

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047

Robert Gober

Press Packet

O'Neill-Butler, Lauren. "Robert Gober." *Artforum* 59, no. 1, September 2020, p. 170.

Gober, Robert, and Deborah Solomon. "A Master's Domestic Surrealism: Robert Gober's Art of the Commonplace Is a Good Fit Now." *The New York Times*, June 2, 2020, pp. C1, C4.

McLean-Ferris, Laura. "Eroticism, Anger and Hope in the Work of Robert Gober." *Frieze*, January 11, 2019.

Tan, Ken. "The Bewildering Lexicon of Robert Gober." *Hyperallergic*, April 17, 2018.

"Robert Gober." *The New Yorker*, March 16, 2018.

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

Reines, Ariana. "Whose Name Was Writ in Water." *Art in America*, March 2015, pp. 98–107.

Haidu, Rachel. "Not Only The Heart Is Not A Metaphor." *Texte Zur Kunst*, March 2015, pp. 216–20.

Mack, Johsua. "Robert Gober The Heart Is Not a Metaphor." *ArtReview*, March 2015, p. 136.

Salle, David. "Drainman." *Town and Country*, December 2014/January 2015, pp. 102, 236.

Earnest, Jarrett. "Robert Gober with Jarrett Earnest." *The Brooklyn Rail*, December 18, 2014.

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Smith, Roberta. "Religion That's in the Details: A Madonna and Drain Pipe Radiate an Earthy Spirituality." *The New York Times*, November 18, 1997.

ARTFORUM

REVIEWS

NEW YORK

Robert Gober

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

It took a pandemic for dreaming to become a common concern again. But Robert Gober never lost interest. For nearly four decades, his art has mined the movement from consciousness to the unconscious and back again, giving us a novel thought landscape: wax objects sprouting a fine layer of human hair, sinks sans faucets, and uncannily detailed sculptures of domestic items. Examples of each were included in this online survey of twenty works, made between 1976 and 2019, alongside related content. At the top of the site was the chimeric *Death Mask*, 2008, a ten-inch-high plaster amalgamation of the artist's face and that of his dog Paco, who passed away unexpectedly. With its hauntingly static blue eyes, long snout, and pale-red lips, the image underscored

Gober's ongoing examination of the preservation of memory, history, and loss through an innovative take on facades and *persona*, a word deriving fittingly from the ancient Greek for *mask*.

Also featured was *Hanging Man/Sleeping Man*, 1989. The silk screen and sometimes wall-paper installation comprises two alternating drawings, of a sleeping white man and a lynched black man, respectively. When George Floyd was killed on May 25 of this year—in another heinous example of whiteness announcing itself as society's greatest plague—I couldn't stop thinking about how the work pointed to white guilt, to the maintenance of racism instead of real action or revolution. According to the gallery's website, Gober came across the source images, which were also on view, while doing research for a 1988 interview he conducted for the *Journal of Contemporary Art* with



Robert Gober, *Hanging Man/Sleeping Man*, 1989, silk screen on paper, 85½ × 29½".

former Michigan congressman John Conyers Jr., author of the *Hate Crimes Statistics Act*. At the time, Gober had been caring for friends dying of AIDS in the wake

of the Reagan administration's deliberate inaction. It's clear the artist was processing the eternal return of American cruelty and violence. Lynching was not an "isolated event," as he noted in a text featured here: "In many ways it has become our background."

The piece is chilling: "The coolness of his palette, the clinical nature of his creations, only made it harder to recover from," as Hilton Als observed of *Hanging Man/Sleeping Man* in the catalogue for Gober's 2014–15 retrospective at New York's Museum of Modern Art. Viewed online, the work lost none of its frostiness, perhaps because it took up so much of the screen, however quietly, with the uniquely American reverence for hate—or, as Gober put it, for that "background."

Page 11 and *Page 12*, both 1978–2000, are black-and-white photographs featuring clippings from the *New York Times*: The former discusses the homophobic murder of Billy Jack Gaither in 1999, while the latter shows the same article behind Gober's open palm, which holds a short letter to the editor arguing that conservatives "have a right to speak out against homosexuality." For *Newspaper*, 1992, from a major series of twine-bound broadsheets the artist made that year, he used photolithography on archival paper to faithfully reproduce the table of contents from an issue of the *Village Voice*. At its center is a striking portrait of David Wojnarowicz, who died of AIDS the year the work was made and who, as C. Carr wrote in the accompanying obituary, "was his own best chronicler and the epidemic's visionary witness."

I began this review with a consideration of dreaming and assumed it would be the leitmotif, but then landed on thinking about connections between what might initially appear to be vastly distinct public health emergencies: Covid-19, AIDS, and police brutality. At its most successful, Gober's work serves as a blueprint for such thought, the kind via which we analyze our dreams and nightmares, examining seemingly unrelated symbols or events and then finding the connective tissue between them so that we can string them together into a cohesive picture or narrative. Work of this kind can prompt us to build a new house or, in the best-case scenario, a new democracy out of our current shambolic mess. To do that, we'll need more visionary artist witnesses.

— *Lauren O'Neill-Butler*

The New York Times

NEWS | CRITICISM

Arts

TUESDAY, JUNE 2, 2020 CI

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DEBORAH SOLOMON | CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

A Master's Domestic Surrealism

Robert Gober's art of the commonplace is a good fit now.

THESE DAYS, AS I STAND at the kitchen sink, washing my hands and wondering why 20 seconds never seemed so long before, I find myself thinking of Robert Gober. So much of our current life-in-quarantine resembles the anxious homebody world he has imagined in his art. He first became known in the mid-1980s for pristine sculptures of sinks, usually with two holes in the place where the faucet should go. You might say he punctured the neutral surfaces of Minimalism, investing them with intimations of the human body, and bringing the unlikely themes of hygiene and handwashing to the forefront of contemporary art.

Mr. Gober's art overlaps with our new, wash-around-the-clock culture in other ways as well. At a time when the pandemic has created shortages of staples like paper towels, common objects can seem to have a sudden



ROBERT GOBER, VIA MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

Robert Gober's "Cat Litter" (1990), made of plaster and vinyl acrylic.

luster, reminding us of Mr. Gober's habit of fetishizing household goods and giving them a radiant presence by virtue of his painstaking craftsmanship.

Some of his sculptures consist of exacting replications of supermarket items — a 25-pound bag of cat litter; or a Table Talk apple pie whose cardboard

A Master's Domestic Surrealism Resonates

box is festooned with a fluorescent sticker advertising a price of 69 cents. Initially, Mr. Gober's food sculptures seemed to allude to a class of Americans who probably didn't eat kale or shop at Whole Foods, although now, I suspect, amid our pandemic deprivations, few among us would be foolish enough to decline a slice of Table Talk pie.

On the other hand, the family home, as defined by the artist, is also a place where things go seriously awry. He is best known for his sculptures of a lopped-off adult male leg jutting out from a wall, dismembered but still dressed for work. You can read it as a pop symbol of Oedipal struggle (i.e. the leg could belong to an unlucky father who was bumped off, like the Wicked Witch, when a house tumbled out of the sky and severed his leg). Or you can see it instead as an emblem of the American plague that descended on this country in the 1980s, when the AIDS epidemic was raging, and the normally quotidian rituals of domestic life were shadowed by catastrophe and death.

As it so happens, the Matthew Marks Gallery is now hosting its first online exhibition, "Robert Gober: Sculpture, Photographs, and Works on Paper 1976 -2019" (through June 10), a selection of 20 works spanning the artist's fertile career. Many of us have mixed feelings about online exhibitions, a hybrid form that poaches on the tradition of gallery-going while emptying it of



ALL IMAGES, ROBERT GOBER, VIA MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

Clockwise, from top left: In "Death Mask" (2008), Robert Gober fused his own features with the snout of his dog; "Short Haired Cheese" (1992-93), made of beeswax and human hair; "Untitled" (2012), with glazed porcelain, embedded pigments, brass, paper and an artist's frame.

sensual pleasure. On the other hand, it is all that we have at the moment. In its defense, if the desire to learn about art and the desire to feel represent opposite ends of the art-viewing spectrum, online exhibitions at least deliver the learning quotient of the experience.

The show at Matthew Marks opens dramatically, with "Death Mask" (2008), a white plaster oval that fills the screen, putting you face to face with what looks like an affable polar bear. It has piercing blue eyes, which are outlined in pencil, and a loosely painted red mouth. A link produces background information: Mr. Gober created the work after he lost his hound dog, Paco. "Death Mask" is a combined double likeness, melding the artist's features with the snout of his pooch. A documentary photograph shows the artist lying on a table on his back, a sage-green towel draped over him, an assistant daubing what appears to be wet plaster on his face.

Also provided are the measurements of the work. It turns out to be only 10 inches tall. The truth is that sculpture, compared to other mediums, has the most to lose from digital reproduction. As you click around a screen, the abrupt changes in scale that can make an

image too big or too small, too near or too far, tend to erase the psychological intimacy of Mr. Gober's objects and cause them to look like props for a horror movie. This is especially the case with "Short Haired Cheese" (1992-3), a generous wedge of Swiss sprouting thin, black strands of human hair. Ditto for "Untitled" (1992), a beeswax sculpture of a girl's right shoe, with hair growing inside. It crosses the Surrealist objet of the '30s with the identity politics of the '90s, as if to say that mutants-r-us.

Drawings and photographs, by virtue of their two-dimensionality, are less vulnerable to digital distortion. The earliest work here, an untitled black-and-white photograph from 1976, is a stirring still life. A hippie-style bedspread, embroidered and un-ironed, appears in close-up, with a book of photographs by Diane Arbus resting on top, and a small plate holding the remains of a slice of watermelon. The photograph has a blunt, powerful composition, and seems to contain everything a young artist could need to dream: a bed, a snack, the perfect book.

Wondering how Mr. Gober is faring in the midst of the pandemic, I called him the other day. Now 65 years old, he is currently in lockdown out in Peconic, N.Y., on the North Fork of Long Island, in a house and garage-turned-studio where he has lived and worked for decades.

I was eager to ask him whether he saw parallels between the current pandemic and the era of AIDS, for which there is still no vaccine. Mr. Gober first exhibited his sink sculptures at the Paula Cooper Gallery in 1985, about six months after the Food and Drug Administration approved a test for H.I.V., ending the period when asymptomatic people had no idea whether they were infected. Are his sink sculptures about the dream of cleanliness? “The impossibility of cleanliness,” he replied.

“There is the reality that I worked and lived through another epidemic in New York,” he said, “and there might be overtones of that now. But nobody was banging on pots and pans at 7 o’clock during the AIDS crisis.” Indeed, neither patients nor their caretakers were given the cheering support that has been extended to the medical community during the current epidemic. AIDS has since claimed the lives of more than 700,000 Americans. “AIDS was always fatal,” Mr. Gober said, referring to the earlier years, before the advent of effective drugs, whereas many victims of Covid-19 are likely to recover. “The differences are more numerous than the similarities,” he said.

What is he working on these days?

“I am not really working,” he said. “I am not making art. My studio is shut, but I have been keeping my assistants employed. There are four of them, and they are working from home and sending me pictures. I have really been out in the garden. I have woods. I have a pond. I have a flower garden. I don’t have vegetables, but I have a varied terrain piece of property and I have planted trees and shrubs. I usually see spring episodically. On weekends, or maybe I take a week. And this time I got to see it incrementally, like every day. It was very rewarding.”

Does he often have periods like this, when he is not working?

“Sometimes I will go a number of months and not make anything. I am assuming, based on many years of making things, by blind faith, that my brain is working on things, but I am not physically making things and I really don’t have ideas yet.”

It was a relief, in a way, to hear from someone free of the compulsion to turn out work for the sake of keeping busy. These days we all need additional time to keep up with the torrent of news. And to clean.

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Frieze

Fan Letter /

Eroticism, Anger and Hope in the Work of Robert Gober

BY LAURA MCLEAN-FERRIS

11 JAN 2019

'To me, it offers a particular emotional experience – something like joyful grief'



Robert Gober, *Untitled*, 1995-97, installation view at Schaulager, Basel. Courtesy: the artist and Schaulager, Basel; photograph: Tom Bisig

There's a special hole in my heart for Robert Gober's work. That is to say, a special kind of enthusiasm. *Untitled* (1995-97) is a complex, major installation that was first exhibited at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles in 1997, and is now permanently installed at the Schaulager in Basel. To me, it offers a particular emotional experience – something like joyful grief – that I've wanted to return to many times since I first saw the work in 2007.

McLean-Ferris, Laura. "Eroticism, Anger and Hope in the Work of Robert Gober." *Frieze*, January 11, 2019.

A concrete cast of a life-sized Virgin Mary, her arms benevolently outstretched, presides at the centre of a large grey room, with a large culvert pipe thrust violently through her middle. To her sides are two open leather suitcases while, behind her, water rushes down a wooden staircase from a doorway above, flooding a pool underneath the exhibition space. Every object in the space stands on a drain cover, through which one can glimpse the subterranean rock pool beneath, scattered with wishful coins. Also seen in the space below are the bare legs of a man standing in the water, who appears to be holding a baby, its tiny legs and feet dangling. Slide down the drain, or the sinkhole, and one finds some brightness, like love or hope, amongst the crabs, rocks and seaweed.

Read through the concerns of Gober – a gay, former-Catholic artist, living through the AIDS crisis in America – the work expresses very particular forms of eroticism, anger, grief and hope. The holes in my body and soul are different. Yet, the presence of a watery, hopeful space that twinkles and splashes always offers the chance for repair. That's why the work makes me cry. These are transitional objects, to use D.W. Winnicott's term, creating a twilight space between personal psyche and shared reality. A body – and soul – can be experienced in parts, and then recovered as whole. Untitled drove its own little culvert pipe through me, so that I could be a conduit too.

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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

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



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

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" (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

Tan, Ken. "The Bewildering Lexicon of Robert Gober." *Hyperallergic*, April 17, 2018.

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ART GALLERIES—CHELSEA

Robert Gober



Robert Gober, Eggs on Diaper. Cotton diaper with acrylic paint, epoxy putty, fabric, hand-printed silkscreen on paper. 14 x 12 x 2 3/8 inches. 36 x 31 x 6 cm.

©Robert Gober, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

In the American sculptor's first New York solo show since his 2014 MOMA retrospective, an abundance of small works mine his familiar, if mysterious, themes. Barred windows and patches of forest (images that recall past installations) are nestled inside bare chests in a series of pencil drawings. Twenty wall-mounted assemblages are nursery-ready nods to Joseph Cornell, with green apples and blue robin's eggs suspended against cloth diapers and floral-patterned wallpaper. Gober's idiosyncratic lexicon, drawn, in part, from childhood memories, lends his work an eerie lyricism, whatever the medium or scale. The pathos of a little sunken cellar door near the start of the show—a foam-core-and-balsa-wood maquette for a sculpture first exhibited at the 2001 Venice Biennale—gives way to the near-mythic aura of its full-sized counterpart, which provides the show with its finale.

"Robert Gober." *The New Yorker*, March 16, 2018.

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Forbes

616 views | Feb 26, 2018, 02:08pm

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

Clayton Press Contributor
Arts & Entertainment

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.

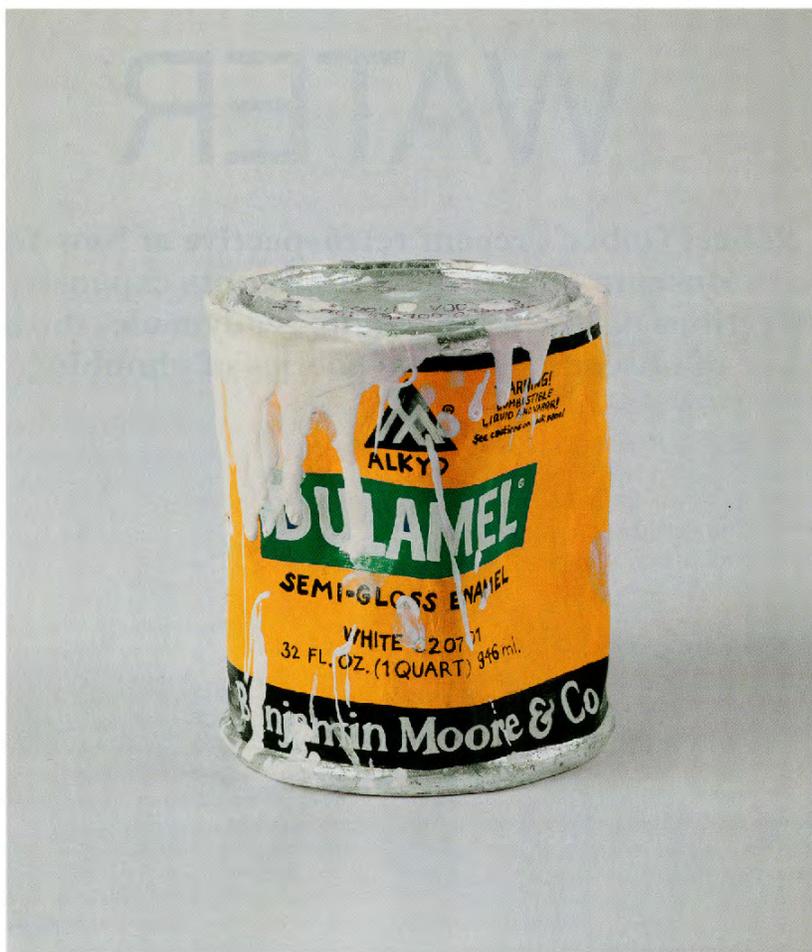
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Art in America

MARCH 2015

**Robert Gober / Pussy Riot / Reyner Banham / Avant-Garde Film
Beatriz Milhazes / Simon Denny Portfolio / Jaanus Samma**



ROBERT GOBER:
Untitled, 2005-06, aluminum-leaf,
oil and enamel paint on cast lead
crystal, 4¾ inches high. Courtesy
Matthew Marks Gallery, New
York. Photo Bill Orcutt.

