

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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Robert Gober: Tick Tock At New York's Matthew Marks Gallery

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Welcome back, Mr. Gober. This is the artist's first New York exhibition since 2014, when the Museum of Modern Art presented *The Heart is Not a Metaphor*. He returns with many recurring images and subjects. This is part of the language he has constructed over the last 35 years, and one that we may not understand or need to. In fact, there is actually something very comforting about not knowing. Karen Marta, wrote in a 1993 introduction to one of Gober's earliest exhibitions:

“ Bob will always be able to retrace his steps, to tell you how "this"—whether it's an essay or a kitchen sink—came to be. . . He will explain the facts of the way something works—he'll describe the mechanism behind it and the mistakes he made before perfecting it. But he will never reveal the impulse of what led to its creation—his own interior life. Bob only talks about *how*; the *why* is something you must unearth yourself.

Finding this passage, reading these words is a relief, if you are aiming for concrete answers to questions like: Why an apple? Why a robin's egg? Why a prison window? And, why a cellar door? These are prosaic questions, fitting for Gober's humble, handmade works.

Press, Clayton. "Robert Gober: Tick Tock At New York's Matthew Marks Gallery." *Forbes*, February 26, 2018.



Robert Gober. Untitled. 2017. © ROBERT GOBER. COURTESY MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY.

Tick Tock occupies an entry area and three contiguous rooms. As you enter, there is a small drawing of a winged being dating from 1967, when Gober was 13 years old. It may be an angel, it may be a fairy, it may even be Icarus flying too close to the sun. Its back is to you, turned away, perhaps signaling “Follow me.” It is riveting in its subtlety and delicacy. The other object in the entry is a maquette for a fully realized sculpture that completes the exhibition.

Next is a room of Gober’s drawings—12 or 14 in all. Over the heart chakra of each headless torso is a two-part detail—almost a monogram—that combines a prison window with a woodlands. The torsos are male and female, yet gender does not feel realized. One drawing suggests a hermaphroditic being—a man’s chest on the left, a woman’s breast on the right—a motif used in several earlier wax sculptures.

Onwards, there is a room of wall-mounted sculptures. You move from two-dimensions to one in between. These works are not quite paintings, not quite tableaux, and not quite boxes à la Joseph Cornell. *Eggs on Diaper* (2007-2017) combines cotton diaper with acrylic paint, epoxy putty, fabric, hand-printed silkscreen on paper. *Plunger/Cherries* (2007-2017) is a carefully crafted wall work combining terra-cotta and acrylic paint on fabric. These are hand-made things, and everything in this piece and every piece in this room is exact, rigorous. For Gober, it is “important that the work ‘be interesting’ to the people who look at it. But it is even more important that it be



interesting to him as he makes it.” *A Robert Gober Lexicon* (2005) written by Brenda Richardson hints at and sometimes describes many clues in and signals to Gober’s work. Mystery is best.

Finally, there is the back gallery. There are two more formidable wall-based “boxes,” windows actually, using Gober’s motifs. Their interiors are deliciously colorful. The detail looks machined—four apples and a broken branch in one; four apples, a dollhouse-sized radiator and



Robert Gober. Untitled. 2000-2001. © ROBERT GOBER. COURTESY MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY.

a crushed cigarette packet in the other. These are surrealist dream objects that are juxtaposed in ways only known to Gober, if even to him.

On the back wall is an untitled work first exhibited in 2001 at the 49th Venice Biennale. It is a sculpture of a cellar door inspired by the artist's childhood home, built by his father. It is crisp and clean, looking freshly fabricated, ageless. The glow from the light behind a yellow door is warm, rather than threatening. Yet, who knows what lurks behind the door, a few steps down from the gallery floor. There is no viewer access.

The sculpture has the look and physicality that was inherent to Gober's 1997 installation—*Untitled*—at The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. It is as engaging and confounding (and potentially threatening) as you want it to be. The contemporary art cognoscenti will make comparisons with Marcel Duchamp's *Étant donnés* (1946-1966). The "look" may be there, but not the manufacture. *Étant donnés* relied on the readymade (with the exception of the hand-made female form), and Duchamp's own installation instructions allowed for ad lib and nuance. *Untitled* (2000-2001) is a great thing, a visual thing, a physical thing, with everything made from scratch. Whether it is specifically referring to *Étant donnés*; to Gober's childhood, family and home, or the cellar in *The Wizard of Oz*, the sculpture is an invitation to imagination and meaning. All of the work is.

A December 2014 *Brooklyn Rail* conversation between Jarrett Earnest, a New York writer, and Gober is something of a Rosetta stone. When asked, “What does it mean to be an artist?”, the artist replied:

“ I think it’s trusting some inexplicable voice within yourself—it’s too cosmic a question in a way, “What it is to be an artist”—it’s trusting that voice in yourself that asks you to focus on an object even if it doesn’t make sense to do in the face of all the other things you have to do in life. It’s trusting the inexplicable—that thing that doesn’t make sense but bugs you and doesn’t let you alone.

Gober is not prescribing meaning. He continued, “I don’t have that much interest in talking about my work. My interest is my work.” Sculptor Charles Ray nailed it saying, “If you were to ask me what his artwork talks about I would not be able to tell you. But this doesn’t mean it is not speaking . . . The work whispers ‘Be with me.’” This is enough.

Robert Gober: *Tick Tock* At Matthew Marks Gallery (526 West 22nd Street), New York, through April 21, 2018.