

# ANIMALS AND PEOPLE

Tal R has thrown himself into classical bronze sculpture: 19 sculptural creatures in bronze and 10 slightly more fragile plaster figures – plus one in wood – have landed on their plinths. They have arrived with arms and legs, heads and paws, wings and shoes, beaks and eyes. Standing and walking, sitting and reclining, on horseback, kneeling and twirling. On the one hand belonging to the family of animals and people to be found in the life of the artist today: dancers and boxers, bats and dogs, birds, girls and boys, Emma and *Adidas Boy*. On the other hand, closely related to the history of sculpture as we know it from the 19th-century Paris of Degas, Rodin and Maillol and the gentleman's study of Modernism: Mr. Giacometti, Mr. Ernst and Mr. Moore. And from Germaine Richier and her fragile grasshopper people. Forms and figures digested and reincarnated as fragments and scraps, surprisingly reborn like scavenged remnants recycled in the hands of Tal R today, in a different world – in a new age. Other familiar elements, indeed whole people or creatures, seem to have wandered from the artist's own drawings and paintings. So in this sense we are dealing with one of Tal R's familiar methods, the assemblage – but coming into its own in figurative sculptures: *Recast* in more sense than one.

Take the top of the tall *Headless Drummer Boy*, with his drum, arms and drumsticks akimbo. At first glance we see long, Giacometti legs on the move. But no, this is 21st-century fashion, baggy Adidas pants following the beat, an overgrown and grown-up street kid with limbs out of synch, erect and mindless, marching ahead on reflex and instinct.



Little Brother in Lars von Trier's TV series  
*The Kingdom*, 1994–1997

Then the ant-like *Moon Dog* with a startled look on its Miró-like face, as flat as a large coin with nipples and bumps in the strangest places on the divided torso. It does not take much before they become eyes, mouth and nose – another face. We ask ourselves if the figure with its spread legs is about to give birth – has inseminated itself like some insects can, the praying mantis for example. We could be in the bar in Mos Eisley, where the extra-terrestrials hang out on the planet Tatooine in *Star Wars* (1977), or encountering a wounded cripple from World War I, trying to recover after dragging himself all the way up to the 21st century on his bandaged, footless stumps with a tail transplanted from a dog (or maybe a cat with nine lives). As if *Neue Sachlichkeit*, Beckmann, Dix and Grosz arrived to pay Tal R's Studio Paradis in Copenhagen a visit. Or is it the one and only Little Brother, Lars von Trier's grotesque baby born in the corridors far below the hospital in *The Kingdom* (1994–1997)?

#### DODGING THE ISSUE

There is a paradoxical contrast between solid bronze sculpture – resident as it is in the largest museums in the world (historical, classical and very, very heavy) – versus the fragile vulnerability and almost moving allure that characterises these figures in all their charm, from the dancer *Rose* with leg and arms lifted in a pirouette, and the almost comically clumsy *Man Backwards on Horse*, ridiculously dressed and probably about to fall off his mount, to *Moon* – a lumplike creature with tiny feet. They are like innocent new-borns, and very strange. Materially there is a marked contrast between plaster and bronze: the plaster fragile and porous, easily destroyed, the run-up to the 'genuine article'. What the figures want of us, we do not know. They are speechless. They give no interviews, reveal nothing in therapy. They are simply here.



Installation view from the exhibition  
*Academy of Tal R*, 20.5–10.9.2017  
at Louisiana Museum of Modern Art

Making sculpture is not new for Tal R, although the artist himself can be quoted as saying he has been dodging the issue for years. As part of his solo exhibition *Academy of TAL R* at Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in 2017, he installed a whole street of sculptures in a separate wing, an installation as dramatically lit as a stage set, a passage to walk through greeting figure after figure on the way. One of Tal R's earliest sculptural realisations was that a piece of fruit that had been on his bedside table for a while became a sculpture if he poked holes for eyes, a nose and a mouth into its soft flesh. Later he discovered that if you gave an ordinary pumpkin to the bronze caster at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, you actually had a sculptural work. But according to the artist, in his own dramatic rendition of his oeuvre, so far these have been mere exercises, rehearsals for the real thing. Something that felt like a bit of a failure, despite resulting in a whole parade of three-dimensional works at Louisiana. These sculptural experiments were merely preparation, a way of approaching figurative sculpture, the three-dimensional work of art, in investigative, exploratory way using materials like bundles of cloth, ceramics, wood, papier mâché, plaster and clay. From these composite rehearsals in materials like fabric and wooden blocks, the figuration has now come into its own, insisting on forming a whole – on becoming a figure.





**Birds Sometimes Fly Away, 2017**  
Skive High School



**Pigeons, 2004**



**Pigeon Man, 2004**

#### BIRDS AND LINES

The caution with which Tal R has approached figurative sculpture can be compared to the artist's constant circling of the figurative in painting, something he returns to and questions again and again. When do the lines on paper coalesce to form a face? A hand? When does a picture emerge that tells us that this is a man with a turban and poulaine slippers sitting on a bench? What do arms look like? It took nerve and a degree of irony to approach the figurative after avant-garde appropriations, minimalism and concept art made the desire to draw the visible world on a piece of paper – to see the world as it appears represented in a work of art – seem pretentious: “Look, a woman in a room with a window”. Irony was necessary, as in the paintings of Georg Baselitz, who in order to legitimise the figurative turned the figure upside down. Tal R talks about approaching the figurative sideways, the figurative, which according to the artist himself, he has spent the past 15 years daring to take seriously.