WHOSE NAME WAS WRIT IN WATER

Partial view of an untitled installation by Robert Gober, 2003-05, plaster, urethane, fiberglass and mixed mediums, dimensions variable. Courtesy Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo Thomas Griesel.

Robert Gober's recent retrospective at New York's Museum of Modern Art prompts expansive reflections on the legacy of the readymade, the nature of obscenity and the poetics of plumbing.

by Ariana Reines

THE WATER OF LIFE

The city of Rome's first aqueduct, the Aqua Appia, was built in 312 BCE; by the 4th century CE, the capital depended on a network of 11 of them. The purest waters hydrated the villas and gardens of Rome's wealthy as well as the first- and second-story apartments of its middle class, while the city's poor, dwelling without plumbing on floors three and higher, could count on the sometimes less wholesome, though potable, waters flowing into Rome's public gardens, public baths and public fountains, from which anyone could draw gratis. In the capital, as throughout the empire, aqueducts did their work mostly unseen, buried underground, though occasionally they did show themselves, stretching elegant and bridgeline across a gulf where need be, as in the case of the Pont du Gard in the south of what used to be Gaul.

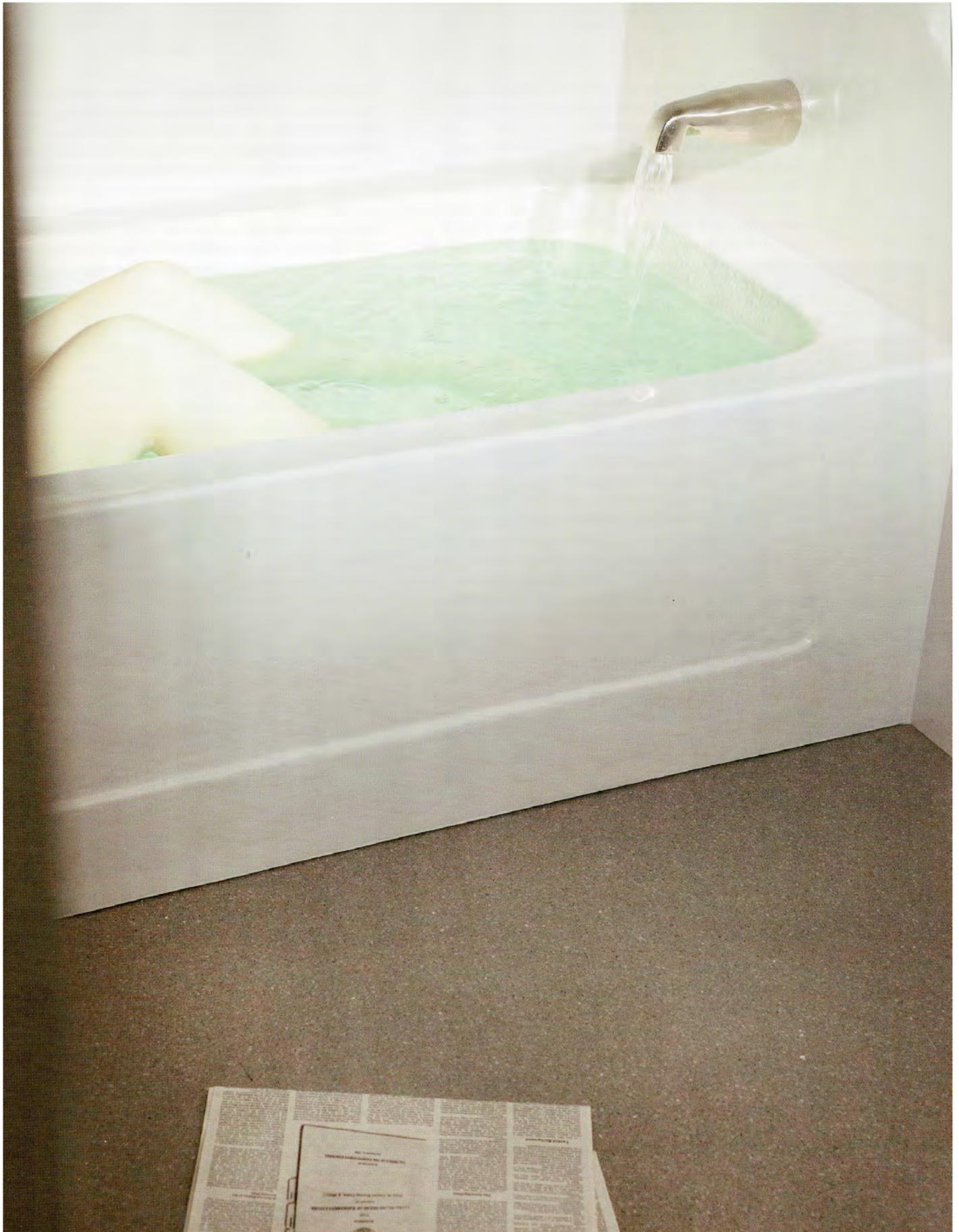
Rome's central sewer, the Cloaca Maxima, predates its first aqueduct by more than 300 years. It had begun in Etruscan days as a big open cesspool, graciously receiving, in addition to the usual refuse, corpses the poor could not afford to bury and any other bodies that required disposal without ceremony. Roman authori-

ties would eventually cover their city's central waste artery with a roof and provide street drainage to handle what the lower classes threw out their windows. Century after increasingly sophisticated century, an ever-evolving hydraulics network channeled Rome's effluent, patrician and plebian, into the Cloaca Maxima, and from there into the famously fetid—and foul to this day—Tiber river.

The Greek historian Dionysius of Halicarnassus, attempting to bring his countrymen around to Rome's worthiness, famously proclaimed that the Empire's greatness “manifests itself above all in three things: the aqueducts, the paved roads and the construction of the drains.” Imagine a properly Roman art then—a kind of Republican Realism celebrating public infrastructure, waste disposal, and the labor that made and maintained these systems—instead of all those copies of Greek statuary.

An aqueduct moves water, a paved road moves goods and people and animals, a drain handles precipitation and waste. Meaning, too, flows and can likewise be conducted. I spent the summer of 2001 cocktail-waitressing in Greece, where you'd see the word “metaphor” on trucks: in Modern Greek, μεταφορά (metafora) just means transportation. Roman art and jurisprudence might have been imitations of Hellenic genius, but for

ARIANA REINES is a poet based in New York. See Contributors page.



Reines, Ariana. "Whose Name Was Writ in Water." *Art in America*, March 2015, pp. 98–107.

Rome's empire as for ours the real power was in the structure of the network itself: what flows or doesn't flow through the network is fungible and secondary.

The artist Robert Gober (b. 1954) has invested heavily in the shallow and deep metaphysics of plumbing. He knows that mass media, like public waterworks, are the channels and ciphers of human connection, however filthy and corrupted. Just as feminism declared the personal political, Gober arrives at his peculiarly language-inhibiting brand of gut-level candor by making the political personal. He's no Walt Whitman telling us to assume (take on) what he shall assume; rather, he finds ways to make solid what he—what we—are already carrying, what we've all been carrying all along, and what is literally piped into our dwellings, our brains and our hearts every day.

"The Heart Is Not a Metaphor," Gober's recent retrospective at New York's Museum of Modern Art, flowed through a visual vocabulary in which drains and sewage pipes, plumbing and the absence of plumbing, figured prominently. Lovingly curated by MoMA's Ann Temkin in close collaboration with Gober, the retrospective had the feel of a single installation. Structured circularly, the show presented early on Gober's artistic coming-of-age: an iconic series of maniacally hand-crafted, faux-readymade sinks (1983-87), then passed by way of his increasingly complex assemblages and full-room installations through the 1990s, and culminated with his most sincere and ambitious work to date: an untitled chapel-like installation memorializing 9/11. The exhibition then ended humbly where Gober first started out: two of his dollhouses from the late 1970s, which, according to the catalogue, he'd built thinking he might be able to sell to support his artistic career.

Over time, Gober has made increasingly broad gestures as a visual storyteller. The bravura which hid in the materiality and construction of his earlier objects has gradually grown into more extroverted, bigger, more unequivocating forms. And yet he is everywhere at pains to let us know that no matter how "big" he or his work might get, his heart retains a Christian love of the humble and the meek. Even the exhibition catalogue, considerably smaller than the usual coffee-table book, turns its back on the tasteful pomposity such a milestone has earned the artist. In the slightly blurry photograph on the cover, we see Gober at work among flowers and weeds and evergreens, with a waxwork leg in each hand, dog trotting at his heels, his green shorts and breeze-haste-ruffled plaid shirt revealing enough husky musculature to make him look eminently cruise-worthy. Without having gone so far as to moon us or, to borrow the Christian Right's parlance, "rub it in our faces," Gober has kept his gay butt—and also his artist's hand—in the picture, while also letting us know that, though this is a retrospective, he's not looking back.

GOBER'S OBJECTS

The mimetic faculty was at the root of the ancients' sense of what art was, and the literalism of some of Robert Gober's handmade objects gets at the fundamental perversity of mimesis in an industrial age. Gober's body of work includes, among other

things, framed archival prints, made entirely by hand by the artist and his assistants, of a thumb-size newspaper clipping; a scrawled flier; an almost translucent cash register receipt. There are stacks of newspapers in museum-quality facsimile tied up with string as if by a hoarder. There are painted lead-crystal reproductions of paint cans and liquor bottles, the latter identical to the industrially perfect real thing while the former purposefully shows imperfections wrought by the artist's hand. Gober's sculptures of bags of cat litter, which look exactly like bags of cat litter, seem so insanely, perversely idiotic to me that they verge on sublime. And his dumbest object of all, a meticulously handmade sheet of plywood from 1987, is so stupefying in its perfection that to say anything about it would only make fools of us all.

One step beyond these reproductions come familiar things that Gober has distorted, truncated or enlarged: counterfeit sewage pipes in the shape of a cross upon which a playpen is impaled, a man-size stick of butter made of wax laid in a crib and surrounded by apples you can't eat, a candle-size wax candle sprouting human hair, a man-size sculpture of a cigar that is actually a giant cigar made of preserved tobacco leaves, a wall-mounted plaster ear the size of your head, full-scale waxworks of male legs or lower bodies jutting out supine from walls like male invocations of the Wicked Witch of the West.

The surfeit of attention lavished on the creation of often banal objects left me feeling like a witness to Sisyphus, suggesting that hell isn't the agony of unending struggle or five-alarm torment, but rather insipid triviality without end. Gober's objects, like conceptual poet Kenneth Goldsmith's "uncreative writing," has at least a little in common with William Blake's nightmares, in which the human imagination is enslaved to machines. In Gober's work, the very flower of human ingenuity and tender loving care is poured into magnificent forgeries of cat litter bags and other shit-related—but always just shy of overtly scatological—objects.

Many of the items in Gober's world seem to conjure or to reconstitute a father, as if from a child's view, or a dog's. A small creature glimpses his father, or his master, as if by the edges: the newspaper he reads, the pipe he smokes, his trouser leg pulled up just so to reveal a decorous strip of hairy flesh. All these, in Gober's world, are the gay fetish doubles of heterosexual pinup-culture's obsession with the edges of mommy: women's stockings, high-heel-shod lower legs. Then there's the stick of butter Gober replicated, which I read as a cipher for father's (not necessarily homosexual) virile anality, i.e., the vicious, decrepit Marlon Brando hissing "get the butter" to Maria Schneider in *Last Tango In Paris* (1972).

DRY RUNS

Water may be the only true readymade in Gober's oeuvre, aside from ourselves, or the conditioned responses within us. Though water didn't actually make an appearance in his work until the 1990s, the absence of liquid was conspicuous in Gober's early series of sink sculptures. When I encountered these iconic works, hanging waist-high on the walls of MoMA's white gallery, I hated them: *sly and dry*, I texted one friend. *Vaginal dryness*, I wrote to another. These dumb-looking cartoony sinks, bland and clean,

Opposite, *The Ascending Sink*, 1985, plaster, wood, steel, wire lath and semi-gloss enamel paint, two parts, 30 by 33 by 27 inches each; installed in Gober's studio on Mulberry Street, New York. Collection Thea Westreich Wagner and Ethan Wagner, New York. Photo John Kramer.

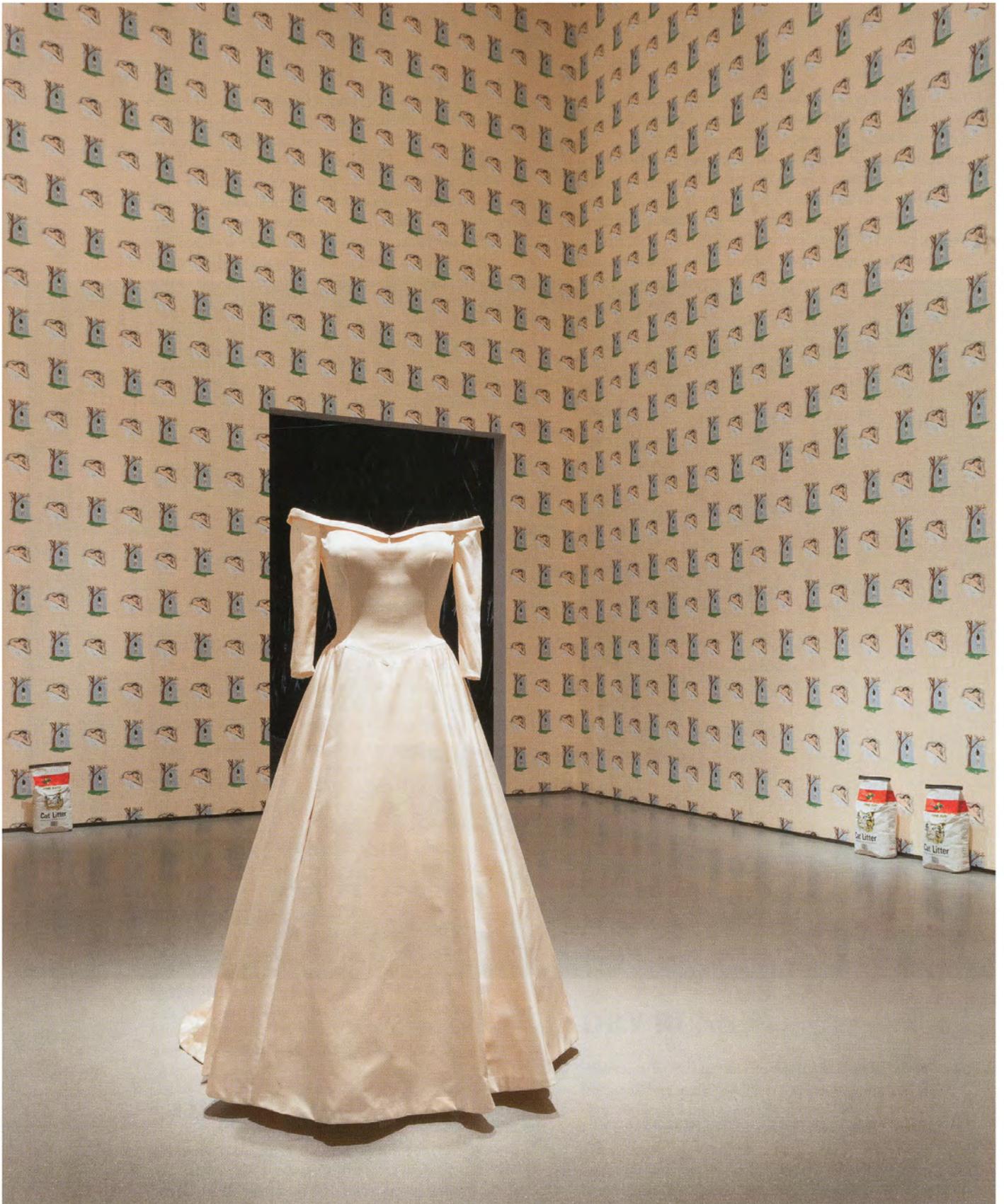
Following spread, two views of Gober's exhibition "The Heart Is Not a Metaphor," 2014-15, at the Museum of Modern Art. Photos Thomas Griesel.



