

## FIGURES

**Thomas Houseago** is known for his monumental sculptures of the human figure. His art examines what it means to be human and to inhabit a physical body. He discovered sculpture while studying at the De Ateliers Institute in Amsterdam from 1994 to 1996. There, studying under artists Marlene Dumas and Jan Dibbets, he developed his distinctive style of assembling the human figure as part of an architectural installation. After his studies, Houseago relocated to Brussels and then in 2003 to Los Angeles, where he is currently based.

Houseago begins his process by drawing. He favours classical sculpting materials such as plaster, bronze and wood, often combined with other elements such as rebar and hemp. In the US, he became familiar with Tuf-Cal casting plaster, to which drawings adhere better than to ordinary plaster. He draws the two-dimensional elements flat on the floor and then reinforces them with plaster, finally lifting the drawn figure upright and incorporating it as part of a sculpture in the round. *Squatting Man* (2005) is one of his first sculptures made this way, and it is also the earliest work in this exhibition.

Houseago made his first walking man out of plaster in 1995, while still studying in Amsterdam. *Gold Walking Man* (2021) is a bronze version of the same motif. The ambulatory figure combines various influences from sculpture history, from ancient Greek sculptures to Auguste Rodin (1840–1917) and Alberto Giacometti (1901–1966). Departing from classical tradition, he turns his figures ‘inside out’, revealing their fragmented core, roughness and imperfections. One of the new plaster sculptures made especially for this exhibition is *Nichole Galicia* (2022), an homage to an existing work in the Sara Hildén Foundation Collection: *Woman on a Chariot* (1943, 1962) by Alberto Giacometti.

Alongside the human figure, the owl is a recurring sculptural motif and personal symbol for Houseago. He sculpted his first owl at the request of his daughter. The owl-themed bronze in this group, *Lechuza* (2020), is named after Lechuza Beach near the artist’s home in Malibu. *Lechuza* is Spanish for ‘barn owl’, and in Mexican myth it refers to a revenge-seeking shapeshifter that assumes the form of an owl. The same nocturnal creature appears in Francisco de Goya’s (1746–1828) etching series *The Caprices* (1797–99).

## ABSTRACTS

The human figure sometimes approaches a purely abstract or architectural form in **Thomas Houseago**’s sculptures. Indeed architectural fragments are a signature part of his repertoire. His temples are like miniatures or fragments of a larger architectural space, drawing our gaze into the sanctum sanctorum.

Houseago is interested in studying spatiality and the dynamic interaction between positive and negative space. He plays with light and shadow, overlapping planes, voids and apertures – non-spatial spaces. He creates alternative realities that leave room for absurdity and strangeness, spaces without a predefined function.

The relationship between architecture and sculpture and their role in shaping shared public spaces is an essential part of the artist’s practice. His fundamental message is that art should be accessible as an embedded part of our daily reality, shaping the way the world around us looks. In recent years, he has been working on architectural sculptures of vast proportions. One example is *Moon Room* (2014–15), an installation within which visitors can move around. Another is *Cast Studio (stage, chairs, bed, mound, cave, bath, grave)*, (2018), a study of the artist’s studio featured on the ground floor of this exhibition. The monumental Beautiful Wall ‘Room of Temples’ to be installed on the compound of the new LACMA building Los Angeles County Museum of Art will mark his largest work to date, nearly 52 meters in length. Located in public space for people to experience and use freely, the work is the artist’s ode to Los Angeles and its people.

The metamorphosis of materials is important for Houseago. Sometimes he might create a sculpture by moulding and adding, sometimes by carving and cutting away. Other times he might cast an organic object or worthless ephemera in bronze, a prestigious material associated with classical sculpture. Houseago has been collecting abandoned objects, garbage, pebbles and seashells while beachcombing with his children. He has used these foundobjects to make collage-like assemblages such as *Gold Vortex (For Love)* (2022) and *Soul House* (2021). The latter is an assemblage in a moving box, forming its own miniature

sculptural world and mirror of the subconscious. The piece simultaneously reflects the transience and underlying oneness of all things: the spiral pattern of a seashell echoes a whirling galactic vortex viewed through a space telescope.

## REDWOOD

For **Thomas Houseago**, this exhibition marks a personal journey from darkness to light, from mental breakdown toward healing and hope. He has openly stated that he uses art as a vehicle for processing trauma. Trauma makes people isolate because seclusion feels safe when you are afraid. On the contrary, it is important to seek connections with other people, to heal.

The black-and-white painting *Untitled* (2019) is an important work for Houseago. Painted pre-recovery, it shows a figure walking aimlessly, as if asking: “Where am I going?” During the challenging period of his breakdown, Houseago was unable to sculpt, but as he began to recover, he gradually resumed drawing and painting and eventually began sculpting again. Through sculpture he felt able to answer the question posed by *Untitled* (2019). For Houseago, his redwood sculptures represent a “return to the cave”, which in C. G. Jung’s theory (1875–1961) means confronting one’s darkest fears and demons. Making the terms with them can help to build a bridge between the past and present. These sculptures also have two sides, each containing a mirror image of itself.

