

MAI 36 GALERIE

Garciandía/Balkenhol

March 7 – April 12, 2025

Mai 36 Galerie is pleased to present *Garciandía/Balkenhol*, an unexpected dialogue between Flavio Garciandía, one of Cuba's most influential artists and a pioneer of conceptual art in the Carribeans, and Stephan Balkenhol, a leading figure in the revival of figurative sculpture in the early 1980s in Germany.

Despite their distinct artistic approaches, both artists share a deep engagement with humor, irony, and a critical stance toward the conventions of their respective disciplines. Their works encourage a reconsideration of the boundaries between tradition and innovation, seriousness and play, the personal and the universal, challenging fixed interpretations while opening new possibilities for meaning.

In Flavio Garciandía's paintings, high and low culture merge, intertwining art historical references, popular iconography, and cultural memory. His self-termed *Nueva Abstracción Tropical* reflects the dynamic and often turbulent artistic, cultural, and political forces that shape creative expression in his context. This concept humorously critiques the legacy of modernism while situating abstraction within the socio-political realities of Latin America.

Garciandía engages with the language of abstraction by blending visual motifs from both global and local sources. Works such as *A. Gorky and Lam in Disneyland* and *Jorge Pardo Was Here* exemplify his ability to reinterpret avant-garde and contemporary movements alongside Latin American popular imagery, collapsing artistic hierarchies and fostering a playful yet critical examination of cultural symbols.

Spanning nearly three decades, from 1996 to 2024, Garciandía's works included in this exhibition explore shifting meanings through appropriation, emphasizing the fluidity of cultural memory and its impact on contemporary artistic discourse.

Through Stephan Balkenhol's carved sculptures, made from a single block of wood, the viewer encounters a redefinition of contemporary figuration that rejects the gravitas of traditional monumentality. Balkenhol's figures inhabit spaces of enigmatic neutrality; their seemingly ordinary yet carefully composed postures provoke quiet contemplation, subtly questioning notions of identity, history, and representation, through evident references to entertainment culture or religion.

The rough textures and deliberate imperfections in Balkenhol's sculptures suggest an unfinished quality, emphasizing their openness to interpretation, in a sort of ongoing work-in-progress where perfection is challenged by rawness. This unfinished aesthetic resonates with Garciandía's destabilization of traditional artistic frameworks, creating a shared exploration of ambiguity and reinterpretation.

By focusing on pared-down forms and understated narrative, both Garciandía and Balkenhol highlight subtlety and ambiguity as key artistic strategies. Together, they challenge conventional artistic canons, using humor and irreverence as tools for reflection. *Garciandía/Balkenhol* encourages the exploration of the intersections between past and present, tradition and reinvention, individual and collective memory. By placing their practices in dialogue, the exhibition underscores

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reinterpretation as a critical strategy for engaging with cultural and artistic legacies, opening pathways for renewed perspectives.