ROBERT GOBER

ART IN AMERICA 101

Reines, Ariana. "Whose Name Was Writ in Water." *Art in America*, March 2015, pp. 98–107.





ROBERT GOBER

ART IN AMERICA 103

Reines, Ariana. "Whose Name Was Writ in Water." *Art in America*, March 2015, pp. 98–107.

blah archaic torsos of Apollo, looked like cleaner (and hardware-free) versions of the sinks in all the public schools I went to and in every loft I ever lived and puked in, not to mention made art in.

They were also obvious nods to Duchamp, with Gober swapping a sink for a urinal. This struck me as a teacher's pet move, and on top of that, the wall text implied that I had better take these sinks as evocative of "the impossibility of cleansing oneself" during the AIDS crisis. The interpretation made sense, but *felt* both facile and heavy-handed. The sinks reminded me of the lines of student poetry on which I often had to comment, "Although I understand what you mean here the line fails to move me" because of one lack of magic or another. How could Gober's contemporaries even look at them? How could I?

The fact that they were supposed to express some feeling about the AIDS crisis only made me want to hate them more. Not only were they clumsy metaphors, they were also cloaking their intended metaphorical significance in the drag of passionless readymades. No, wait—they weren't even readymades! They just *looked* like readymades! And didn't the title of this entire retrospective invoke the heart? Where was the heart here?

Gober's most distinguished critics have praised his work for precisely the reasons I found it irritating. Art historian David Joselit, writing in these pages, situates even Gober's later assemblages—including his statue of the Virgin Mary impaled with a sewer pipe from an untitled 1997 installation (not included in the MoMA show)—as "sly" invocations of Duchamp. According to Joselit, the French artist, who exemplifies "avant-garde indifference to iconography counterbalances [Gober's] own intense sentimentality." Joselit continues:

Whereas Duchamp depended upon the power of institutions to confer the status of art on ordinary things, Gober takes advantage of the now canonical status of the readymade to accomplish his own ends.¹

In this account, Gober makes explicit reference to Duchamp in order to smuggle real feeling into the heady discursive airs of galleries and criticism. It's as though the Duchampian legacy has become frozen, not so much in Gober's hands, but in those of critics.

But the more I've thought about Gober's sinks—especially in light of what their *madness* has caused me to feel—the more their indifference, if not antagonism to the critical use-value of Duchamp, emerges. You can't retroactively manufacture a visceral feeling. And those sinks *do* have visceral power: they're kind of funny, and it's through examining what's funny about them that one discovers their power as artworks—both visceral *and* conceptual.

Every real-life version of these sinks I'd ever seen had been yellowed with age and streaked with years of paint in all kinds of colors, plus other more mysterious encrustations: petrified cakes of soap, Kennedy-era rubber cement barnacles, etc. If Gober's sinks were meant to evoke the impossibility of ever getting clean, why not show honestly dirty readymades? What was gained by whitewashing them? These sinks felt a bit like Ikea renderings of the "New York Loft" originals.

But maybe the extreme cleanliness of Gober's false sinks evokes a hopeless longing, in the AIDS generation, for a kind of cleanliness or purity bordering on the otherworldly—even

the Catholic. In the end, this feeling might not be dissimilar to the "made-up" hopelessness of magazine and sitcom domestic femininity. (Those faucet holes also suggested the telltale lesions of Kaposi's sarcoma, which some men tried to cover with women's foundation.) The more I looked at the sinks, the more tenderness I saw in the act of reconstituting by hand what now seemed settled in my mind's eye as a mechanically reproduced cognate of the male chest, hard and smooth save for blank orifices where nipples should be. Might Gober's craft have begun as a knowingly quixotic, rigorously pathetic—and slow-moving—attempt to short-circuit wholesale American masculinity by infusing it, via meticulous and patient handiwork, with aura? The sinks' janitorial butch would work beautifully if they were used as fonts for holy water in a gay church, where queers might go not to cleanse themselves of plague or shame, but to sing a rather tough, but generous, American hymn.

THE AMERICAN OBSCENE

Gober's sincerity can be arresting, a quality that I found especially apparent in his treatment of wallpaper. "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman is a classic feminist short story whose heroine, at great risk, escapes the suffocation of Victorian domesticity. Gober's wallpapers evoke airless, no-exit interiors even as they overturn their laws of good taste. The wallpaper imitates the *style* of mass-production, though its iconography—at least until recently—would seem to forbid wide distribution. In a burlesque of industrial design, we find a pattern of alternating male and female genitals (*Male and Female Genital Wallpaper*, 1989), and another that alternates a lynched black man and a sleeping white man (*Hanging Man/Sleeping Man*, 1989).

The shock-value of this work might need to be historicized for my generation, since Internet culture's marriage with industrial design means we're accustomed to the pleasure of fusing the cute with the (genuinely, supposedly or formerly) transgressive. Our bedspreads and socks and curtains have cannabis leaves, skulls and expletives on them. You can buy pasta shaped like cocks and balls; a best-selling children's book has the word "fuck" in the title. And, of course, a torrent of obscenity is always available with the click of a mouse.

Gober's lynching-dreaming wallpaper was presented at MoMA as part of an installation that includes a handcrafted bag of donuts that looks like a real bag of dry, unappetizing donuts, imitation bags of kitty litter and a wedding dress sculpture tailored to fit the artist. The setup hardly proved controversial when Gober showed it at Paula Cooper Gallery in New York in 1989, at least according to Hilton Als, who described the event in a deeply felt essay for the MoMA catalogue. But when exhibited in 1990 at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C., where the staff and patrons were white, and the security was black, the security guards demanded an explanation, both from Gober and from the museum's curatorial staff.

The anthropologist Michael Taussig, and Goethe before him, has commented on polite society's preference for muted interiors—pale walls against which a bright painting or throw pillow might shine, but never the other way around. Gober's wallpapers simply

Untitled, 2008, cast gypsum polymer, 14½ by 10¾ by 6 inches. Collection the artist. Courtesy Matthew Marks. Photo Fredrik Nilsen.



Reines, Ariana. "Whose Name Was Writ in Water." *Art in America*, March 2015, pp. 98–107.

reverse the old laws of good taste. One way they do this is by making something absurdly grand out of kitsch, such as in the pattern featuring the outlines of various American states in a kitchenish pastel palette. Good taste is also violated through the ad nauseam repetition of “obscene” genitals, which effectively diminishes their effect on the Christian Right’s culture warriors, who, especially in the ’90s, were so vociferously terrified by sex.

On the other hand, Gober’s repeating patterns can *magnify* horror, as in the lynching-dreaming wallpaper, which unmistakably links the American slavery nightmare to its obverse, the American dream. And yet this clarity, repeating and repeating, admits rich ambiguities. Is the image of the lynched black man not also the wet dream of the white man? And to what extent are all Americans, whatever their color, forced to sleep the sleep and aspire to the dreams and dream the nightmares of the worst oppressors, of the worst of what our culture has been and remains? Is the white man figure even asleep at all? Or is he insomniac for reasons too vast and ineluctable for one artwork to contain?

FLOW MY TEARS

Water came gushing from sinks that were part of Gober’s 1992–93 installation at New York’s Dia Art Foundation, introducing an element of badness—of deliberate impurity, excess—to his careful system of handmade readymades. That piece, titled *site-specific installation*, was re-created at MoMA. It occupied an entire room, temporarily constructed in the center of the museum’s atrium. Sinks lined the walls, which were decorated with printed wallpaper depicting a Long Island forest. Apertures cut into the walls were covered with prison bars, behind which one could perceive the glow of false daylight. In this context, where everything seemed artificial, the water stood apart. So splendid to me was the sight and sound, at last, of something “real,” and such a visceral relief after so many virtuosic subterfuges, that it was weeks after the exhibition closed before I could bring myself even to consider the extreme artificiality and excess of these sinks’ hidden plumbing.

To borrow a crucial question from Als’s catalogue essay: “Can artists make water?”² For reasons idiomatic and scientific, the answer to Als’s question is, of course, “yes,” for “to make water” is an antiquated euphemism for the verb “to pee,” and it is also technically possible to fabricate water by combining two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom. But the water in Gober’s world, at least as far as I know, was not laboratory-synthesized or elaborately made. It was just water. A piece of water, as Gertrude Stein might put it, is also “water is water is water”: it can accommodate any metaphor while also just being itself.

Water as feeling, water as life, water as tears, or real water as ultimate emotional *realness* (“realness” being a vogueing term for mimetic perfection): unabashed, but complicated, sincerity gushed from the retrospective’s chapel-like climax, Gober’s untitled installation (2003–05) memorializing September 11, 2001. On the back wall of the room hung a crucifix, water spewing from the nipples of a decapitated Christ. The sound of rushing water was loud, sensual, and real: its simplicity transcended the gothic fount from which it spewed, as if to say: there’s the mawkishness of the emotion any single artist can express, and then there’s

the authority—the gigantic realness—of emotion itself. Bronze slabs, crafted to resemble chunks of Styrofoam, are arranged in a pew-like formation. On top of each is an offering of sorts: diapers, fruit, black strips that resemble rubber. Behind the crucifix were two “bathrooms”: through each ajar door one could glimpse a pair of waxen legs in a bathtub, faucet on full tilt but never overflowing, and scattered pages of the *New York Times* on the floor. Once again the hypnotizing, even ejaculatory delight of real rushing water stilled my capacity to consider the hidden feats of engineering and artifice *behind* it, which so expertly, and seemingly effortlessly, kept MoMA’s second floor from flooding.

The installation also includes archival prints of pages of the September 12, 2001, edition of the *New York Times* lining two walls, and on each page is a drawing of two headless torsos in a loving embrace, the image rendered lightly enough for the text to be legible. News offers Gober a direct way of grounding personal, poetic explorations in the flow of public history. Where the *Times* had earlier been stacked against the walls of Gober’s installations—for example, in piles near the running sinks of *site-specific installation*, its sheets are here the miserable iconostasis of a city that barely got to take a breath between the ravages of AIDS and the unending war on terror, both catastrophes on which the *Times* failed to report accurately and vigorously until far too late in the game.

Art has waged a long war against the news. Baudelaire called the newspaper “a tissue of horrors;” Virginia Woolf began crafting an ethics around photojournalistic accounts of human suffering; and Joyce cast the hero of *Ulysses*, Leopold Bloom, as a journalist precisely to upend, in his single-day epic, the obscenity to which daily papers inure us. Gober treats newspaper with almost tender disgust: for him, the newspaper, no matter how overdetermined a matrix of entrenched power and social conditioning it may be, also represents the flow of what connects us. In this respect it’s like his sewer pipe, but also like the Roman aqueducts. Although it kind of kills our capacity to think and feel, the news is still the central artery connecting our bodies to the city, the rest of the nation, the world.

But newspaper’s no match for the water rushing out of Jesus’s breasts or the seemingly overflowing bathtubs. You find yourself visualizing that paper as so much pulp. Since at least the 12th century, Jesus has been written about in feminized, even mammary terms, his blood and tears cognate to a mother’s milk. That Gober has also excised Jesus’s head reminds me that the only face in this exhibition belonged to Gober’s dead dog. A decapitated idol protects us from abstracting the heart’s work. It’s worth noting that Gober’s most unabashedly lyrical work to date, this chapel, is also the one most explicitly engaged in public discourse. And though the concealed waterworks that make it possible for Jesus to “sob” torrentially without flooding the museum are no doubt a subterfuge tantamount to “making water,” their virtuosity magically restores a possibility of sincerity to what we feel about 9/11, making a space for us to grieve also over the cynical obscenity, lubricated by gallons of crocodile tears, of the unending war and destruction it has been used to justify. If we’re ever to get clean of this nightmare, Gober seems to suggest, we’re going to need an endless supply of the strongest solvent there is: public sorrow. ○

1. David Joselit, “Poetics of the Drain,” *Art in America*, Dec. 1997, p. 69.

2. Hilton Als, “I Don’t Remember,” in *Robert Gober: The Heart Is Not a Metaphor*, New York, Museum of Modern Art, 2014, p. 82.

View of the exhibition “The Heart Is Not a Metaphor,” 2014–15, showing *Chair with Pipe*, 1994–95. Courtesy Museum of Modern Art. Photo Thomas Griesel.



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TEXTE ZUR KUNST



Robert Gober, "Untitled," 1991–93

NOT ONLY THE HEART IS NOT A METAPHOR

On Robert Gober at the Museum of Modern Art, New York

This past year, New York's Museum of Modern Art staged the first major survey of Robert Gober's career. While in recent years, the institution has prominently featured the American artist's peers, perhaps none more than he placed such pressure on the aesthetic tenets that MoMA once set out to define.

Art historian Rachel Haidu observes that the binary of abstraction and figuration, in Gober's hands, "becomes instead a story about a city, its bathhouses, and by extension, its dreams of community." As Haidu goes on to argue, the social sphere that gives shape to Gober's art, in turn, powerfully upends the utopia and purgative impulses of the modernist project itself.

One day last fall I walked into the Museum of Modern Art and found myself instead in a museum of postmodern art. Christopher Williams and Robert Gober shared the headlines, and Sturtevant's tiny retrospective was about to open. Although the most crowded exhibit was by far the Matisse cutouts, it felt miles away from – almost forgotten within – these luxuriously open spaces. For open they felt, though Sturtevant's dark cave would soon provide an aptly eremitic alternative to the triumphantly lofty rooms assigned to Gober. In fact, MoMA's investment in postmodernist heroes of many stripes has lately become so dominant – think of recent retrospectives of Alighiero e Boetti, Isa Genzken, and Sigmar Polke, to say nothing of the massive Mike Kelley bonanza at MoMA PS1 – that it begs a reconsideration of how museum retrospectives might historicize those figures whose work potentially complicates the categories of modernism and postmodernism most profoundly. Williams and Sturtevant each redefine postmodernist artistic practice by unearthing each aspect of art that modernism buried – visual interest, artistic fabri-

cation, scene-setting and semiotic meaning – and using one after another to whack the others. Gober wraps each in fur, digs it a hole, and leaves us a marker at the site of its grave.

Both most fascinating and most problematic in the exhibit are the ways in which that grave oscillates between a singular and a collective site. If the singular artist is naturally at the core of any retrospective, then the notion of collectivity augured by "Robert Gober: The Heart Is Not a Metaphor" is not one that includes other principals such as Forrest Bess or Charles Burchfield (both absent from this exhibit but well known both to Gober's fans and now, thanks to him, an even wider audience). Rather, it's that notion of collectivity that points us toward looser, painfully untimely notions of community.

The show opens brilliantly, with a room of Gober's sinks, which, according to curator Ann Temkin and her collaborator Paulina Pobocha, inaugurate his art-historical contribution. These sinks are not only different from one another – some higher, some deeper, their semigloss enamel of slightly differing textures and whites – but they are, of course, different from actual sinks. Though references to Minimalism abound within the retrospective's wall texts, it's with respect to abstract painting that these reliefs work most interestingly. Not only because of the microscopic filaments in the sinks' enamel surfaces that, up close, evoke the cracks of aging whitish oil paint (of, say, the vintage of a Mondrian or a Malevich). Rather, because of the ways that the sinks, as shapes that enable their viewers to read volumes as planes, teasingly return us to the primitive mode of searching for figures amid abstract forms. If this move counteracts Ellsworth Kelly's work on shape, planarity, and color, it does

so by throwing us off the scent. Rather than keep the poles of figuration and abstraction suspended, Gober plunges the binary into the fulsomeness of figuration, and lets it languish there. And "there," of course, is exactly where modernist criticism barred us from going, many decades ago.

What we used to look for when we looked at something half-abstract/half-figural was a decision, an end to the incertitude; one thing that postmodernism supposedly relaxed was that drive toward certitude. But as anyone can see, these are sinks that substitute for their operational function other forms: faces (particularly of the graphic, pre-emoticon variety) or gravestones (an allusion made acute by two errant versions embedded in lengthening grass on a terrace adjacent to the exhibit's third room). And then Gober extends the problem by making the sinks look unearthly, quasi-holy. Wall texts that feature unfortunate quotes from Gober himself (about the difficulty of "cleansing oneself" in the age of AIDS) revive a related, moralistic reading, drawing on those discourses about AIDS that the very group through which Gober was able to find political alignment – ACT UP – refuted with utter effectiveness. And so, Gober's sinks enter that push-and-pull between abstraction and figuration, and as one further enters MoMA's hallowed rooms, this move can seem paradoxically site-specific, both to New York City and, perhaps, to MoMA. The mutual imbrication of abstraction and figuration that this institution so deftly organizes becomes instead a story about a city, its bathhouses, and by extension, its dreams of community.

