

## The Digital Hand

by Dennis Kardon

Stephan Balkenhol, Apr. 15-May 13, 2000, at Barbara Gladstone Gallery, 515 West 24th Street, New York, N.Y. 10011.

Karin Sander, "1:10," Apr. 1-May 13, 2000, at D'Amelio Terras, 525 West 22nd Street, New York, N.Y. 10011.

"It's all a big nothing, what makes you so special?" is Livia Soprano's reply to her existentially troubled grandson in the HBO show, *The Sopranos*. This sentiment also underlies the sculptures of German artists Stephan Balkenhol and Karin Sander, whose work was recently on view in two neighboring New York galleries. Both artists make simple models of individual people.

Balkenhol's rough-hewn everyman sculptures, each chiseled from a single block of wood and painted by the artist, were originally designed to reinvent mimetic sculpture. Critics have claimed that he creates figures that are "ordinary rather than idealized, and anonymous rather than heroic" to "represent the familiar strangers that occupy our everyday lives."

In truth Balkenhol's sculpture seems more momentous than that. The first experience of one of his figures is unforgettable. The play of light across the lightly painted or raw surfaces is simply riveting. A painter produces light by subtly manipulating close tonalities of brushstrokes. Balkenhol uses the flickering gradations of highlights and shadows made by his chisel strokes to animate the light and make the figures seem alive. Since the exposed skin of the figures is always left unpainted, the organic nature of the raw wood contributes to the feeling of vitality.

Balkenhol also has a gift for representing human posture. His figures have a relaxed quality that looks simple but is in fact constructed of thousands of complex signs embodied in head and shoulder positions, eye positions, and the geometry of lip and eyebrow curves. The expressions have a quiet awareness.

Whereas Balkenhol embraces the handmade look of the generic, Sander celebrates the generic look of the digitally made. Her exhibition was crowded with 40 vitrines containing little figures that are one-tenth scale reproductions of actual people.

Though at first glance these look like tiny hand-sculpted Balkenhols, they are actually produced by laser scanning the actual people and feeding the info into an extruder that builds them from the bottom up with sprayed layers of plastic. The figures are then hand-painted by a "technician."

Sander, who was born in 1957, the same year as Balkenhol, has previously done conceptual installations that transform the exhibition space by altering something familiar. She has polished rectangles into the painted surfaces of white museum walls and lined a gallery with 770 framed hairs she collected from 80 people.

In this installation, the figure-filled boxes organized the traffic of real people through the space. Upon reflection, we can see ourselves as examined specimens, much like the figurines that share with us a common cultural background.

But this is a depressing viewpoint, because though we sometimes like to feel our lives have become as plastic and extruded as Sander's figures, we never experience real people in this frozen objectified manner. All it takes is a genuine human to appear among the Lucite to drive this home.

As a conceptualist Sander seems more interested in the idea of the examination rather than the pleasure of it. But it is the process that dominates this experience. She underplays the importance of the painting in these works,



[Stephan Balkenhol](#)  
[Four Figures](#)  
[2000](#)



[Stephan Balkenhol](#)  
[Four Figures](#)  
[2000](#)  
[\(detail\)](#)



Stephan Balkenhol  
Three Men on Sculpted Pedestal  
2000



Stephen Balkenhol  
Female Corner Sculpture  
2000



Karin Sander  
Self-portrait  
2000

ascribing it to a technician, as though some anonymous figure in a white coat were performing only rote and perfunctory decisions. But the emotive associations that painting induces carry a huge impact here. The hand-painting changes the nature of what could have been fairly tedious little effigies. Nevertheless the relentlessly digitized linear quality of the surfaces ultimately does become tiresome.

It is interesting that though Sander's figures are of real people in actual postures they seem less vital and more generic than Balkenhol's invented figures, which are not based on real people at all. It must be due to the way Sander elects not to control the constellation of details that form our ideas of what constitutes human.

While Sander keeps upping the ante on the conceptual development of her overall work, troubles arise as Balkenhol attempts the innovation he obviously thinks he needs. He betrays the original conceptual goals of his project with sculptures of giraffes that look as though they could belong in some high-end zoo giftshop. A pair of mammoth male and female headless and limbless torsos seem perfunctory. And the photo screenprints on plywood of various details from the sculptures are pretentious.

Balkenhol's strength is in developing the subtle specificities of his generic figures. The quieter the evolution, the more there is to think about. Full nude figures could work, but giraffes are far too exotic for his project. Although perhaps the link with African art, especially the post-colonial figures of Baule, and Germany's role as a colonial force in Africa might be interesting to consider.

Though Balkenhol stumbles conceptually, his work is more energizing to the spirit. And artists who look to digital technology to escape the hard work of the handmade might also want to take note that while Sander's 40 sculptures took two years to assemble, Balkenhol, working alone, produced 20 pieces in the first three months of this year. In the end, it seems the pleasure we take in human inventiveness is exactly what can fill the Big Nothing.

**DENNIS KARDON** is a New York painter.



[Karin Sander](#)  
[Self-portrait](#)  
[2000](#)  
[\(detail\)](#)



[Karin Sander](#)  
[Annemarie Becker](#)  
[2000](#)



[Stephan Balkenhol](#)  
[Giraffe](#)  
[2000](#)