Sculpting is physical and sometimes dangerous work. Houseago carved the redwood sculptures with a gasoline-powered chainsaw during the scorching heatwave that hit California in the summer of 2022. The merciless redwood dust penetrated everywhere, sticking to the artist’s skin and clothing, transforming his appearance into something closer to a sculpture than a human being.

## PAINTINGS

**Thomas Houseago**’s paintings depict the unpredictability and mystery of nature. They also take a candid look at human nature and the inner struggles we all face. The world is a place of both light and darkness, where beauty coexists with suffering. Houseago feels deeply connected to the Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890) and how he transformed pain into beauty: how it is possible to suffer and show one’s wounds and yet simultaneously paint beautiful sunflowers. The bright hues of Houseago’s paintings diverge from his earlier work and the earthy colour scheme of his sculptures. His work also shows affinities with the Norwegian painter Edward Munch (1863–1944), the legacy of European landscape painting, and Northern symbolism.

When he paints, Houseago favours solitude. He enjoys observing and meditating upon nature: the sea, trees, the cycles of the sun and moon, the play of light and shadow, the unity of the universe. Houseago paints outdoors in Malibu, with nature taking part in the process. Sage petals and dead bees carried by strong winds sometimes end up on his canvas.

The Japanese poet Matsuo Bashō (1644–1694) found inspiration for his haiku poems by roaming outdoors and hiking in the wilderness and then penning lines about the events and spirits he encountered while moving in nature. Houseago strives to capture similar moments in his paintings. One of his newest paintings, *Demon Dream no. 2* (2022), portrays the moment of his mental breakdown. *Weekend at El Cap* (2022) in turn depicts the moment when light returned to his life after spending a morning in nature with a close friend.

## CAST STUDIO

**Thomas Houseago** has been making art in his current studio since 2010. Housed in a repurposed industrial space overlooking the Los Angeles River, the studio is large enough to accommodate collective and performative work.

The monumental sculpture *Cast Studio* (*stage, chairs, bed, mound, cave, bath, grave*) is one of Houseago’s most important works to date. He has described how making the piece necessitated his opening the inner sanctum of his studio to others. The work was completed over a period of several months in 2018 in cooperation with family members, friends and colleagues. The piece debuted in Houseago’s solo exhibition *Almost Human* at the Paris Museum of Modern Art in 2019.

Houseago describes the piece as a therapeutic return to childhood games and tactile memories of playing in the sandpit and making mud cakes. At the same time, it makes a statement about what sculpture should be and what all art is ultimately about: life and love.

*Cast Studio* is the inspiration behind the exhibition's connecting theme: *WE*. A sculpture that celebrates a form of artistry that flouts rigidly entrenched roles and conventions. In the spirit of 'we', Houseago invited two of his artist friends, Nick Cave and Brad Pitt, to co-exhibit with him.

## **Nick Cave** **THE DEVIL — A LIFE**

*"You know, at night, when I try to sleep, I close my eyes and see the figurines parading by in sequence – the newborn Devil nestled against the foal, the in-fant with his ball of fire, the child holding the red monkey, the Devil seducing the girl, the Devil riding off to war through a field of flowers, and then returning on a black horse down a road of skulls, on and on they go, the Devil with his bride and the golden rabbit, the Devil sacrificing the child on the altar, the Devil separated from the world, on and on, the Devil sitting on a wall, his tears pooling around his feet, his chilling, operatic death, and at last his body washed up on a beach, a child crouched by his side reaching out a hand in forgiveness. This procession makes a certain sense and brings me enormous comfort. It draws my own story out of the darkness, out of the chaos, to stand in testament to something. It brings an order to the world and a kind of peace."* Nick Cave

The Devil – A Life consists of a series of ceramic figures developed and handcrafted by Nick Cave in the period from September 2020 - August 2022 in a studio in London. The work is a nod to the artist's interest in Victorian Staffordshire flatback figurines, of which Cave is a collector. The ceramic figurines are religious in nature and chart the life story of the Devil in 17 stations, from his birth to his death.

Nick Cave (Australia, b.1957) is an artist and singer-songwriter, who initially gained notoriety as the lead singer of Nick Cave and The Bad Seeds. Born in Warracknabeal in rural Victoria, Cave was drawn to the visual arts from an early age. He studied painting at the Caulfield Institute of Technology (Monash University, Melbourne) in 1976 before abandoning his studies to pursue music, relocating to Berlin and London in the 1980s.

As a predominantly self-taught artist and creative chameleon, Cave works across disciplines using various mediums including painting and drawing. A recent interest in ceramics has resulted in Cave's first major body of visual work entitled *The Devil – A Life*.

Cave's artistic output over a creative career that spans more than 40 years has been prolific and ever-evolving; a relentless process which he describes as ritualistic and compulsive. Often religious in subject matter and confronting in nature, Cave's work seeks to explore the dark underbelly of existence, raising questions about the nature of faith, the human condition, and the act of creation itself. The result is a destabilising combination of unease and profundity.

Cave lives and works in the UK.