To the extent that Gober does attack this problem, it is by directly implicating the frameworks of sex, politics, and religion. These may be the frameworks that modernism alternately

sublated and explored, but they are also the undoing of modernism's utopia, and its own purgative impulses. If there is one room in which Gober's urge to purify finds fulfillment, it is in that sacral temple located at the midpoint of the retrospective. In that room devoted to devotion, his now-famous drawings of embracing torsos, which featured on the pages of the September 12, 2001, edition of the *New York Times* line the walls of a miniaturized church whose plinths and pews are decorated with diaper boxes and fake fruit, whose altar features Christ on a cross spewing water from his nipples in the jaunty manner of a "Manneken Pis," and whose two transepts feature bathtubs hidden behind barely ajar doors. In those brightly lit bathrooms, into which visitors peeked, then turned away from with polite rapidity, we see legs gently bent, and a copy of (Gober's version of) the *Starr Report* as printed in the *New York Times*. Here, indeed, sex, politics, and religion return not only to comment on the individual (metonymically signified by a priest's collar on a plinth just past its doorway) but also on the larger sense of "community" for which the city, particularly in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, once held out hope.

Throughout "The Heart Is Not a Metaphor," these frameworks return repeatedly, not as much to redefine preexisting ways of thinking about abstraction but to overwhelm them.¹ Nowhere is this more effectively accomplished than in Gober's reinvention of wallpaper, and particularly his savvy use of the visual seam – the "repeat" – on which wallpaper relies. Thus do the webbed tree branches and sketches of genitals evoke not only the images that once enabled Saussure and then Lacan to draw the cognitive structure of recognition into the structure of



language? They also ask us to think of how even webby branches, forming their own rhythmically opening creases and folds, might signal the return of sex or religion to the thought of abstraction. If these schemata of thought were displaced not only by modernism but also by the postmodernist strictures regarding semiotic play and the “hunt for meaning,” then what kind of post-secular, sexually explicit framework could return as a way to rethink abstraction, and would that be a framework one would want to live with?

Take, for example, the case that pushes this experiment to the limit: Referred to in the catalogue as “wallpaper with the *Hanging Man/Sleeping Man* imagery,” the first of Gober’s wallpapered rooms features tiny alternating portraits of a lynched black man and a sleeping white man. In some ways, the exhibit’s first rooms feel like a preparation for this coda to ’90s installation practices. For by the time those sinks and other simple sculptural elements give way to room-sized installations, the rhythms of shock and docility, serenity and creepiness – themselves a

historical mode – have taken over our experience of the exhibit. Like various auditory elements throughout the show, Gober’s 1989 combination of “*Hanging Man/Sleeping Man*” with bags of kitty litter and a wedding dress recalls the kind of cackling whimsy that was once a cinematic style. From David Lynch’s *Laura Palmer* to Quentin Tarantino’s killer Bill, the stylization of the traumatized individual was once something of a cinematic signature for a country specializing in ignoring its own policies of wreaking mass destruction. Like the formerly critical trope of installation art, this cinematic genre may now feel exhausted. However, beneath that impression, there is in fact the sense, as with Gober’s subject matter, that it is simply too frightening to rethink, but no less apt for its familiarity.

For in the fall of 2014, as the United States grappled with the aftermath of an incredible ruling in Ferguson, Missouri, followed by one where New York City’s own grand juries made a similar and no less incredible ruling in the case of the NYPD’s homicide of Eric Garner, those feelings

of exhaustion and fear have come alive again. This time, they describe the inevitable, affective component to political and social awareness in our time. Using the paint-by-numbers treatment supplied to him by two scenic painters, Gober employs the trope of light filtering into dappled woods to explode the sense of inside and outside, or the way that woods signify both eternal protection and abandoned vulnerability in the American imaginary. In the final, showstopper-style room, MoMA's second-floor atrium is reconfigured as a box, with working plumbing that allows the sound of rushing water to confront the silence and solitude of prison-barred windows and piles of hand-tied (and of course handmade, facsimile editions of) newspapers. If the wallpaper depicting lynchings was idiosyncratically and maybe capriciously mismatched to the painted, faux-plaster bags of kitty litter and the dramatically-lit, centrally placed wedding dress, in the box-in-an-atrium we are faced with an almost operatic engagement with the most horrifyingly raw wounds of America's present moment. Prisons and torture, their dailiness inscribed in the piles of re-fabricated newspapers lining both dark ante-chambers of the box, are the décor of an everyday scene. Jauntily painted yet inevitably traumatic, the "forest" here is (to paraphrase the show's title) not a metaphor but rather the condition for the normal, the status quo.

This returns us to one of the most powerful strains of installation art from the '90s: one that not only subverts the distinction between interior and exterior, but takes this doubled identity as a way to structure thinking about trauma.² Trauma is, in Gober's universe, not only "the everyday" – those quaintly upholstered objects of daily use that he remakes in his own eerie

manner – but the valve between self and other that opens and closes without our help or control. If, this past fall, his lynching wallpaper read both as sentimentally blithe and unbearably of-the-moment, it was because the quiet graphomania of the observer isolated by what he or she sees is not only in that creepy-quaint universe *alone* (as Lynch and others used to suggest) it is also because the post-secular, sexually explicit age that Gober's art seems to imagine for art makes it everyone's – and in this, one perhaps even more universal than MoMA's secular, agonist modernism.

RACHEL HAIDU

Robert Gober, "The Heart Is Not a Metaphor," Museum of Modern Art, New York, October 4, 2014–January 18, 2015.

Notes

- 1 For example, whereas one might turn to the work of Amy Sillman to rethink the ways that painterly abstraction relies on templates and outlines – and by extension, the processes of desire, recognition, and the lure of semiosis – one looks at Gober's work to understand what happens when abstraction becomes overwhelmed, sometimes spectacularly, through an assortment of other practices. I'm not convinced that Gober's sculpture, installation, curation, and other yet-to-be-named forms of making (for example, a facsimile engraving of a receipt) lead back to painting, but I am convinced that they speak most effectively to the project of abstraction when they point honestly to those frameworks that interrupt abstraction's impulses toward the universal, matching them with their own urgency.
- 2 Hal Foster cites Laplanche and Pontalis in his authoritative essay on Gober's work: "The whole of the trauma comes both from within and without [...] From without, since sexuality reaches the subject from the other; from within, since it springs from this internalized exteriority, this *reminiscence* suffered by hysterics." Hal Foster, "An Art of Missing Parts," in: *October*, 92, 2000, p. 132, footnote 7. The citation is from Jean Laplanche/Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, "Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality" [1964], in: Victor Burgin/James Donald/Cora Kaplan (eds.), *Formations of Fantasy*, London 1986, p. 10.

Robert Gober *The Heart Is Not a Metaphor*

MOMA, New York 4 October – 18 January

Few, if any, artists have delved so trenchantly into the existential hypocrisy of latter-day America – the creed of equality masking ingrained racism, sexism and homophobia; sanctimonious conservative mores belied by an adolescentlike indulgence in drugs and too-often-predatory sex; the consumption of schlock trumpeted as the world's highest middle-class standard of living – as Mike Kelley and Robert Gober, both sons of 1950s Catholic families of modest means. Kelley, in his reenactments of high school pageants, photos of naked adults soiling stuffed animals and of his own acne-inflamed teenage face, and drawings of garbage dumps, strips away such constructed veneers of innocence and convention to reveal the ghastly sadism, tackiness and personal insecurity that define formation in, at least, baby-boomer American culture. In contrast, Gober's puzzling, reticent objects and installations – both he and Kelley are masters of the latter form – at once present the veneer and pierce it.

In his replica boxes of rat bait and the bags of cat litter, for example, he works with objects

that control the filth Kelley indulges, and in his pewter drains embedded in gallery walls, ones that facilitate transitions between home and sewer, he offers up states of suspended identity (such as the sinks that lack taps and piping, which seem lifted from some enigmatic, unfolding ritual). He posits the human condition as an equivalence between the creations of the mind and of the gut, most potently in *Untitled* (1990), a waxwork of naked buttocks printed with a musical score and punctuated by a light brown hole. He gives us plaster, paint, wood, cast crystal, etc, all the materials precisely listed on the wall labels, which have been made to look like something else entirely – hairy candles, trompe l'oeil plywood, submerged bodies – through his meticulous craft.

Gober does not aim to create metaphors. As signalled by the show's title, he attempts to realise the physical and spiritual embodiment of the heart; or, given his frequent use of Catholic imagery, an artistic version of the dictum 'God is Love'. Just as the host transcends the immediate, physical world, his

pieces exist simultaneously in the here of the viewer and in a dimension defined by the care and content he vests in his work: the fragility of childhood, the status of same-sex attraction, the nature of intimacy, all themes that suggest love as he envisions it and thus how society perverts it.

Heavily reliant on personal references, as suggested by the exceptionally detailed chronology that comprises the better part of the exhibition catalogue and that edges into hagiographic minutiae, his art nevertheless often – and in this dense exhibition, quickly – becomes recondite and overly baroque, as in, say, *Untitled* (2012), an inverted sink, the backslash of which mimics driftwood woven with human limbs. In other cases it can be overly obvious, as with *Untitled* (1994–5), a fireplace filled with children's legs. But Gober's chronology also suggests the marvellous specificity of an individual life, and particularly in his sinks and cribs, he evokes the body and its absence in ways that remain evocative, mysterious and almost transcendent. *Joshua Mack*

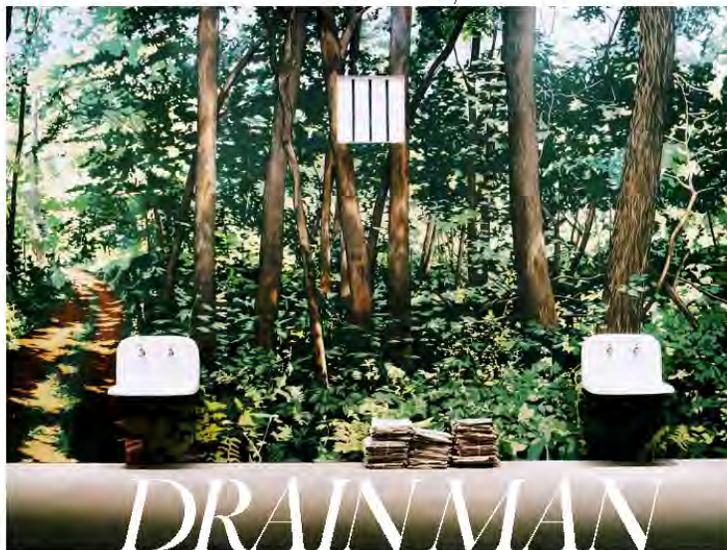


Untitled, 1994–5, wood, beeswax, brick, plaster, plastic, leather, iron, charcoal, cotton socks, electric light and motor, 120 × 119 × 86 cm.

Emanuel Hoffmann Foundation, on permanent loan to the Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel.

Photo: D. James Dee. © the artist. Courtesy the artist and Matthew Marks Gallery, New York

OUT & ABOUT / ART



DRAINMAN
Some artists give everything but. Only Robert Gober is smart enough to give us the kitchen sink.
BY DAVID SALLE

THE ELEGANT AND ELEGIAC SCULPTOR Robert Gober, whose career retrospective, “The Heart Is Not a Metaphor,” opened in October at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, is the poet of drains. Unlike the readymade urinal by a certain R. Mutt (the Dadaist pseudonym that Marcel Duchamp invented to sign his notorious appropriation), Gober’s plumbing fixtures are lovingly—one wants to say achingly—crafted by hand from wood, plaster, and paint. When the first sink sculptures appeared, in 1985, their artisanal restraint felt right for the time but came with a touch of dissonance; they were things that were also images—object and picture as one. Mild as that double nature might seem 30 years later, it took a measure of guts, in that twilight time of abstraction, to side with the imagists. What kind of new animal had suddenly appeared at the watering hole? Like a shy warthog nudging aside the larger and noisier beasts, Gober’s wall-mounted variations on the white porcelain slop sink had a modest yet tenacious presence. They literally hugged the wall, often set near the floor, and dared you to overlook them. And their metaphoric, symbolic content—so available, obvious even—gained gravitas as the AIDS crisis deepened and our need for a useful metaphor (things really did start going down the drain)

FIRE STARTER
Two untitled works. Above: From 1992, with hand-painted wallpaper; right: from 1994–5, with beeswax and cotton socks, among other things.

became more urgent. As icons of irretrievable loss, the sinks (a good example in the MoMA show is *Untitled* [1984]) have retained their plainspoken mystery and have, in their fragility and lustrous patina, come to seem piercingly beautiful as well.

I thought then that Gober might be the kind of artist to stay with his embodied image—the white plaster sink—in continual variation, and that would be that. But after the first shows, as his imagistic vocabulary grew more macabre, it was clear that he was aiming for a larger synthesis, and a more audible cultural voice as well. Seldom has a silence spoken so loudly. Gober, 60 years old, grew

up in New England, and his work, in its loneliness and stillness, is solidly American, part of a great lineage that runs from Edgar Allan Poe to Robert Frost and Edward Hopper. A painter friend of mine notes a quality of watchfulness in the work; it is the product of his intense and somewhat ruthless brand of looking. His imagery—the sinks, drains, cribs—is almost painfully quotidian, but it reverberates with the strangeness of the everyday as seen through the eyes of a child. Gober also works with overlooked things—a glimpse of a man’s white shin exposed between the cuff and the sock, a bag of kitty litter—that, touched by his gift for verisimilitude, become unsettling, full of anxiety.

Gober’s bold stroke, his innovation, was to combine the handmade factuality of post-minimal sculpture with the transformational syntax of surrealism. It is often said that surrealism mimics the logic of dreams—that

[CONTINUED ON PAGE 236]



DECEMBER 2014 / JANUARY 2015

Drain Man

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 102] is, they have none; things turn into other things at will, and in the artist's hands, the familiar becomes strange, an emblem of alienation. His more elaborate works combine images in ways that recall daydreams or adolescent doodles: sinks that sprout drooping limbs; a fireplace filled with men's legs, complete with well-worn shoes, in place of logs; still more legs that sprout candles or drains; a wax replica of a man's chest endowed with one breast; a white painted crib with sides slanted into a parallelogram, to name a few. Gober's material palette also expanded considerably. To the wood and plaster was added wax, human hair, lightbulbs, leather, running water. There is a whiff of the hospital, the wax museum, the fun house, the morgue. These works are creepy, liturgical, a little alarming, with something bristling, almost accusatory, just below the surface. They also have a mordant humor, the vocabulary of the melted world. The shadow of Magritte falls over them.

In addition to his formidable talent and tough-mindedness, Gober's ascent had

Gober's concerns: cleanliness, servitude, abjection—as well as romantic love. A wall-size hand-painted mural of a forest scene serves as the backdrop for six mounted sinks, this time with functioning taps and drains. The sound the water makes as it falls and empties, the rushing and gurgling of it, has been amplified—it takes over your mind. There are, in addition, barred windows, boxes of rat poison, and stacks of what look to be old copies of the *New York Times* but are in fact screen-printed facsimiles with made-up photographs and headlines. This carnival of despair and control left me feeling utterly hollowed out, yet also elated by its existence. That Gober could externalize and make concrete such complexity of feeling—it lifts one up. It's a richly theatrical work. It could be a set for a play by Pinter or Genet. By forcefully bringing to mind a cultural moment mired in feelings of failure, enervation, and entrapment, Gober creates something that makes you hold your breath.

One of Gober's themes is the terror and feeling of marginality that go with being a man. His work is like a catalog of male torments, desires, and failings, which are sometimes ameliorated by a maternal or

By forcefully bringing to mind a cultural moment mired in feelings of failure, enervation, and entrapment, Gober creates something that makes you hold your breath.

something to do with timing. Surrealism was being let back in, after decades of banishment to high school art class. The same combination—linking images, sometimes bizarre ones, with a post-minimal procedural approach—would later form the foundation of Matthew Barney's work, along with that of dozens of other younger artists. What differentiates Gober from the rest is his attitude toward media. Where Barney, to name one example, has transitioned to full-on showman, a maker of elaborate productions on an immense scale, it's easy to imagine Gober still living with a black-and-white TV, if he has one at all. That is to say, he adheres to the more intimate, traditional means of art's transmission; he makes environments, not spectacles.

At the beginning of the '90s, as the art world and art market froze into a kind of paralysis, Gober made an admirable leap into large-scale installations. MoMA has restaged several of these pieces, and they are stunning; they seem today like fully arrived classical art, albeit of a particularly melancholy flavor. One in particular, *Untitled* (1992), first seen at DIA's old Chelsea space, locates several of

religious female image. Of course, it's bigger than this and can't be reduced to any one effect. But at least in part his work points to a vanquished or otherwise missing father, the remains of whom are seen mainly from the waist down, often accompanied by lighted candles, in memoriam. But, at least for a male viewer, there's a feeling of confronting the father but also becoming him. In the sculpture *Untitled Leg* (1989–90) and its many variations, I feel as though I'm coming face to face with a combination doppelgänger and shroud. These body cast sculptures have the vibration of a grave site; they are either dead serious or very funny, depending on your mood. The space between the top of the sock and the pants cuff, in its vulnerable, horizontal whiteness, is, to me, as chilling a glimpse of the fallen father as we are likely to get.