With a title like *Animals and People*, however, there can no longer be any doubt. There is no longer any ironic distance to the figure. On the contrary, it is about presenting the viewer with a puzzle. Is that a bird? We have seen Tal R's pictures of birds, including his sketches and paintings from Dronning Louise Bridge in Copenhagen. On the artist's regular walks over the bridge, a gallery of characters with three main figures emerged: a man in a cap feeding pigeons on a bench, *the prophet* with a turban, usually sitting alone, and *the milkman* – a young boy sitting on the railing drinking milk. The pigeons



Edgar Degas (1834–1917)  
*Dancers Practicing in the Foyer*, 1880s  
Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen

were always there, and were also drawn. The artist talks of a kind of mathematics, the system or elements of a drawing it takes before we can say “A bird!”.

Take the large sculpture *Birds Sometimes Fly Away* at Skive High School (2017), which marked the beginning of Tal R’s work with figurative bronze sculpture, materialising out of this logic of bird mathematics, from bird drawings in which birds standing behind each other look as if they share the same belly, because their stomachs are on top of/in front of each other on the flat surface of the drawing. From here silhouettes of beaks, wings and feet point in all directions, like flowers arranged in a vase. So nothing could be more natural when entering three dimensions for the birds to do the same, to become one body, a mass with beaks, wings and feet. But where does that leave the bird’s eye? On the side? A Cubist dilemma Picasso can give us the answer to.

And it is precisely this oscillating approach to the figurative that is at play among the art colleagues Tal R talks about when you ask him about the sculptors that inspire him, like Hans Josephsohn (1920–2012) with his human figures built out of clay, plaster and later bronze. Not portrait-like delineations of the human form, but a more a constant circling of the human figure he constructed again and again. Rachel Harrison (b. 1966), who like Tal R works with assemblage, uses cardboard boxes, papier mâché, plaster and concrete forms to approach the figure. Rebecca Warren (b. 1965), with her plaster sculptures of walking legs, huge bodies on skateboard-like bases and over-dimensioned female forms, is also part of the family of sculptors that interest Tal R. Sarah Lucas (b. 1962), with her more abstract, ironic and almost surreal sculptures comprised of many parts, also has an ongoing negotiation with figurative sculpture and especially the human body, just like Tal R.

#### LA DANSE

If we look at Edgar Degas’ famous studies of ballet dancers, such as *Dancers Practicing in the Foyer* (1880s), there is a direct connection to Tal R’s bird mass with all its beaks and tails. Here the bent arms, ballet shoes and extended legs of the dancers grow out of a pile of tutus layered on top of each other, hiding how many bodies there actually are. And just as Tal R’s birds seem to have grown into bronze from his drawings, Degas’ ballet dancers also become sculpture – bodies in multiple different positions like a strip of film modelled frame by frame in the artist’s favourite sculptural materials of soft clay and wax, materials easily moulded to capture the pose of a dancer or an animal on the move – a galloping horse, for example. Sculpture and dance are closely related as expressive forms: an arm, a neck, a bent leg say it all.

Tal R’s *Dancing Emma* spins around and around, arms arched above her head. Another *Dancer* has one leg bent in front of the other. Because sculpture and the dancing body are connected. Auguste Rodin also studied the expressions and posture of the dancing body. Fascinated by dancers from countries like Japan and Bali, by the yogi dancers and acrobats who performed in Paris, Rodin found his inspiration









Auguste Rodin (1840–1917)  
*Assemblage de deux Mouvements de danse : Alpha et Bêta*, c. 1911  
Musée Rodin

in dancers like René Moreau, Eugène Druet, Nijinski, and the acrobatic Artaud. We can also find an example of a ‘joint’ body with dancing arms and legs in Rodin’s *Assemblage de deux Mouvements de danse : Alpha et Bêta*, although as stages of movement rather than layers on top of each other.

Unlike Tal R, and despite the differences between them, both Rodin and Degas adhere to a degree of anatomical accuracy in terms of the proportions of the figure. Even though Degas leaves many details to the imagination of the viewer in his fast, Impressionist portrayal of body positions, movements and rhythms that bring his dancers so vibrantly to life, and even though Rodin errs towards the expressive in all his tactility, they still work with a certain naturalism and accuracy in line and proportion. Tal R’s human figures, on the other hand, are not anatomically accurate. Yet despite the anatomical absurdity of the legs of the archer in *Bow and Arrow*, their angles and bends, we are left in no doubt that we are in the presence of full concentration, an alert body with every muscle tensed. A sculptural drawing with an archaic Egyptian perspective in three dimensions allowing us to see the archer from multiple angles at once. Despite the illogicality, what we see is a realistic form, because we know what it takes for a body to shoot an arrow: something bent, something stretched, taut and tense.

Tal R has created a sculptural language of his own. We are witnesses to a big event. Step inside!

