness.

■ *Regen Projects, 629 N. Almont Drive, (310) 276-5424, through Saturday.*