Gober's work is important because it plants these images somehow within us, setting off a cathartic chain reaction. He would no doubt have made a probing psychoanalyst, adept at holding the broken idealization. I'm not sure he isn't a new type of analyst in artist's clothing. ♦

DEC 14-JAN 15

ART

DECEMBER 18TH, 2014



ISSUE HOME

ART	ARTSEEN
CRITICS PAGE	BOOKS
MUSIC	DANCE
FILM	THEATER
FICTION	POETRY
ART BOOKS	FIELD NOTES
TABLE OF CONTENTS	

INCONVERSATION

ROBERT GOBER with Jarrett Earnest

Robert Gober entered the New York art world in 1985 with an exhibition of polysemic sinks that effortlessly slipped between torsos, faces, tombstones, ghosts, and glory holes—animated by the gentle quivering of their handmade surfaces. Since that time his “common objects” have proven a major force, engaging the trauma and tenderness of the contemporary world. His 40-year retrospective *The Heart Is Not A Metaphor* (Museum of Modern Art, October 4, 2014 – January 18, 2015) brings together drawings and sculptures, and reveals both the precision of his images and complexity of his greater vision. He met with Jarrett Earnest in his studio to discuss materials, art schools, faith, and the nature of metaphors.

Jarrett Earnest (Rail): I wanted to start with materials. I found it significant that the drains embedded in the walls in “Untitled” (1989), were made of pewter, which I feel is an especially tender metal: it is soft and sentimental, something that used to be given at weddings, but historically it’s a toxic metal—pewter once contained lead which was dangerous to eat from. I wanted to ask you about the decision to make them out of pewter.

Robert Gober: It was an unusual metal that I didn’t see used much in the art world. It is a metal with a low melting point so we could do it here in the studio, now that they have leached the lead out of it. I grew up



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

in Wallingford, Connecticut and one of my grandparents worked at International Silver, and before Wallingford became the silver-plating capital it was known for pewter work. But I'm thinking for the first time now of how pewter was used for plates and tea sets and things that you drank out of and ate off of, and I'm wondering if I wasn't bringing that as a sort of dim metaphor to the drains—something going through you.

Rail: When he curated *In a Different Light* at the Berkeley Art Museum in 1996, Nayland Blake talked about your sculptures as a form of drag—where “high-brow” materials masquerade as “low” materials. So you have the pewter, which becomes the drain. How did you relate to his idea of sculptures in drag?

Gober: You rely on other people's perceptions to help you understand your own output. I think Nayland was ahead of his time. That was a fascinating show—still reverberating. A collaboration, I believe, with Larry Rinder. My sculpture of a piece of plywood was in the section called *Drag*. Writers now refer to that piece as a sculpture in drag but don't credit his mind, or maybe they're just unaware.

Rail: “Untitled” (2005 – 06), the paint can sculpture at the beginning of the MoMA retrospective, is cast lead crystal and painted to look like a can of paint. In contemplating the crystal interior, which has been made visually inaccessible by the paint, how do you think the inside and outside of the sculpture relate?

Gober: [*Gober retrieves another version of the paint can sculpture in his studio and places it in Earnest's hands.*] In this instance the glass is a metaphor for the paint. It's a precious material. Paint is not, but lead crystal is. The paint can in the exhibition directly precedes the sculptures of the sinks, which were all painted with this same semi-gloss Benjamin Moore enamel.

Rail: Ugo Rondinone made those lead-filled bronze tromp-l'oeil fruits, and he maintains that because it is solid metal it has a different relationship to gravity that you can perceive, even though it just looks like an apple. I am trying to understand how you think about that aspect—you handed this to me to feel, and I learned something important about its nature as an object. For people who do not have the opportunity to handle it, does this information get delivered just on a conceptual level—because it says it is “cast lead crystal”—or is there some perceptive faculty that understands its density?

Gober: That's why stating the exact medium on the labels can be useful. Thinking about the medium might lead you into a more complex wondering about the piece, not an explanation necessarily.

Rail: I think Brenda Richardson makes the point that your medium lists usually function as the surrogate title because the titles are mostly “Untitled.” Why is it important to you to keep the title as officially “Untitled” and then have these extremely descriptive lists?

Gober: I have no talent for poetic titles. I tried. I envy artists who do, like de Kooning's “Door to the River” (1960); could there be a more beautiful and

evocative title? I tend to say “Untitled” or use a simple descriptive title. I know it’s annoying to people and that it creates a vacuum when you “untitle” things, but if I have no interesting information to add with a title then why do it?

Rail: I read that the title of your current show is taken from Elizabeth Hardwick’s *Sleepless Nights* (1979). She is a writer I admire because she is good at something I’m not good at: very precise observation that is hard, clear, tight, often about ambiguous things. That is why I read her, because I want to learn how she does it. Those are also formal qualities that could describe your own work. When did you start reading Elizabeth Hardwick and why did you want to make that reference?

Gober: It was years and years ago. I think I’ve read maybe everything and then re-read some. It was in re-reading *Sleepless Nights* a few summers back in Nova Scotia that the phrase “the heart is not a metaphor” jumped out at me. It was part of a longer sentence that I think read, “alas, the heart is not a metaphor—or not only a metaphor.” I had never titled an exhibition of my own work, I’d only titled exhibitions that I curated, but there it was. So from the beginning I had a working title although I wasn’t absolutely certain that I was going to use it. I never met her, but Hardwick was such an interesting, vital character to me, both in her writing of fiction, her amazing essays, her involvement in the founding of the *New York Review of Books*, her marriage to Robert Lowell, and her book *Seduction and Betrayal* where she ponders women writers. I was happy to bring her into the exhibition, even as a footnote, for people who might not have any idea of her.

Rail: That is something you do a lot—retrieve people or things and say, “look at this great thing!” Have you always been drawn to creating those kinds of lineages, or sharing those kinds of obscure things? [*Gober gets up and hands Earnest a small panel—floating on a pale blue background is a bunch of tenderly painted violets—he points to a signature in the lower corner, “MFAULKNER”.*]

Gober: It’s by William Faulkner’s mother, Maud Faulkner. I had seen her paintings hanging in his home in Oxford, Mississippi a number of years ago and never forgot them, and I always wanted one.

Rail: What was it about them?

Gober: Imagine being William Faulkner’s mother!

Rail: So, it’s not the paintings themselves, but the context of where they come from that you are interested in?

Gober: Absolutely—William Faulkner’s mother.



Robert Gober, “Untitled,” 2006. Blown glass, Flashe paint, aluminum, pewter, approximately 6 1/2 × 13 1/2 × 10 inches. Photo: Bill Orcutt, Courtesy of the artist and Matthew Marks Gallery.

Rail: One thing this relates to is the way you put together the long chronology for the MoMA catalogue. It seems like a rather straightforward thing but it deals with a lot of art historical and intellectual issues. The most obvious being: what is the relationship of the biography of the artists to the stuff that they make and how do we talk about that relationship without being reductive? When did you envision doing that kind of chronology and what was important to include?

Gober: Memory is like looking up at the stars, it's not a linear thing—my memory is that the chronology was not my idea initially. This show hatched over a long period of time. The first years were mostly speculative talking. We were tossing around ideas for what would be useful as a catalogue. I think from the beginning Ann Temkin (the curator) did not think it would be useful to have the usual four or five distinguished scholars weigh in—this was not something that was interesting to either of us.

So one day during this process, Hilton Als, who I literally hadn't seen in 20 years, although I've followed his writing, came to visit. He said he wanted to possibly write a book about me and my work. I was both puzzled and flattered. I told Ann about this visit and as she admired his work and his voice, she wondered if maybe Hilton's idea for a book could be the book for the exhibition. When Hilton agreed, that became our anchor. We knew his writing would be poetic, allusive, and non-hierarchical in an art historical way, in terms of a definitive staking of territory—and probably something of a surprise. So then we thought, what is the balance to Hilton? I don't spend much time thinking about how I might come across to people outside my immediate circle but I've been told that people say "oh, he's so private," and things like that. So we both thought that it might be worthwhile to be pretty forthcoming about who I was, where I came from, what happened to me and where I am now. Claudia Carson, who is my registrar and archivist and much more—and who has worked alongside me for almost 20 years—began the work. She created an accurate timeline that included early school years, formative experiences, disappointments, friends, dogs, assistants, exhibitions, curators, trips, photos, and numerous interviews with my mother. Paulina Pobocha the co-curator of the exhibition then came in and interviewed her own selection of individuals—friends from my past, artists, curators, dealers, me, and it started to really fill in. Then I got more involved in shaping it, to be more reflective of my voice and how I would like to be presented given all this information that they had accumulated.

Rail: I appreciated that you listed what shows nothing sold from, when and how you met certain people, romances, apartments, and when you adopted and lost all your dogs. All of that stuff seems equally legitimate information that is almost always excised from art historical accounts. One of the things you said that was being considered with the catalogue was that there is a perception of you as a "private" person—

Gober: Which I don't feel I do anything to help create. Sometimes I do things like this, like an interview, because I don't want to create a false impression of myself as hermetic, even though I don't have that much interest in talking about my work. My interest is my work.

Rail: “Slides of a Changing Painting” (1982 – 83) made me think of how slippery and smart the images are as they relate to each other cumulatively. The title, *The Heart is Not a Metaphor*, seems like you are signaling that you are resisting language, as you’ve said multiple places, but in fact there is a lot of linguistic play in the images. In the slides you realize the relationships: tree trunk to torso; leg to limb; seashell to ear; with abstractions in between—body to landscape to body. I thought that piece was a key to the exhibition; all the imagery is very much there in 1982.

Gober: That is why we put it in the center, it worked metaphorically—

Rail: It’s the “heart”!

Gober: Chronologically it should have been in the beginning but I was dead set on not beginning an exhibition with a dark room, with a slide show you have to sit through, because I wouldn’t watch it, I would just say, “Let me get to the show.” You ask about the title, people ask, “What does it mean?” and I always say, “I don’t know.” I still think it’s a good answer, a valid answer: I don’t know what it means —“the heart is not a metaphor”—because obviously it is, sometimes. It still stays in my mind as a puzzle. It becomes a bit of poetry that is almost irreducible, and that is why I love it.

Rail: Do you think of your works as metaphors?

Gober: I don’t know how else you would understand it without metaphor. It is one essential way to experience and feel something about the pieces.

Rail: When you started making work I feel the whole apparatus of art criticism had been about killing metaphor in the discussion of art, and what is funny about the sinks is that they can be minimal *and* metaphorical, which is I think what John Russell meant when he said of your first show “minimal forms with maximum content.”



Unpainted cast lead crystal for “Untitled,” 2006 at Gober Studio. Photo credit: Andrew Rogers, Courtesy of the artist.

Gober: I went to a liberal arts college—I didn’t go to an art school—so I spent more time in literature classes than I spent in art class. Metaphor was not as thoroughly exiled in literature. I think some of the things I am interested in—like bringing metaphor into a minimal language or bringing the question of faith back into art—are things that most people aren’t interested in. Artists spent decades getting rid of the connotations of faith being married to art.

Rail: How does the metaphorical transformation work in an object? What is a metaphor in matter?

Gober: A metaphor is something that loosely refers to and resembles something else.

Rail: Perhaps wax opens itself up for association more than other types of materials. When you are choosing materials to work with is that part of what you are drawn to in them?

Gober: Part of the task is to find the appropriate material, if there is one, that makes the work resonate in a way that another material might not help it to.

Rail: It seems like a lot of what you are doing is working *against* the inherent qualities of your materials for specific effect.

Gober: An example please.

Rail: The paint can: the benefit of crystal is that it is transparent. And you have used it for its weight or density or value but robbed it of its most defining characteristic, or at least made it inaccessible. I think that is a strategy in a lot of your work.

Gober: Is that a question? Sometimes the best questions don't need an answer—

Rail: At one point in the chronology you say: "I was increasingly aware that my intuitive, somewhat blind, choice to make dollhouses was inevitably woven into the challenge of 'coming out' and whatever that meant." I want to know more about what you meant by that at that moment.

Gober: My dad built the house I grew up in—not that you'd know it, it looks like an ordinary Cape—but it had a deep effect on me, growing up knowing "this is what a man does." If you need a house, you build one for yourself. When I really started making art, which is when I started making the dollhouses, I was a man making houses but what I was also doing was what was forbidden to me as a young boy, which was immersing my imaginative life in dollhouses.

Rail: I really appreciated all the information you included about your work with the Gay Men's Health Center (G.M.H.C.) and ACT-UP—

Gober: I have never talked publicly about what I did during the epidemic. What a lot of people did. But something moved me and I thought it was important to put down into print what it was like living in the epicenter of one of the worst public health epidemics of the 20th century and how that might have affected me and my work. I'm not sure that young artists understand that. How could they?

Rail: At the moment you started making that work, were there certain formal or conceptual aspects that could speak to a gay sensibility?

Gober: Well, to appreciate the dollhouses you had to get on your knees.

Rail: Do you think there has been a contextual shift around the work? Do you think there is a change in how people perceive it now at MoMA versus how it was encountered in the '80s?

Gober: I don't know. I grew up studying artists, great seminal

American artists, who were same-sex attracted but who expressed that through an encoded symbolism within their work—I grew up learning from this in a very useful and creative way. Because I became more plain-spoken about my nature I don't think writers knew how to best handle that. A lot of art writers write from other writing and where was history for them there? I think they felt obligated to talk about it but didn't know how. I used to be called "openly gay." Finally, thank god, that stopped because it was absurd—who is talked about as "openly heterosexual?" Sometimes there is actually a review where it is not even referred to which is in some ways progress and some ways isn't.

Rail: I talked about your work a lot with Dave Hickey last month, and I think his essay on you for the Dia installation in 1992 is very beautiful. It's hard to find, and luckily we were able to link to it in the online version of this issue. Despite his macho persona, many people forget that Dave wrote very sensitively and interestingly about a lot of women and gay artists.

Gober: I thought Dave's essay was deep and perceptive and maybe hard-won, his observations about me as a gay artist as opposed to him as a straight viewer and writer. I appreciated how he identified *himself* within the essay—because writers as a rule don't want to do that, they want to seem more neutral or omniscient. I think it drives gay writers a little crazy when I tell them that I really value his take; I think they are hell-bent that this straight cowboy from Las Vegas is not going to be the one to define gay identity—as if there is a singular "gay identity."

Rail: There was something in the catalogue that implied a criticism of art schools. What are your thoughts on education for artists?

Gober: I'm totally pro-education and I think art comes out of life, so the more you know of life and thus of history, the better. The one thing that an art school never tells you is that they cannot teach you how to be an artist. That should be on their letterhead. That really is up to you to figure out.

Rail: I was interested in the early show where you and Koons are both showing together—you sinks and him vacuums. Maybe because the two retrospectives had



Robert Gober: *The Heart Is Not a Metaphor*. The Museum of Modern Art, October 4, 2014 – January 18, 2015. © 2014 Robert Gober. The Museum of Modern Art. Department of Imaging and Visual Resources. Photo: Thomas Griesel.

such close proximity, I was comparing and contrasting them in my head and I believe there are generative differences, maybe regarding hygiene—because the Koons have a lot to do with obsessive cleanliness.

Gober: Some of my favorite of Jeff's works are the *Made in Heaven* series—I love the faux dirt marks on their cheeks and butts in the most salacious pictures. Obviously during the epidemic hygiene was a huge consideration, the same way you read in the paper now about Ebola—how it is contracted or not, and what you should do, or shouldn't do—so hygiene became a life-saving subject of interest.

Rail: In that regard, I was interested in thinking of your activities with G.M.H.C. and aspects of “care”—what it is like to care for sick people as you did—and the way that your objects look very “cared for,” in terms of the qualities of the objects. Most people talk about this as “craft” and it seems to me more appropriate as “care.”

Gober: That is a really nice observation. I wouldn't have put that together but thank you, in a way, for noticing, I think it's probably true.

Rail: Walking through the exhibition I was thinking a lot about abstraction, which is something I think about a lot, and when you referred to “Plywood” (1987) once you said it was a “realistic sculpture of a more or less abstract object.” I thought that was compelling. How do you think about abstraction in what you do?

Gober: I don't think of abstraction that much in my own work but I do think about it in art in general, and I think where we are with a lot of very young abstract painters is puzzling—historically there was an attempt to understand contemporary consciousness through abstraction. I don't see it, but maybe that's my failure. I do find it hard to understand art in its time. It can take me years.



