



### Preview: Joe Havel: "Fantômes" at Hôtel Tingry

by Joseph Staley | August 21, 2024

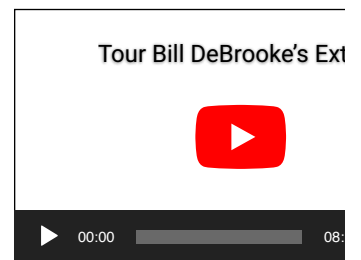
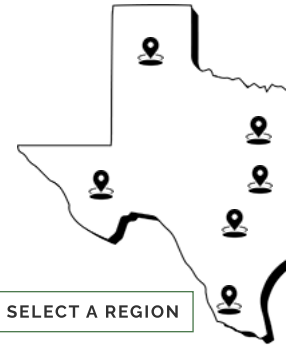


As a sculptor, Houston-based artist Joseph Havel dignifies everyday objects. He solidifies towering sculptures of curtains, immortalizes pandemic staples such as cardboard Amazon boxes in bronze, and reinvents bulbous forms like traditional Chinese paper lanterns in unexpected ways. These seemingly banal replications function much like memes: memes in the memetic sense as coined by Richard Dawkins in his influential 1976 book, *The Selfish Gene*. According to Dawkins, just as genes replicate to multiply life, memes replicate to multiply culture. Dada artists like Marcel Duchamp subverted memes in the form of readymade sculptures, Warhol's Factory assembled memes to elevate the mass production of consumer goods and tease the art market, but Havel sculptu memes that transform the banal into the poetic.



Joe Havel. Photo: MacKenzie Mercurio

Havel's Houston studio flows much like a gallery. With ample lighting and room, it serves as an ideal audition space to stage works for his rigorous exhibition schedule. Instead of the antiseptic minimalism of most gallery showrooms, it lends the sparseness a soul. With its exposed ceiling of wooden beams — at times lofty and low — its concrete floors, and its resounding depth, it collapses the gap between the typical humanity of an artist studio and the sterility of a gallery.



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of France where Havel now owns a second home and studio. The 17th-century hotel was built by Joseph Balthazard des Laurents, a descendent of the Prince of Tingry and Marshal of France, Christian Louis de Montmorency-Luxembourg. Given this austere sensibility, the exhibit hinges on several omnipresent questions; How does Havel's work cohabitate an already furnished space, how does it exhibit without altering the flow of its preexisting elegance, and how can we read its enmeshment in such an esteemed habitat?



Works by Joe Havel at Hôtel Tingry. Photo: MacKenzie Mercurio

The exhibit is inspired by “the disappearance of books in our current culture because of the effects of the internet as well as censorship in some countries,” Havel said. It emerged from his fondness of written and visual language. It speaks to the utility, accessibility, and what feels like the mounting *futility* of the printed word as intellectual capital. Along with American culture’s *passive* disinterest in reading, book censorship remains *active* in the American South.

As a Houstonian, these cases of book censorship hit particularly close to home for Havel. Ground zero for this type of “protect the children” hysteria lies about 30 minutes west of Houston, in the outlying suburb of Katy, Texas, where its public school district has banned more books than any other American city. This institutional gatekeeping, coupled with the “analysis paralysis” and “too long didn’t read” mindset of the internet, projects a mounting culture of even more crippling extremes, where too little dulls and too much overwhelms.



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Joe Havel, "Fantômes Drawings." Photo: MacKenzie Mercurio

As European convention might suggest, Hôtel Tingry maintains an impressive library. This becomes the exhibit's epicenter as artistic objects radiate away to populate the rest of the Hôtel with consistent literary symbols. Among the many books that Havel repurposed as sculptures, are collections from his partner, Mary Flanagan, the artist and academic who "helped bring the light of Ménerbes to [his] eyes in 2019," Havel said. The two now own a home just down the street, a seasonal retreat from Houston's stifling climate.



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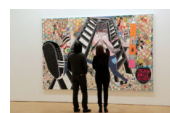
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Placed as the library's centerpiece, and punctuated throughout the building, the icy translucence of Havel's cast resin book sculptures both blend in and stand out. In preparation for the show, he produced two versions. First, pieces where resin bodies of books sprout from bronze bases. These hybrids are accompanied by a series of pure resin sculptures. The hybrid sculptures recall the way one interacts with Mark Rothko's characteristically ethereal paintings. Despite his elusive intentions, Rothko's monolithic fields of color invite an imaginary interaction; Uniformly hung at shin level, these painted portals long to envelop the viewer, as the bottom of each frame loosely suggests a stepstool, a symbolic device that beckons the viewer to step into its void of modulated color. Similarly, the point of transition between Havel's bronze bases and their resin bodies lies at a similar height, as his tallest stack of hybrid books (*Deux Pôles*) sits before a window overlooking the hotel's beautifully manicured courtyard.



Joe Havel, "Fantômes Drawings." Photo: MacKenzie Mercurio

Havel's paprika-infused suite of eponymous *Fantôme* drawings oozes a primal allure. The most obvious comparison recalls ancient murals produced by prehistoric Magdalenian cave painters in the South of France. These ancient progenitors expressed visual language in the age before writing. They communicated via an extinct visual dialect, an incomprehensible intelligence steeped in magical thinking, inseparable from nature. Without any written records, this purely oral tradition of speech remains lost to time. Considering Havel's literary subject matter, the spell of this lineage either dissolves or multiplies, an inverted intersection that proves the timeless mystery of art history.