



**Visual Arts**

## Thomas Schütte: Faces and Figures, Serpentine Gallery, London

The German sculptor's poetic, anti-heroic sensibility resounds in his studies of the human form



Thomas Schütte's 'United Enemies' (2011) outside the Serpentine Gallery © Gautier Deblonde

Jackie Wullschlager OCTOBER 16, 2012

“Between the hippies and the punks” is how German sculptor Thomas Schütte defines his generation, born in the 1950s. “We weren’t naive enough to improve the world, and we weren’t destructive enough to reduce everything to rubble.”

Many went instead for a dispassionate neutrality, combined with dark humour and, often, a refusal to commit to particular styles, media, viewpoints. Such subversions have characterised distinguished bodies of work by European artists including Thomas Struth, Thomas Ruff, Andreas Gursky, Luc Tuymans. All seem nevertheless, as they approach 60, to become more classical, more interested in beauty, less afraid of expressing virtuosity. This is very evident at Schütte’s new exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery in London, entitled “Faces and Figures”, and the first show to focus on the artist’s long engagement with the human form.

British audiences know Schütte best from his Fourth Plinth installation “Model for a Hotel” (2007). That work appeared to crystallise his architectural interests, although Schütte stressed its figurative impulse, with different levels of the coloured glass building suggestive of hips, waist, torso: a geometric, faux-Constructivist approach to human representation which responded brightly, humorously, to Trafalgar Square’s imperial statues.

“Faces and Figures” too begins with a giant mockery of the monumental. Outside the Serpentine stand the ungainly, bulky, four-metre bronzes “United Enemies”: comically enlarged versions of small clay models originally made in the 1990s, depicting haplessly yoked and bound, expressionless, anonymous pairs of figures. Inside, the central gallery is dominated by another towering absurdity, the steel “Vater Staat” (Father State), a monolithic, authoritative but pathetic-looking rusty tyrant, with no arms and the heavy folds of a cloak instead of a body – a fleeting form, hastily finished as if it hardly merited completion.

These follow, clearly enough, the anti-heroic aesthetic with which postwar German artists – Gerhard Richter’s blurred grey portraits, Georg Baselitz’s upside-down paintings, A.R. Penck’s stick people – responded to national trauma. At the Serpentine, however, Schütte’s monsters are in surprisingly light, intimate company: portrait heads in watercolour, ink, crayon, on paper, which are defiantly non-political, non-conceptual, and take simple delight in how material, form and colour create their own language.

Some, such as the scores of depictions of “Luise” – variously alert, at rest, concentrated, dreamy – are displayed in a grid and suggest the shifting nature of character, perception, consciousness. Others – fresh, lively watercolour sketches of Schütte’s children Henri and Carla, just completed – are achieved with superb economy of means and catch a passing moment: teenagers briefly absorbed, reflective, growing up.

A group of ink and pencil “Mirror Drawings”, self-portraits of the artist trapped in a circle – a shaving mirror – are suffused with frustration, as if the quest for self-identity is doomed. Yet Schütte is a precise, even lyrical draughtsman, depicting his sharply focused eyes and pursed lips now with fine gossamer lines, now fluidly in vampish washes of purple, now on a yellow ground, the ink trickling disconsolately.

A sensuous satin-black “Happy Skull” is exhibited alongside, though the real mirror images here are two fantastical series, the “Innocenti” and the “Wichte” (Jerks). The first are ghostly black and white images of crushed wrinkled faces photographed from Schütte’s clay models, at once baby-like, corrupt and ancient-looking, and evoking science-fiction nightmares of genetic mutation. The “Wichte” – the literal German translation is imps – are their bronze counterparts: ill-formed, awkward heads, with hollow sockets for eyes, protruding or squashed noses, drooping jaws, recalling Daumier caricatures. Both groups are placed high on the walls, lining the gallery like a frieze, so that the gargoyle-like creatures peer down on us, jeering, daring judgment or empathy.

Is Schütte a storyteller in conceptualist clothing, or the other way round? Certainly, new pieces here emphasising his interest in literature tilt our reading of his oeuvre. “Walser’s Wife” is a large lacquered aluminium imaginary portrait of the spouse that Swiss writer Robert Walser never had; the gleaming gold sheen, solidity and classical air are ironic attributes given that Walser’s work and life, which ended when he froze to death on a snowy walk in 1956, were an exploration of obscurity, ephemerality and defeat, as well as a meditation on the uses, or not, of art. “We don’t need to see anything out of the ordinary, we already see too much,” Walser wrote, and, having committed himself to a mental institution, “I’m not here to write, I’m here to be mad.”

The livid green bronze “Memorial for unknown artist” (2011), a bearded half-figure with flowing locks, sunken eyes and urgently upraised hands posed on a curving steel base, was first shown earlier this year at “In the Spirit of Walser”, Chicago gallerist Donald Young’s project. Schütte’s sculpture was enlarged from a five-centimetre wax model he had kept in a box for decades; he shaved off the shoulders, reworked the features so that hair, eyes, nose and beard all merge into each other, and produced a figure which is a cliché of the artist as crazy yet god-like – Schütte mentions both Leonardo and Neptune (“with it being so green”) as reference points – but also desperate, fragile, forlorn. “There are so many exhibitions that are about ‘I’m important, I’m great and I’m expensive’,” Schütte says. “People never really explore failure – except for Robert Walser, who did it so wonderfully.”

“Memorial for unknown artist” opens the Serpentine show, where it is displayed alongside Schütte’s first surviving self-portrait, an oil on cotton grisaille depicting a long-haired student hiding behind cool shades, painted in the style of Gerhard Richter in 1975, when Richter was Schütte’s teacher at the Kunstakademie, Dusseldorf. The painted and sculptural portraits gaze at each other: success and defeat, fame and obscurity, hope and despair, separated by just a breath.

The self-portrait is accomplished, but Richter’s immediate effect was to prevent, by force of his own originality, any of his talented pupils from becoming painters. Schütte chose sculpture; Struth, his close friend at the Kunstakademie, switched from painting to photography. Richter’s deeper influence, however, persists; his ambivalence, doubt, questioning of art’s purpose, his fight against its seductions and distrust of established positions, all resound here.

Was it, then, Schütte’s masterstroke to exclude from the exhibition his most iconic figurative pieces, such as “Man in Mud” – the hero stuck knee-deep in mud, rendered helpless – which launched his career in the early 1980s, or “The Strangers” (1992), defining image of German unification and its discontents? “This ‘Man in Mud’ is always measured against statues, and then it very quickly becomes official, and then indifferent,” Schütte has commented. By contrast, the Serpentine’s carefully chosen show embodies in its modesty and delicacy Schütte’s anti-monumental stance, and is a quiet celebration of his poetic sensibility.

‘Thomas Schütte: Faces and Figures’, Serpentine Gallery, London, until November 18; Fondation Beyeler, Basel, from October 2013