Robert Gober: *The Heart Is Not a Metaphor*. The Museum of Modern Art, October 4, 2014 - January 18, 2015. © 2014 Robert Gober. The Museum of Modern Art. Department of Imaging and Visual Resources. Photo: Thomas Griesel.

Rail: At the time of the Forrest Bess show you curated for the 2012 Whitney Biennial I remember going to a panel of art critics and one of them was going on about how appallingly “sensational” it was to reproduce the photographs and writing of the self-surgeries along with the painting. I was incensed by that. Part of the argument was that if you disregard this weird stuff, they're interesting paintings and as you showed they are not separable. Did you see Bess as an earlier moment in American art that was sympathetic to the work you were making? Or, that by making visible this historical artist that is not being seen it would help contextualize your own work?

Gober: It was never that articulated in my mind. It must have been there in some regard, because I did it and I put it out there, but it was never a strategy for people

to understand my own work better.

Rail: I didn't mean that in a strategic way—just that people seek out prior examples of things that validate what they already feel.

Gober: But how would Bess exactly relate to my work?

Rail: You don't think that his hermaphrodite photographs look shockingly like some of your sculptures?

Gober: I suppose you are right. Sometimes you work really blindly as an artist.

Rail: Also maybe about scale—they are little, but actually big.

Gober: They are intimate paintings talking about big stuff. He was a conundrum that fascinated me. I'm interested in occluded histories.

Rail: What did you mean earlier when you said you were bringing faith into contemporary art?

Gober: For decades it has been a high priority of contemporary art to exclude, or separate, art's very old relationship with religion. An interest in revisiting that possible relationship is hard to put into words.

Rail: Is that to tell me to not ask another question about it?

Gober: No, it's an attempt at answering a difficult question.

Rail: I wouldn't have had that sense based on the materials surrounding you and your work. The normal aesthetic scar tissue of being traumatized by Catholicism is there, sure, but in terms of a lingering engagement in aspects of faith, I haven't picked up on that as a priority. Not that I couldn't see it in the work, but in the chronology there isn't any reference to a spiritual life.

Gober: I do write about my first long time therapist, James Serafini, who was the cofounder of Dignity NY and to whom I dedicated the catalogue for the Dia exhibition in '92. (Dignity NY was established in 1972 to encourage gay men and lesbians to “express their sexuality in a manner consonant with Christ's teaching.”)

Rail: I read an early interview in *Bomb* with Craig Gholson where you explicitly said you didn't believe in God. He says "don't you believe in god?" and you are like "no,,"; then he says "well I don't mean 'God' god, but in some kind of spiritual thing?" and you say, "no, I wish I did." So, since that time you no longer feel that way?



Robert Gober: The Heart Is Not a Metaphor. The Museum of Modern Art, October 4, 2014 – January 18, 2015. © 2014 Robert Gober. The Museum of Modern Art, Department of Imaging and Visual Resources. Photo: Thomas Griesel.

Gober: That was a long time ago, maybe 25 years ago. I was young. But it's too reductive to ask, "Do you believe in god or not?" It was a rude question. Perhaps I was reacting to that, I don't remember, but it isn't something to talk about publicly. Did Warhol talk about going to mass every Sunday?

Rail: What does it mean to be an artist?

Gober: [Pause.] 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.

CONTRIBUTOR

Jarrett Earnest

JARRETT EARNEST is an artist and scholar currently living in Brooklyn.

The New York Times



RUTH FREMSON/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Reality Skewed And Skewered (Gushing, Too)

The brooding realism of Robert Gober, which will be haunting 13 galleries at the Museum of Modern Art beginning Saturday, is as American as apple pie — with the sugar left out. The sharpness of his tenderly handmade sculptures and installations — a repertory of familiar yet startlingly altered playpens, sinks and easy chairs and truncated human limbs and bodies — brings us up short.

**ROBERTA
SMITH**

**ART
REVIEW**

Robert Gober: The Heart Is Not a Metaphor, a survey show at the Museum of Modern Art, opens Saturday.

Mr. Gober's artwork is often called Surrealist, but it's too real and full of barbs to comfortably fit that label. One of the first galleries displays five of the stark white bathroom, kitchen and laundry sinks with which Mr. Gober, now 60, first announced his presence to the New York art world in the mid-1980s and separated himself from the overheated bravura of Neo-Expressionist painting and the industrial cool of Minimalism. Symbolism is rife in all his objects, which are also subtly touched all over and full of imperfections.

Lacking faucets or other plumbing, each sink has a ghostly yet resonant visage. The empty faucet holes also evoke the nipples on a headless male torso, pure yet lifeless, like a figure on a cross. In one gallery, a playpen

Continued on Page 25

Reality Skewed and Skewered (Gushing, Too)

From Weekend Page 21

slants precariously; while in another, a playpen is twisted into an X: both visibly hostile to their usual occupants. And in the next, seemingly benign wallpaper repeats hand-drawn images of a black man hanging from a noose and a white man safe and asleep in his bed, while signs of filth and purity — sculptured bags of kitty litter and an ivory satin bridal gown — hold the floor.

Later on, the waxen lower half of a man's body, hyper-real down to the hairy legs and jammed against the wall as if crushed, is dotted with pale drains absent from the sinks. The implicit obsession with cleanliness expands here and the nine drains also echo AIDS-related Kaposi's sarcoma. Still later in the show, a slipcovered easy chair is run through with an enormous twisted culvert, a shocking collision of lulling comfort and backbreaking roadwork and a form of penetration so violent rape comes to mind.

The exhibition forms a partial, often painful portrait of a nation, while also suggesting a culmination of restrained American realisms that run from Homer and Eakins to Johns and Vija Celmins, and include Duane Hanson, Walker Evans and Edward Hopper.

It highlights some of the conditions of Americanness: the country's triumphs and tragedies, its amazing grace and falls from same, its faith in a spirit unseen and preoccupation with sin, and its forgotten respect for manual labor and craft. (In addition to wallpaper, less traditional mediums used here include basket weaving and leather working.)



PHOTOGRAPHS BY RUTH FREMSON/THE NEW YORK TIMES



Robert Gober's survey includes, from top, "Slanted Playpen," "Chair With Pipe," part of an installation with wallpaper that has a racial motif, and sinks installed in a forest.



It also offers sobering reacquaintance with recent history and unfathomable loss: the implacable legacy of slavery, the talent destroyed by the AIDS crisis, the shattering that was Sept. 11. And always at the center — of the show and of art — and in the silence and vulnerability of so much that Mr. Gober has done, dwells the theme of redemptive love and the all too real effect of its absence, which is poisonous hate. This much is stated up front, in the show's title: "Robert Gober: The Heart Is Not a Metaphor."

The show's national portrait is rendered by an artist who is at once a moralist and an aesthete and an anthropologist of his own childhood and psyche, which were shaped by growing up gay and Roman Catholic in mostly Protestant New England. He is also a modest poet who all but disappears behind the mirroring familiarity of his work. Discussing the meaning of his art in *The New York Times* in 1997, Mr. Gober told Steven Henry Madoff: "It's kind of hovering, with you in front of it. That's who I want to stand in front of the work," he said. "You. Not me."

As deeply as I've been affected by Mr. Gober's art over the years, I wasn't sure how a full-dress treatment at the Modern would turn out. A little Gober goes a long way, and it tends toward dour, short on humor and color. It can also seem repetitious. (In the mid-1980s, he made more than 50 increasingly eccentric sinks.)

But the show clarifies his development, revealing its pace

with abundant visual jolts. Organized by Ann Temkin, chief curator, and Paulina Pobocha, assistant curator in the museum's painting and sculpture department, it is full of felicitous signs that Mr. Gober had free rein but overdid nothing, thanks in part to good curatorial instincts and a keen appreciation of empty

space. He even pauses to devote two galleries to works by other artists that appeared in group shows he organized, demonstrating a characteristic generosity and illuminating his own work with inspirations or influences. At the same time, the museum seems to have met his every wish, drilling through floors and inserting plumbing where there was none.

The opening gallery introduces a lexicon of themes: the body (a man's leg protruding from the wall); the insistence on hand-forming, whether difficult or nearly invisible (a seemingly real dented can of paint, made of cast glass); the natural world (a study for the flowering plants painted on the slipcover of his first easy chair) and language (a print of a handwritten card advertising cat-sitting services). Most arresting is "Untitled Closet" (1989), a quaint door frame revealing a shallow, dead-end space. A symbol of family secrets, punishment and the love that sometimes still dares not speak its name, the closet foreshadows Mr. Gober's preoccupation with architectural detail, while also reflecting his family home, built by his father. But the installation has, foremost, an uncanny beauty that typifies the stillness and quiet of Mr. Gober's best efforts.

He arrived in New York in 1976 with his art bags pretty much packed. He was not yet 22, had a bachelor's in fine arts from Middlebury College and was soon making big, detailed dollhouses that he was unsure he could call art. Yet in 1982-83 Mr. Gober created "Slides of a Changing Painting": 89 images of paintings made on a small piece of plywood in his storefront studio in the East Village. He made a slide of each motif, then scraped off the

"Robert Gober: The Heart Is Not a Metaphor" runs through Jan. 18 at the Museum of Modern Art; 212-708-9400, moma.org.



paint and began again. It is stunning to see how much of his art this work foretells.

Two major turning points arrived in the late 1980s and early 1990s, by which time Mr. Gober was an AIDS activist: First, the wax likeness of men's legs and lower bodies appeared. Three torsos occupy a radiant gallery, where a corpse-size cigar lies in state, and hallucinatory scenes of refracting autumnal forests and spider webs paper the walls.

Second, and perhaps more shocking, the sinks finally function, acquiring faucets, plumbing and audibly running water. A cacophonous symphony of sights and sounds contrast control and freedom: barred prison windows versus open forests, faucets that gush like waterfalls versus boxes of rat poison. These oppositions, unveiled at the Dia Art Foundation in 1992, turn subtle in bundles of old newspapers full of reports of power and its discontents. Several have ads featuring Mr. Gober in the bridal gown: a gay man forbidden to marry.

The show culminates in Mr. Gober's memorial to Sept. 11, first seen at the Matthew Marks Gallery in Chelsea in 2005. It makes an even stronger impression here, in tighter quarters, its resonances heartbreakingly intensified. Spreads from *The Times's* Sept. 12, 2001, report about the terrorist attacks approximate stained-glass windows. They are drawn with glimpses of embracing bodies, a combination that



Part of a memorial to Sept. 11, above. More photos from the show: nytimes.com/design.

powerfully contrasts public and private loss. The pews are apparently palettes of scruffy plastic foam (actually painted bronze), displaying objects that evoke fecundity, birth and the Crucifixion. On the altar wall, a headless body hangs as if on a cross, water sprouting from his nipples, recalls the first sinks. A spring robin perches on his arm. There are more layers of history and meaning to be explored here, but Mr. Gober's great subjects are autonomy and self-knowledge, which this exhibition demonstrates at nearly every turn. As he said: "You. Not me."

The New York Times

THE NEW YORK TIMES, FRIDAY, APRIL 18, 2014

Inside Art

Carol Vogel

Gober Retrospective Planned for MoMA

It seems almost inconceivable that there has never been a Robert Gober retrospective in an American museum. This 59-year-old artist, who rose to prominence in the mid-1980s, is perhaps best known for his creepy sculptures of body parts — a cast wax leg or torso with individually applied hairs on them — as well as his signature sinks fashioned from plaster painted with enamel.

But for several years now, Ann Temkin, chief curator of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art, has been quietly working on “The Heart Is Not a Metaphor,” a large-scale survey of Mr. Gober’s work, which will be on view there from Oct. 11 to Jan. 18, 2015. The show’s title, chosen by Mr. Gober, is taken from a sentence in “Sleepless Nights,” a 1979 novel by Elizabeth Hardwick, because, Ms. Temkin said, he often chooses enigmatic phrases for exhibitions.

So often, organizing an exhibition of a living artist’s work can be a tug-of-war between curator and artist. But what few realize is that, in addition to being a celebrated artist, Mr. Gober is also an active curator. He has organized exhibitions, like the paintings of Charles Burchfield at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles and the Whitney Museum of American Art; he also put together a room of works by the painter Forrest Bess at the Whitney’s 2012 Biennial. “Robert is totally involved and approaching himself as if he were one of his subjects,” Ms. Temkin said.

Over the years, he has been particularly influential among a generation of artists too young to have seen his only previous retrospective, which took place in 2007 at the Schaulager in Basel, Switzerland, or the meticulously carved doll’s house that he made when he was just 24 and struggling to get by, which was included in the 2013 Venice Biennale (organized by Cindy Sherman).

The show at MoMA will include about 130 works in all mediums. There will be many well-known objects but also some rare sculptures and new works made just for the retrospective.

Because some of his sculptural installations involve plumbing — like sinks and bathtubs with running water — and others, like a room-size, hand-painted mural depicting a New England forest in summer, need space, the show will take place in the contemporary art galleries on the second floor, rather than the museum’s special exhibition galleries on the sixth.



2014 ROBERT GOBER, BILL JACOBSON/MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY
Above, an untitled installation by Robert Gober from 1992 that features a hand-painted forest mural. Below, his Untitled Leg, 1989-90, made with beeswax, cotton, wood and human hair.



2014 ROBERT GOBER, MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

ART

AROUND THE GALLERIES

Gently tapping into the surreal

BY DAVID PAGEL

Surrealism never took root in America. When the visual arts came into their own in this country around the middle of the 20th century, the most prominent movements steered clear of Surrealism's embrace of life's unconscious underbelly.

Pop, Minimalism and Conceptualism dispensed with the irrational messiness of inner lives in favor of easy-to-read emblems, squeaky-clean surfaces and brainy language games.

The pivotal year was 1958, when Jasper Johns first exhibited what would come to be known as his trademark works: juicy pictures of targets, flags and numbers made of torn newspaper, fleshy wax and dripping pigment, some with 3-D objects attached and others with built-in boxes, their hinged covers lifted to reveal life-size faces.

The surreal side of Johns' psychologically charged art was overlooked by people eager to read its Pop iconography and Minimalist repetition as the start of something new and improved.

Over the last 35 years, Robert Gober has made a name for himself as a great American artist by tapping into the surreal undercurrent running beneath the surfaces of Johns' enigmatic masterpieces.



ROBERT GOBER'S pieces, including this haunting, untitled sculpture, embrace the surreal in his own way. FREDRIK NILSEN/Matthew Marks Gallery

At Matthew Marks Gallery, Gober's first solo show in a Los Angeles gallery since 1986 reveals that an American strand of Surrealism is beginning to blossom, and that it is nothing like it was in Europe.

Gentler and sweeter and far more discreet than the confrontational version that emerged nearly 100 years ago, Gober's Surrealism finds meaning not in the private lives of individuals but in the social spaces we share with neighbors, strangers and lovers. Think of the New York artist as a Social Surrealist, an artist attuned to the myriad ways social media have changed how we communicate.

In the main gallery, three haunting wall sculptures resemble mutant sinks. The largest, an upended pair of industrial-strength washbasins attached to each other like Siamese twins, also resembles an ad-hoc confessional, a clunky folding screen and a super-sized mask. The smooth, snowy white surfaces of the other two sink sculptures become rough, undulating strands, into whose curves Gober has woven lifelike limbs, made of beeswax and human hair.

A second showroom, just down the alley, features basic drawings, raw studies, understated sculptures and wallpaper on which the profiles of a dozen or so states

appear in no apparent order. Unlike Johns' famous paintings of maps, Gober's pastel-tinted rendition almost comes off as cute, until its quiet mystery gets under your skin and into your head.

