

## VISUAL ARTS

### Josephsohn

Hauser & Wirth,  
London



By ZOE PILGER

"When I was offended in the Nazi era, I couldn't respond," the late sculptor Hans Josephsohn explained in 2001. "Whenever a Hitler Youth leader insulted me, I wasn't able to hit him."

Josephsohn, who died this summer at the age of 92, cited this early experience of muteness – a denial of the right to defend himself – as key to his practise as an artist. His sculptures are amazing and difficult to describe; they seem to be ancient, as though unearthed on an archaeological dig. But they are rooted in a particularly modern mood – that of post-war existentialism.

These hulking figures and human heads are unnervingly silent. They were made by adding and subtracting layer upon mottled layer of plaster, then cast in brass. They appear weighted with a deep – perhaps not terrible – feeling. It is impossible to discern what they are feeling; of course it is ludicrous to imagine that they are feeling anything at all.

Most of the figures' features have been erased or never existed, and their surfaces are rough and complex. Some are dusted with bronze or gold or pale blue. Ranging from one to three metres high, and partly abstract, they take up the space in a way that makes them impossible not to look at. There is something devastating about their apparent determination to either escape from their own material, or stay buried within it.

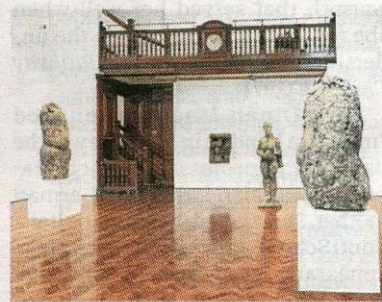
Born of Jewish descent in East Prussia in 1920, Josephsohn came of age during the Third Reich. He was compelled to leave his birthplace in 1938, and travelled to Florence, where he studied the high Renaissance, before settling for the rest of his life in Switzerland.

Although Josephsohn is often compared to Giacometti, these sculptures are more akin to Michelangelo's unfinished *Slaves/Captives* series (c1530), which seem to be bursting out of their own marble by a tremendous act of will. While the power of the slaves derives from their explosive physical strength, Josephsohn's subjects are inert. They seem to be looking outwards, waiting.

Most impressive are the sculptures downstairs, particularly *Untitled* (2001), a hunched figure that appears nailed to a ceremonial structure. Elsewhere, a reclining female form is voluptuously contoured yet swamp-like. She too seems watchful.

Josephsohn only achieved wider recognition in the late Nineties. These works – including drawings and abstract reliefs – span his 60-year career. They are defiant and defensive: a response.

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#### Impressive: Hans Josephsohn

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