

Vancouver Sun November 2010

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BREAKING NEWS: VANCOUVERSUN.COM | THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 18, 2010

VISUAL ARTS

Dynamic duo mixes classic and modern

Husband-and-wife painter-sculptor team prepare for show at Wing Sang Gallery

BY JENNIFER MOSS

Despite the season, Los Angeles-based artists Thomas Houseago and Amy Bessone bucked the trend this week and hopped a flight north, arriving in Vancouver just in time for their opening at the Rennie Collection at Wing Sang.

"I'm thrilled to have the opportunity to come to Vancouver," said Bessone, who has spent much of her adult life studying and exhibiting art in Europe but fondly recalls being impressed as a child growing up in New York by north-west coast first nations carvings at the American Museum of Natural History. The married couple (he's a sculptor, she's a painter; they met at art school in Amsterdam) have been busy helping install the Rennie show, which promises to be, above all, a rigorous exploration of the figure, and a joyful homage to the likes of Picasso, Moore, Matisse, Beckmann — and *Star Wars*.

Both Bessone and Houseago acknowledge a deep vein of pop-culture influence running through their work. British sculptor Houseago, according to gallery legend, was first introduced to cubist esthetics through the shape of Darth Vader's helmet. Houseago turned to sculpture while attending Central Saint Martins School of Art in London in the early 1990s as a way to define himself in a sea of other artists.

Known for pushing the limits of the three-dimensional figure in new and interesting ways, Houseago's sculptures are, nevertheless, clearly steeped in art history. There is a "reminiscent" quality about them that is almost primal. Like Picasso's, his work shares certain qualities with African masks and totemic statues, and has an aura of both the ancient world and the present.

In conversation with fellow artist Aaron Curry, Houseago once stated, "I guess this is the thing of being artists of the 21st century. The 20th century comes to us without this linear index. Where Picasso, Neil Young, Bob Dylan, Hanna-Barbera, *Star Wars* and modernism all kind of coexist. We can make of it what we want."

What Houseago seems to be building his career on is his ability to walk these lines of contradiction between originality and



reverence. His delightfully grotesque figures are at once muscular and pocketed, almost Rodin-ish, as though they just crawled out of the primordial ooze, and yet crisply modern at times, with two-dimensional sections, mask-like faces, exposed rebar and flat edges.

Art writer Jonathan Griffin has called Houseago's figures "hulking, mad and Luddite," which, it must be understood, in the art world is meant as a compliment.

Amy Bessone's paintings of female nudes also embrace history while seeking the new.

"I think we're part of a generation where there's less of a distinction between high and low culture," Bessone said. "We grew up seeing the classics through a pop culture lens."

Her lively figures seem as if they've been liberated off the sides of some classic vase. Bessone's bold black impressionistic lines on colourful monochromatic backgrounds give the figures a life of their own. It's as though the women Matisse famously painted dancing in a circle have let go of each other's hands in order to

At a glance

AMY BESSONE AND THOMAS HOUSEAGO, RENNIE COLLECTION AT WING SANG

When: Opens Saturday, runs until April 16.

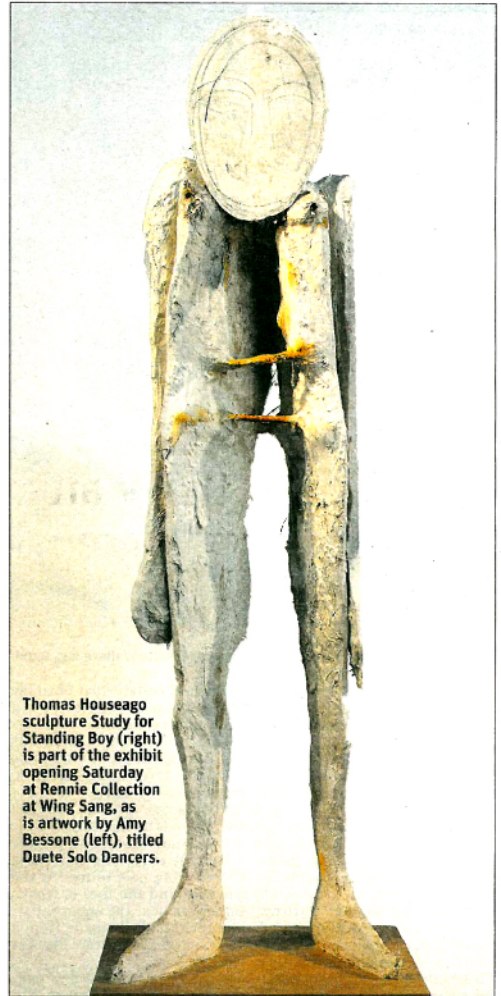
Where: Wing Sang Gallery, 51 East Pender St.

For info and to book a tour: renniecollection.org

bend and stretch their way right to the limits of the canvas.

Anne Martens of FlashArtonline.com reviewed Bessone's recent show at the David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles, which featured a number of these splashy nudes. She wrote: "How does it affect the work's interpretation when a contemporary female artist invokes the curvy models and signature brushwork of Picasso and Matisse? Is it a subversively feminist gesture, if there isn't an overt statement made about the tradition of the male artist's gaze?"

Bessone's paintings do raise



Thomas Houseago sculpture *Study for Standing Boy* (right) is part of the exhibit opening Saturday at Rennie Collection at Wing Sang, as is artwork by Amy Bessone (left), titled *Duete Solo Dancers*.

some lofty questions, and indeed the artist was well schooled, at De Ateliers artists' institute in Amsterdam, in the inner mechanisms of conceptual art. Somewhat thankfully, however, these paintings are earthy and humorous enough to work with or without a palimpsest of art criticism

laid overtop of them.

"Not to be naive or dismissive," Bessone said, "but all that history, it can be a lot of baggage to carry around."

Bessone's solution seems to be to head straight for liberation.

Special to The Sun