Matthew Marks Gallery, 1062 Orange Grove and 7818 Santa Monica Blvd., (323) 654-1830, through April 6. Closed Sundays and Mondays. www.matthewmarks.com

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047

THE NEW YORKER

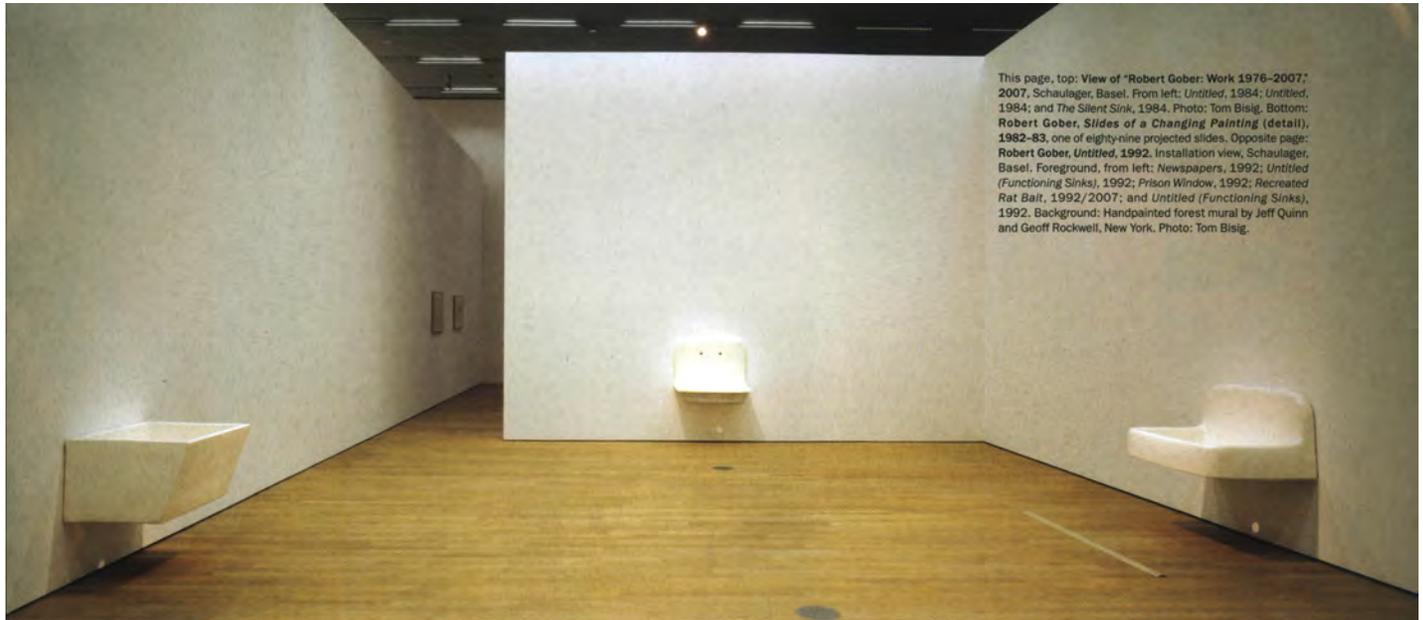
ROBERT GOBER

This slender, hypnotic pair of shows—works on paper and sculptures—finds Gober honing his highly personal, Neo-Surrealist take on Americana. In the hand-worked linoleum-block prints, a road winds through green hills until it vanishes under a cloud-flecked sky. The sculptures, which are mounted to the walls, replicate the seat and legs or a ragged wooden chair—the first that Gober owned in New York. A gun wraps around one, a bird’s nest is tucked into another; wax breasts affixed to the seats look uncannily like staring eyes. Through March 29. (Marks, 521 W. 21st St. and 526 W. 22nd St. 212-243-0200.)

38

THE NEW YORKER, MARCH 10, 2008

ARTFORUM



This page, top: View of "Robert Gober: Work 1976–2007," 2007, Schaulager, Basel. From left: *Untitled*, 1984; *Untitled*, 1984; and *The Silent Sink*, 1984. Photo: Tom Bisig. Bottom: Robert Gober, *Slides of a Changing Painting* (detail), 1982–83, one of eighty-nine projected slides. Opposite page: Robert Gober, *Untitled*, 1992. Installation view, Schaulager, Basel. Foreground, from left: *Newspapers*, 1992; *Untitled (Functioning Sinks)*, 1992; *Prison Window*, 1992; *Recreated Rat Bait*, 1992/2007; and *Untitled (Functioning Sinks)*, 1992. Background: Handpainted forest mural by Jeff Quinn and Geoff Rockwell, New York. Photo: Tom Bisig.

BEST OF 2007

Robert Gober

Schaulager, Basel

LINDA NORDEN



SINCE OPENING IN 2003, Schaulager in Basel has come to specialize in what might be described as gestalt retrospectives—highly intelligent monographic shows that reenact an artist's practice more than provide conventional chronological reconstructions of an artist's work. Two years ago, Jeff Wall's cool conceptualism unfolded here in almost mathematical sets, a single gallery (and then sequence of galleries) proposing a succession of potentially disparate photo set-ups as a larger formal and sociological hypothesis. In 2006, Francis Alys's performative relationship to artmaking benefited from a case-study presentation, in which a single long-term project was exhibited in its myriad manifestations. Even last year's installation of Tacita Dean's heavily film-based oeuvre underscored the intensely interior intellectual reverberations of her work over time, with the seemingly endless array of semi-enclosed dark viewing rooms her practice required (an irritation in situ) obtaining a surprisingly powerful, implosive lag effect.

But "Robert Gober: Work 1976–2007," a meticulously tended-to installation at Schaulager this year, exceeded even those exceptional surveys. Strictly as an exhibition, it was a near-perfect exercise: beautiful, instructive, revelatory in places, and deeply affecting. At once theatrical and conceptually orchestrated, the show unfolded contrapuntally and over time, as the artist—working with Schaulager director Theodora Vischer—jettisoned chronological, thematic, and stylistic retrospective modes to restage his own storied development, creating new connections and contexts for his work. The lexical nature of Gober's iconography, its repetitions and recombinations, lends itself to this kind of time-based, almost musically composed curating, as do the varied spaces and sight lines of Schaulager. The enigmatic, overscale aspect of his sculptures both commands attention from afar, holding the huge space visually, and intimates something between cinematic set and scene of the crime; the works weigh in like so many words and phrases from an ongoing story, transforming the institution's dramatic but insistently neutral spaces into a kind of memory palace. It is hard to



imagine an oeuvre better served by the variable vistas, looped circulation, precipitous interior elevations, and equally lofty museological goals of this über-archive.

The exhibition's official, and conceptual, starting point was *Slides of a Changing Painting*, 1982–83, shown in the first entry-level gallery on an elegant rear-projection screen. By photographing a single board that he painted and repainted over the course of an entire year, and then editing the pictures into a gentle, sequenced dissolve, Gober here created a kinetic work that introduced his visual vocabulary and the gradual transformations within it. "For some reason I always thought that I was a painter," Gober explains in one of many illuminating commentaries included in the accompanying catalogue. "But I could never make a successful painting. . . . What I eventually realized was that I was interested in imagery, not in actually making a painting." In fact, the calculated morphing of one image into another that the changing slides allow—a pool, say, into a drain and then a coffee cup and then a sore—also serves to imbue each image with unexpected symbolic power. The significance of Gober's recognition was made crystal clear when viewers encountered his exploded dollhouse-size church, *Prayers Are Answered*, 1980–81, which seems as much picture as sculpture: Its interior contains treelike pillars awash in water, all made of white plaster, and the walls are hung with colorful paintings depicting quotidian scenes from the artist's life ("putting socks on, having a drink, a smoggy puddle and riding the subway"). Together, these two early works seem to prefigure everything in his practice: the everyday, the home, and the church as subject and setting; metamorphosis as aesthetic; and an instinct for what might best be described as the suburban unconscious.

The retrospective included several of Gober's sculptural series, objects that are repetitive yet never identical, presenting in turn a slow evolution of forms—sinks and drains and cribs and body parts—appearing and reappearing in room after room. Seen in this context, the subtle variations from sink to sink—his first

series, begun in 1983—seemed to be internally driven, psychological and surreal; the works are minimalist only in outward appearance. Gober devoted more than three years to his sinks before, as the artist explains it, he "literally put the image to rest": In *Two Partially Buried Sinks* and *Partially Buried Sink*, both 1986–87, the object emerges from the ground like a tombstone. In the interim, he varied their configuration and distorted their scale; he streamlined their contours and rid them of anything functional, of anything so cathartic as running water. (Only when the sinks reappeared on the forested walls of his 1992 installation at Dia Center for the Arts in New York did they feature faucets and water.) At first, the artist thought of his sinks as portraits "of a sink that I knew or had lived with," and their constrained expressivity reinforces this impression. The sinks never become anthropomorphic, but they do gain individuality. The three galleries devoted to the sinks at Schaulager were among the most beautiful in the show, spare and haunting. As in their original installations, they hovered or hugged the walls, rotated and inverted; Gober seemed to have calibrated their placement to the inch. The lighting changed almost imperceptibly from gallery to gallery, to surprisingly palpable effect.

For all their imagistic quality, however, one of the most compelling aspects of Gober's sculptural objects, beginning with his "dollhouses," is their confounding facticity—not just the sinks, but the cribs and drains and armchairs and footstools; the uncanny bags and boxes of cat litter, rat poison, and enormous farina; the clammy, hairy legs, socked and shoed or candlelit like the branch of a Christmas tree; even the weirdly illustrational wallpaper patterns. They all but scream their specificity, in part because they are so conspicuously handmade, and in part because Gober's selective exaggerations, aggressively narrative juxtapositions, and ever-precise placements are inescapably driven by something far stronger than mere aesthetic fancy. The obdurate "thereness" of his mute furnishings leads us to read them as clues to a very particular past, whether or not they



This page, left: View of "Robert Gober: Work 1976–2007," Schaulager, Basel. Foreground, from left: *Untitled*, 1988; *Slanted Playpen*, 1987. Middle ground, from left: *Untitled*, 1986/2006–2007; *X Playpen*, 1987. Photo: Tom Bisig. Below: Robert Gober, *Untitled*, 1986, wood, cotton, wool, down, and enamel paint, 36½ x 43 x 76 ¼". Opposite page: View of "Robert Gober: The Meat Wagon," 2005/2007, Schaulager, Basel, 2007. From left: Robert Gober, *Untitled Closet*, 1989; Guerrilla Art Action Group, *Letter Action to President Richard M. Nixon*, 1972; Robert Gober, *Rat Bait*, 1992; Artist unknown, *Head of Abe Lincoln*, nineteenth–twentieth century. Group, from top: Oxen yoke, n.d.; Artist unknown, *Crucifix without Cross*, eighteenth century; and Robert Gober, *Untitled*, 1994–95. Next group, from top: René Magritte, *Le modèle rouge* (The Red Model), 1964; Ax head, sixteenth century. From left: Robert Gober, *Plywood*, 1987; Robert Gober, *Untitled*, 1992; and François Xavier Vispre, *Two Beggars*, 1746.



do in fact refer to the artist's personal history. That they incite both intrigue and foreboding makes them unexpectedly, almost exotically, political. More like Warhol than his Pictures-generation contemporaries, Gober makes his personal engagement public, successfully turning private talisman into popular symbol.

GOBER MATURED AS AN ARTIST in the America of the 1980s, a decade of rampant consumption sideswiped by a traumatic epidemic and a downsizing economy; its population, polarized by the relentlessly upbeat and blinkered nostalgia of the Reagan administration on the one hand and an academic culture of complaint on the other, was subject to newly virulent, latent prejudices incited by the specter of AIDS. (The '80s might have been the last time the optimistic mythology of America had any purchase on the collective imagination.) In her essay for the Schaulager catalogue, Elisabeth Sussman quotes a 1989 article that Gober wrote for *Parkett*. The passage is revealing as it underlines how, for a gay man, the artist's twin obsessions—the home and the church—always contain thematic undercurrents of exclusion and prejudice. Describing how homosexuals have had to organize and rely on one another in the face of AIDS, Gober writes, "Should gay men succeed in moving through the discrimination that has nurtured this pandemic, their achievement will be remarkable—because for the most part they will have succeeded without the support of family and religion, the two mainstays of succor and strength for previously oppressed minorities."

Amid a generation equally committed to private pleasure and public outrage, Gober found a way, it seemed, to make work that conveyed emotional complexity and vulnerability, as well as what Vischer calls "old themes": childhood, sexuality, religion, discrimination, power. His response to this decade differs, too, from that of many of his closest artistic contemporaries, who engaged appropriation not just as an aesthetic strategy but as a political act—an extension, one might say, of a position Jasper Johns once called "American": "not mine but taken."

Explaining why his oversize *Urinal* of 1984 never inspired a series, for example, Gober suggests that that Orwellian year was also "the beginning of 'appropriation' and all that people saw in the work was its reference to Duchamp. It was also too loaded for me in its sexual and social connotations . . . although later on I would embrace those same qualities. The relative blankness and heightened formal qualities of the sink gave me much more room to explore."

Political outrage—sexual and social—enters Gober's objects obliquely, as if unleashed through the act of making anew objects others preferred merely to reposition. He grasps the power to be had in making fake, as in artificial, something all too inescapably real, and in simply shining a light in dark corners; he trades on the recognition that the scariest scary lurks in the typically domestic daily repressions and denials constructed in the interest of comfort and embodied in the overlooked details. His meticulously crafted, lumpen totems are cautionary, alluding to dark and hidden actions, past and possibly to come, and they recast nostalgia as a symptom of trauma—like the severed, misplaced ear in the opening stretches of David Lynch's 1986 film *Blue Velvet*. Gober's deceptively banal objects are more awkward and dumb than Lynch's, if equally creepy, but their stubborn presence intimates unresolved circumstances and forces further thought. His strain of suburban surrealism is streamlined and minimal, but like Lynch's, his work is vividly pictorial and speaks of dreams gone bad. The artist shares the sense that, as the filmmaker has said, "the home is a place where things can go wrong."

Indeed, the first artwork I saw as I entered Schaulager was a bed. Although situated on the lower, second level of the show, Gober's *Untitled*, 1986, could be viewed from the open mezzanine entrance. Even looking down at it from that considerable height, one sensed the blank bed's assertive tautness, just-so control, and conflicted vulnerability. A slightly oversize twin, or single, it is the first of the few beds Gober made (the others were not included in this exhibition),



the first series he began when he finished the sinks. Gober's beds, however, are not indelibly linked to his artistic profile. One reason for this may be that he made only three before going "back in time," in the artist's words, to build cribs and playpens. Like most of his sculptural objects, the bed is a deceptively simple piece of furniture, painstakingly constructed by the artist. Unlike his other handmade everyday objects, however, its closeness to the "real" thing complicates its sculptural identity; simple wooden beds, unlike sinks, are often hand-built, and there is little by way of obvious exaggeration or distortion or ambiguous decoration to nudge the work from furniture to art.

Untitled was included in the first show Gober organized, in 1986 at the Cable Gallery in New York. As he notes in the Schaulager catalogue, "The bed was also the sculpture that first got me interested in curating exhibitions. As my work was beginning to be placed within large group shows, I was increasingly frustrated by contexts that I felt weren't rich or elusive enough." Gober's comment is similar to the complaints voiced in the '60s by artists such as Sol LeWitt about the critical texts addressing their work; whereas LeWitt and his colleagues turned to writing criticism, Gober became a curator in an attempt to enlarge the context and impact of his sculptural practice. Indeed, Gober describes himself as a curator as much as a maker of objects. The sheer volume of the Schaulager interior allowed the inclusion not only of individual sculptures and installations but of whole exhibitions reconstructed and positioned as autonomous artworks, including shows featuring other artists. The grandest of Gober's tableaux is on permanent display at the museum: *Untitled*, 1995–97, featuring his cast-concrete,

The obdurate "thereness" of Gober's mute furnishings leads us to read them as props for a very particular past, whether or not they do in fact refer to the artist's personal history. That they incite both intrigue and foreboding makes them unexpectedly, almost exotically, political. No one since Warhol has managed quite so successfully to turn image into symbol rather than simply sign.

culvert-pierced Virgin, water-flooded stairs, and brightly gurgling pools of sea flora. But the retrospective also included simulations of past shows held at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston; Paula Cooper Gallery, New York; and Dia; and revised versions of those at Paris's Jeu de Paume, the 2001 Venice Biennale, Matthew Marks Gallery in New York, and Houston's Menil Collection (all of them only slightly scaled down here).

Gober is adept as well at manipulating more purely architectural sight lines, an often underestimated curatorial skill. His reinstallation here of the Art Nouveau-ish, faux-forest, artificially sun-dappled wallpaper originally made for the Jeu de Paume in 1991 is a case in point. By covering the vast, multistoried far wall of the lower level, he managed to make visitors look up as well as down—and at Schaulager, to look up is to take full measure of the space and of the quantity of archival storage its high interior walls conceal, and to exploit the full impact of the building's dematerializing flood of skylit sun. The contrast between Gober's compellingly illusionistic "light in the forest" and the blinding daylight from above perfectly recapitulated the degree of artificiality that makes the artist's earliest entries so eerily affecting. The giant cigar that accompanied the original installation was unfortunately absent at Schaulager; an elegant tobacco-covered wooden ellipse, banded in brass paper, it signaled a shift into a more abstract frame of reference, appropriate for a historic European museum. It is one of Gober's funniest art-historical conceits: In one stroke, he sends up Magritte, Freud, Duchamp, Minimalism, and naturalism. His cigar is not just a cigar; it's a felled log, a sculpture,

continued on page 378

NORDEN/GOBER *continued from page 347*

and a slyly dandified phallic form linked to the musically “scored” wax buttocks (also not at Schaulager) that hung on the wall as if wrapped around a pair of painted tree trunks.

