

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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# HYPERALLERGIC

ART

## The Bewildering Lexicon of Robert Gober

Is Gober taking stock and summing up his life at his latest exhibition at Matthew Marks? If so, he sure is breaking new ground while at it.

Ken Tan April 17, 2018

A man with wings, plumed and outstretched, is in full ascension towards the Sun. This man is Icarus. Making a splash at the bottom of the picture is presumably Icarus again, who, as the legend goes, ignored his father's warnings of flying too close to the sun and plummeted into the sea, melted wings and all.

"Icarus" (1967), rendered tenderly in graphite on a 12-inch by nine-inch, stained piece of spiral-edge paper, serves as a preface to the exhibition *Robert Gober: Tick Tock* at Matthew Marks gallery, the American artist's fourth at the New York gallery and the first since his remarkable 2014 MoMA retrospective *The Heart is Not a Metaphor*.

Gober was thirteen when he drew "Icarus." Compressing two timelines into a single image, Gober compels the viewer to intuit the in-between. This natural faculty to suggest hidden stories would characterize all his future works to come. In his art,



Robert Gober, "Icarus" (1967) graphite on spiral-edged paper, 12 x 9 inches; 31 x 23 cm (© Robert Gober, courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery)

Gober excavated objects from his own life and charged them with symbolic purpose to present the exigencies of the times — the politics, tragedies, and anxieties linked to identity and racial issues — in a way that is both deeply personal and universal. For instance, having come to prominence during the ‘80s in New York when the AIDS crisis was in full bloom, Gober would elevate the white washing sink from the basement of his Yalesville childhood home to one of history’s most poignant memorial to AIDS victims.



Installation view: *Robert Gober: Tick Tock*, at Matthew Marks Gallery, New York

Lining the walls of consecutive rooms are two categories of new, small-format works: 20 boxed tableaux and 14 riveting drawings on paper. In these enigmatic works, most of Gober’s bewildering lexicon return. Apples? Cells on breasts? Rubber plungers? He may employ motifs of seemingly ordinary things, but they belie the immense depth of his vision. These new works are best enjoyed through extended looking and contemplation..

The new drawings, all untitled, reacquainted me with Gober’s haunting headless torso, after having recently been transfixed by its metamorphosis in the seminal “Slides of a Changing Painting” (1982–83) at the Met Breuer’s inaugural exhibition *Unfinished*. A prison cell window is in place of the heart where ominous woods have sprung forth, but the blue skies beyond the

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prison suggest hope. Does love set us free or imprison us?

There's a certain familiarity to the boxed tableau works. Cornell? Not quite, no. Gober does not use found objects, instead he labors over hand making every element from scratch to achieve a convincing realism. Not Magritte either. Gober's object associations do not come to him in a Surrealist dream. In intimacy and spirit, here I think Gober is closer to Forrest Bess, whom he greatly admires. Or Robert Motherwell's great collages, with his expressionistic layering of

materials.



Robert Gober, "Untitled" (2017) graphite and pencil on vellum, 12 x 9 inches; 31 x 23 cm. (© Robert Gober, Courtesy Matthew Marks gallery)

Almost all the boxed works feature wallpaper. Wallpapers first appeared in his early dollhouse sculptures that suggest a nostalgic ideal of the privileged, American, middle-class life. Like "Icarus," they are a stage that compresses narratives and time. Many wallpapers contain floral motifs of lilacs and cherries, which I hazard, have something to do with love and sex. In "Untitled" (1978-2018), apples are hovering behind prison bars over a backdrop of lilacs and brown leaves. There's an intense aura of reminiscence here.

In several works Gober combines robin's eggs with stained diapers, where I can't help think of the little blue pill — the promise of virility and new beginnings. Perhaps the most sexually charged piece

in the show is "Plunger/Cherries", (2000-2017): the gaping orifice in the sculpted terracotta plunger is brutally carnal.

Finally, I entered the last room of the gallery with excitement. Prior to my visit I had read that the "cellar door" sculpture, "Untitled" (2000-2001), would make its first appearance here in the US since its debut in the 2001 Venice Biennale. Inspired by the cellar door that was built by Gober's father in his childhood home and here installed into the wall and floor of the gallery, "Untitled" has the reduced look of Minimalism. Its open doors are thickly daubed in gray, as if overpainted and weatherproofed. Stairs cut into the floor lead to a closed yellow door with an eerie yet warm

glow that emits through the cracks. What lies beyond? The closed door denies access, but it also heightens the perverse interest by this very estrangement. A key would have killed the fantasy.

Tick, Tock, as the exhibition title suggests – time marches on. Everyone gets old. Is Gober taking stock and summing up his life here? If so, he sure is breaking new ground while at it. Just as these objects had personal significance for Gober, they are almost always quotidian, universal, enough for anyone to access. Once you think of an object meaning other than its original

function, you will never unthink it. Therefore this almost inscrutable exhibition is worth as many visits as possible.

Robert Gober: *Tick Tock continues at Matthew Marks Gallery (526 West 22nd Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through April 21, 2018.*



Robert Gober, "Untitled" (1978-2018) copper, beeswax, forged iron, paper, soil, balsa wood, oil and acrylic paints, hand-printed silkscreen on paper, 24 x 24 x 6 inches; 61 x 61 x 15 cm



Robert Gober, "Untitled" (2000-2001) wood, paint, concrete, cast plastic, human hair, Overall approximately: 80 x 48 x 72 in; 203 x 122 x 183 cm; above ground approximately: 32 x 48 x 48 in; 81 x 122 x 122 cm; below ground approximately: 48 x 48 x 72; 122 x 122 x 183 cm

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