

Life Forms

Hans Josephsohn's sculptures

By Jennifer Higgin

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Ranging in size from the intimate to the monumental, Hans Josephsohn's sculptures are characterized by both restlessness and permanence. In his pursuit of what he described as 'the power of life itself' – which couldn't be achieved by 'simply copying nature'ⁱ – he forged a body of work in which eruptions from the deep past collide with the urgent present. And yet, despite its often totemic strength his work is also an evocation of something very human: a commingling of flesh, feeling and bone; swirling memories and the inviolability of the individual.

Beginning with a visual prompt – a gesture, a face, the curve of a breast, an arm or a thigh – Josephsohn would tirelessly revisit and modify his heavy, ghost-like plaster creations: heads, busts, reclining figures. He also 'sketched' in swift, small clay reliefs in which human figures and loose geometric shapes occupy various architectural spaces. His practice was intensely physical. He piled wet plaster onto wooden armatures, kneaded it, hacked at it with an axe or smoothed it with a spatula in a seemingly endless process of becoming. He believed he was simply a conduit, explaining: 'There is a stage when you stop creating and the work makes itself.'ⁱⁱ Talking about the evolution of his larger sculptures he said: 'As I work on them, they grow. Always through working on them, nothing happens intentionally with me.'ⁱⁱⁱ

Josephsohn's pace was unhurried and deeply focused; an act of daily meditation he maintained for over six decades. Many of his sculptures – especially in his later years, when he could afford it – were cast in brass, which lends the figures both a literal and a metaphorical weight: its patina suggests, variably, volcanic or burnt earth occasionally enlivened with flashes of soft golden light.

The artist's biography is relevant to an understanding of his fascination with devastation and rebirth. The son of Jewish parents, he was born in 1920 in Königsberg, East Prussia; he fled Germany's racist laws as a teenager in 1938, studying art in Italy and then Switzerland, where he remained – he died in 2012. His parents disappeared, most likely murdered at the Theresienstadt concentration camp. 'Learning saved me', he said. 'Sculpture became my home country. Sculptors across history were my true relatives.'^{iv} After time in a refugee camp and with the help of a Jewish refugee aid organisation, he studied under the Swiss sculptor Otto Müller. He admired the economical forms of Müller's teacher, Karl Geiser, and the 'coherence and

reduction^v of Aristide Maillol's nudes. But Josephsohn was also drawn to the centrality of the figure in Byzantine and medieval art and by the 'reinvention of nature'^{vi} in sculptures carved by the ancient Assyrians, Hittites, Egyptians and Greeks. When he could, he spent hours sketching in the University of Zurich's archaeological collection. He established his daily routine as a student. 'Everything went very slowly and in an unconscious manner. [...] I just worked. I never had a programme. I never decided that we must go back to a primitive form.'^{viii} He saw his studio as a place where 'everything is in suspense' – a room where the artist's role was to breathe life into inanimate lumps. In many ways Josephsohn was not simply an artist but an archaeologist, a builder and a visual poet; an innovator who brilliantly mined the creative and emotive possibilities of repetition and renewal.

It's hard not to read mourning, catharsis and survival into the artist's ravaged surfaces. 'I always choose sculpture,' he said in 1977, 'maybe to protect myself from my own vehemence, from the catastrophe of contact, of real contact.'^{viii} That said, he was resistant to theoretical or psychological readings. 'I feel and think in sculpture', he said, and 'you can't explain it, it's impossible. You have to leave a secret to the work.'

Over time, Josephsohn's variations on the theme of a simple pose – in particular, a reclining female figure – evolved from figuration to an increasingly monumental abstraction; as if the artist was searching for something ancient and immovable in the midst of modernity. Four roughly life-size brass *Untitled* sculptures are a case in point: in 1971, a naked woman emerges from a maelstrom of gestural eruptions and yet she is clearly recognisable; her belly, breasts and thighs swell with the force of a prehistoric Venus figure. In 1993, the artist revisits the pose: now, her skin is as turbulent as a freshly ploughed field. In 1999/2001, she is only vaguely recognisable as a woman: her head is like a dislocated stone, her arm a blasted tree. By 2004, details have become absorbed into the whole: this is woman as undulating landscape, her skin an organic, moody, mottled metal.

While many of Josephsohn's sculptures are untitled, and the features of his subjects are often universal rather than specific, at times they reference wives, lovers, friends, assistants. *Untitled (Mirjam)* 1950, for example, refers to Josephsohn's first wife and constant model, Mirjam Abeles, whose Madonna-like face and upper body he depicts in expressive stele-like planes. In 1956, he sculpted *Untitled (Benno)*: the head of a young man, his skin clear, his expression stoic. Decades later, he depicted his third wife, Verena Wunderlin – as in *Untitled (Verena)*, 1987 – as a raw, abstracted energy, a study in mass and volume. Only the title alludes to the fact that in a way it

could also be a portrait. *Untitled (Verena)* (1988/90) is like an object unearthed or the root of a tree, the bulky surface marked with imprints of the artist's fingers.

Working quietly and without financial reward for many years, Josephsohn finally achieved a measure of acclaim. Today he is revered by a slew of contemporary artists who are stylistically indebted to the Swiss artist's approach – from Urs Fischer and Nicole Eisenman to Thomas Schütte and Rebecca Warren, to name but a few. Despite exploring their subjects from myriad angles, they are united in their aim to reflect the complications of being alive through a representation of the body – in all its possible manifestations.

ⁱ Hans Josephsohn speaking in *Josephsohn - Stein des Anstosses*, documentary, dir. Jürg Hassler, 1977

ⁱⁱ *Josephsohn Bildhauer*, documentary, dir. Matthias Kälin & Laurin Merz, 2007

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Sonja Pizonka, ed., 'Josephsohn, become a sculptor!' *Hans Josephsohn Existenzielle Plastik*, Göttingen, Edition Folkwang / Steidl, 2018, p.159

^v 'Josephsohn, become a sculptor!'

^{vi} *Josephsohn - Stein des Anstosses*

^{vii} *Josephsohn - Stein des Anstosses*