In general, however, and certainly for most of the '80s and '90s, Gober has turned less to art-historical “pinging” (essential to the art of close colleagues such as Sherrie Levine) than to another trope of that time: identity. His work continues to elicit intense, personal response and to invite a range of reactions that depend on the viewer's gender, sexual preference, race, and religion. For example, the reinstalled 1989 Paula Cooper show still feels shocking: One room is wallpapered with repeating imagery of a hanged black man and a sleeping white man, another with chalklike sketches of male and female genitalia; drains are sunk into the walls, and an empty wedding dress, a bag of doughnuts, and boxes of rat poison stand silently. Writing at the time, artist and critic Gregg Bordowitz applauded Gober's “redress of the presupposition of a universal heterosexual viewer”; on view a year later, in 1990, at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, DC, the wallpaper provoked outrage among the museum's African-American guards.

The three most recent reinstalled exhibitions at Schaulager reveal how Gober's themes have expanded in

the past few years. His remade objects now take on a broader subject—America—rather than an isolated American household and the gay man who grew up there. Gober's exhibition at the United States pavilion in the 2001 Venice Biennale was described by its curators as “a sort of archaeology of a democratic society's collective unconscious” and by the artist as “vignettes of violence and banality and garbage and hope.” (One element, also displayed in Basel, was a terra-cotta-and-oak toilet plunger—which recalls the 1997 brutalization of Haitian immigrant Abner Louima by New York City police officers—standing on a bronze platform cast from a piece of Styrofoam.) Gober's 2005 show at Matthew Marks made explicit reference to Catholic symbolism and mimicked the internal structure of a cathedral, laying out highly irreverent objects in reverent order as it decried the fallout of 9/11. In Basel, the artist split up and reconfigured the works, diffusing their sacred reliquary status and putting them in dialogue with earlier sculptures, and with the space of the museum itself.

The Venice and New York shows were familiar to me and many others, but the compressed Menil exhibition from 2005, originally called “Robert Gober: The Meat Wagon,” was a revelation, even in its reduced reconfiguration. Culling works from that institution's holdings—sketches of body parts by Delacroix, a damaged

eighteenth-century *Crucifix without Cross*, a wax head of Abraham Lincoln, a “letter action” to President Nixon from the Guerrilla Art Action Group, a slashed Lucio Fontana—and combining them with his own sculptures (newspaper stacks, an empty closet, a fireplace with children's legs), Gober recounted myriad histories of violence and racism but also expressed religious hope and a deep belief in art itself. His strategy here is an inversion of the stuttering, widely spaced outbursts of his Venice installation; nested within the archive of Schaulager, the room felt like a treasure chest in a sea of sculpture—or, perhaps, a diary hidden within a house. The distillation underlined how Gober's multipart projects as well as exhibitions of other artists and artifacts are central to his practice. In his remade sculptural objects he grasped the power to be had in making over something all too easily overlooked; in his curating, he trades on the rethinking appropriation demands by simply re-presenting the things themselves, while maintaining the importance of narrative and juxtaposition in his work. Mining the museum much as he has explored the home and the church, he focuses the attention of his willingly captive audience. If the museum is our cathedral, where we vest our faith and look for meaning, then perhaps Gober is the priest, awaiting our confession. □

LINDA NORDEN IS A WRITER AND CURATOR BASED IN BOSTON. (SEE CONTRIBUTORS.)

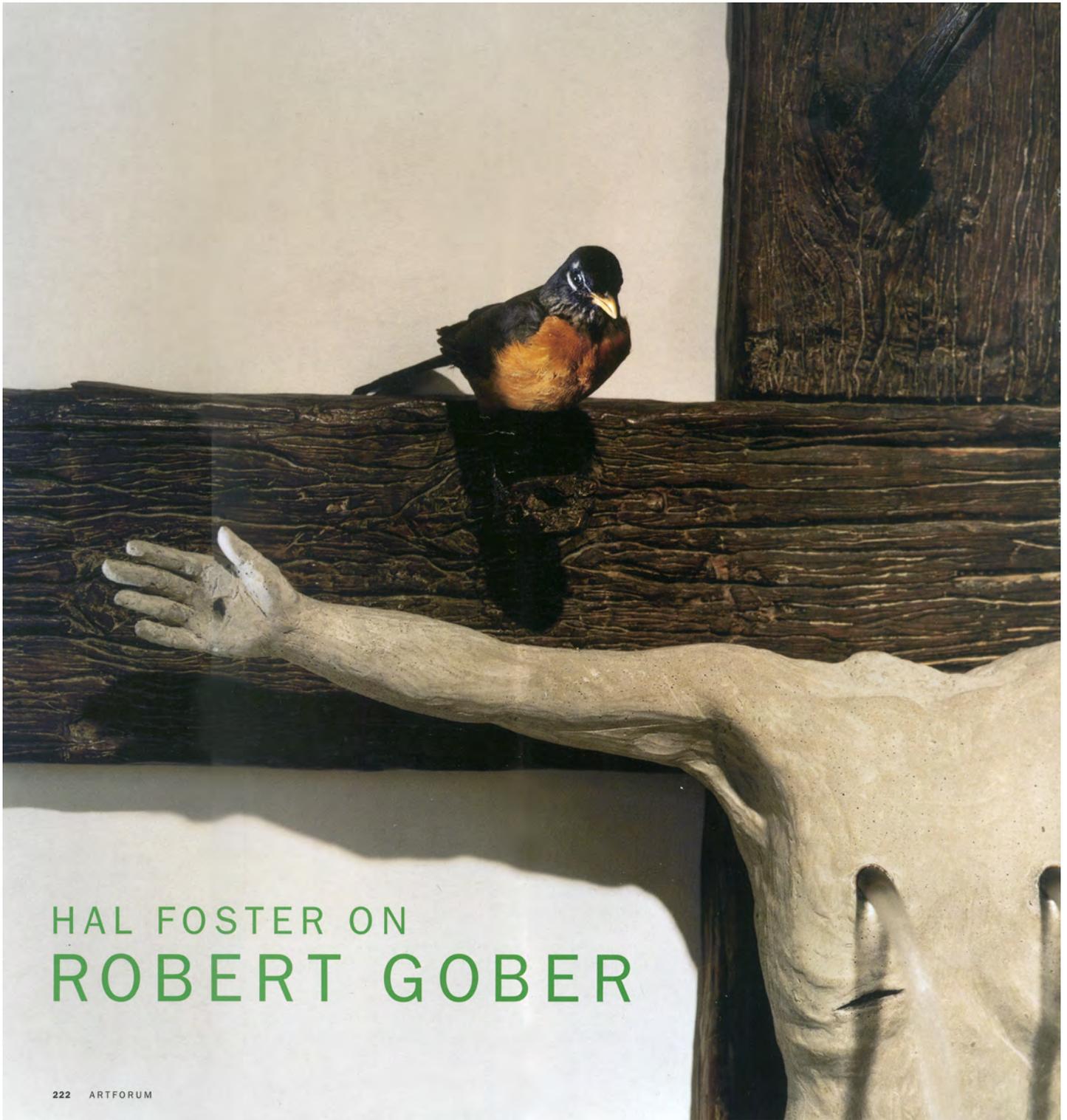
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Foster, Hal. "Robert Gober: American Gothic." *Artforum*, May 2005, Cover, pp. 222–25.



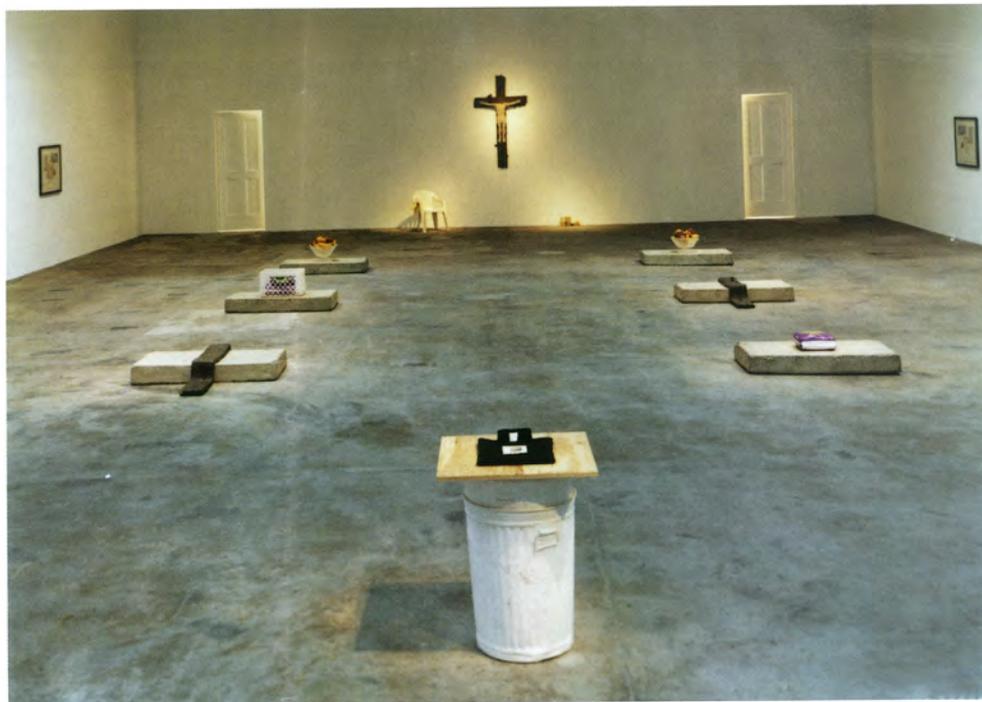
HAL FOSTER ON
ROBERT GOBER

222 ARTFORUM

AMERICAN GOTHIC



Spread: Robert Gober, *Untitled (detail)*, 2004–2005, bronze, cement, re-creation of American robin, and water, 112½ x 39½ x 41". This page, top: View of "Robert Gober," Matthew Marks Gallery, New York, 2005. Bottom: Robert Gober, *Untitled*, 2004–2005, plaster, watercolor, and bronze, 70½ x 8½ x 5".



ROBERT GOBER ONCE DESCRIBED his installations as "natural history dioramas about contemporary human beings," and, like many dioramas, they mix the real with the illusionistic in ways that both fascinate and disorient us. With his recent project at Matthew Marks Gallery, his first New York show in more than a decade, it was the aftermath of 9/11 that we revisited as if in a waking dream. At stake was the question of how to work through this present-past (Gober began the project soon after the Al Qaeda attacks and completed it soon before the last presidential election)—how to be sensitive, at once, to its human tragedy, political exploitation, and cultural sentiment.

Entering the gallery, we saw a knotty plank of faux wood in unpainted plaster leaning against a wall, an item somewhere between refuse and relic. Then, in the exhibition space



proper, were two stacked garbage cans (also in unpainted plaster) covered by a sheet of plywood on which lay the folded shirt of a priest and a newspaper clipping showing a female delegate to the Republican Convention mocking the Purple Heart awarded John Kerry. This makeshift pulpit

opened onto two rows of three dirty-white slabs, which, though bronze, were made to look like leftover Styrofoam. Like a plinth, each slab supported a particular object, which, as is typical of Gober, appeared readymade but was handcrafted. First, to the left, was a plank of faux wood in bronze (malformed, it seemed both molten and petrified) and, to the right, a bag of diapers (made of plaster sealed in commercial packaging that was both meticulously reproduced and slightly altered); then a milk crate with three more diaper bags and another plank (also in bronze); and, finally, two glass



GOBER TREATS POST-9/11 KITSCH AS A CULTURAL PROGRAM IMPOSED ON US. YET HE DOESN'T MOCK IT: FOR ALL THE AMBIGUITY OF HIS PIECE, IT CONTAINS NONE OF THE SUPERIORITY FOUND IN CAMP AND LITTLE OF THE SECRET AFFIRMATION SENSED IN PARODY.

Top row, from left: Robert Gober, *Untitled*, 2004–2005, plaster, wood, wool, linen, and paper, 32½ x 24 x 24". Robert Gober, *Untitled*, 2004–2005, bronze, beeswax, lead crystal, and oil paint, 19½ x 46½ x 25½". Robert Gober, *Untitled*, 2004–2005, fiberglass, beeswax, human hair, nickel-plated bronze, wood, semi-gloss enamel paint, graphite on paper, and water, approximately 8 x 11½ x 6½". Bottom row, from left: View of "Robert Gober," Matthew Marks Gallery, New York, 2005. Robert Gober, *Untitled*, 2004–2005, stoneware, white china glaze, and urethane rubber, 28½ x 24½ x 20½". Robert Gober, *Untitled* (detail), 2004–2005, bronze, cement, re-creation of American robin, and water, 68½ x 39½ x 41".

bowls filled with large pieces of fruit that looked plastic but were beeswax.

The presentation of these things was at once forensic, like evidence laid out in a police warehouse or morgue, and ritualistic: We walked through the rows as down a chapel aisle. And, in fact, on the far wall hung a crucified Christ (the figure was cement, the cross bronze like the planks, with an artificial robin perched on it). Decapitated as if vandalized, this Jesus was flanked, in the customary positions of the two Marys, by spare tokens of suburban life: a white chair that looked plastic but was glazed stoneware (a yellow rubber glove hung from one arm) and a carton of yellow bug-lights in blown glass. Like additional stigmata turned into tacky spouts, the nipples of the beheaded Christ gushed steady streams of water into a round hole cut roughly into the floor. Clearly, Gober was working with the

nastier bits of contemporary American kitsch, drawing equally on Wal-Mart goods and churchyard displays.¹

To the sides of this brutal crucifix were two doors wedged open a crack to show spaces bright with light. Peeking in we saw white bathtubs with flowing taps occupied, to the left, by two male legs and, to the right, by two female legs (to the side of each tub lay sections of the *New York Times* given over to the Starr Report). At this point, more than a little puzzled, we turned and noticed, in the opposite corners of the gallery, two torsos in beeswax that mirrored one another, each with one male breast and one female breast. A familiar Gober motif, these bisexed torsos sprouted from the crotch one male leg (dressed with sock and shoe) and three branches in faux wood (bark also appeared on the legs). At this point, too, we saw the four framed pictures hung on each side wall (perhaps like stations of the cross), all made up of individual spreads from the front section of the *New York Times* of 9/12 (on the east wall the pages were literally reversed, as if seen in a mirror). Gober had drawn over the reports and photos of the Al Qaeda attacks with images (in pastel and graphite) of commingled body parts; it was left to each viewer to decide whether they were male, female, or both. These nude bodies were locked in different embraces that seemed erotic but, in the context of 9/11, might be deathly as well; they were body parts, after all, and some were shown clinging in ways that could suggest grief. The pictures seemed to be keys to the work; yet, finally, they were as enigmatic as any other of its elements.

As usual with Gober, the installation is a broken allegory that both elicits and resists our interpretation; that, materially, nothing is quite as it seems adds to our anxious curiosity. We might draw art-historical connections to the assisted readymades and tableaux of Duchamp (especially *Etant donnés*), the paradoxical illusions of image and space in Magritte, as well as to various biblical representations (Gober featured a Virgin with a drainage pipe cut through her middle in his 1997 installation at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art), the *Bacchus* of Caravaggio (recalled by the bowls of fruit), the severed body parts painted by Géricault, and so on. (Brenda Richardson searches widely for such references in her ambitious catalogue essay for the show.) Yet these associations take us only so far, and, as again usual with Gober, they are complicated, even undercut, by allusions to topical events that are both momentous (9/11) and banal (a soak in a bath). In this way different levels of allegorical reading are set up, from the anagogic to the literal, but they are fragmentary, and the real disrupts the symbolic (the tacky elements around the crucifix) just as the symbolic haunts the real (the amorous bodies over the 9/11 reports). A similar confusion disturbs the oppositions in play between male and female, human and inhu-

man, public and private, and sacred and profane. Almost in a caricature of Lacanian psychoanalysis, the two bathrooms, the emblematic markers of gender difference, seem to govern all the oppositions, yet each binary is broken down, rendered ambiguous: male and female, human and inhuman, are combined in the grotesque torsos; public and private come into contact in the *Times* pages and through the bathroom doors; and sacred and profane collide in the crucifix scene. In this confusion a subtle ambivalence is created in every object, image, and space.

Gober effectively adapts the intrinsic ambiguity of the still life. Usually an offering of food that is also a withholding (for the food is never real), a still life is a cold gift, a *nature* that is precisely *morte*, a *vanitas* whose beauty stings with a reminder of death. Here the beeswax fruit is artificial, the hardened diapers are ominous (they may recall the rat poison or the kitty litter in other Gober installations), the Styrofoam is unrecyclable, and the wood reified; in fact, Gober shows the entire world changed for the worse. The molten material, mortuary slabs, and commingled limbs evoke a historical hell that combines the postattack space of the Twin Towers with the bomb sites of Iraq: It is both hideous morgue and hallowed ground, wasteland and reliquary. Implied here, too, is a political continuum in which the trauma of the 9/11 attacks was troped by the Bush administration into the triumphalism of the war on terror, replete with the rhetorical coercion of the last election (whereby to oppose Bush was to appease the terrorists, to betray the troops, and so on). And Gober implicates us in this debacle: Again, private and public spheres touch (the bathers next to the crucifix), even interpenetrate (the bodies drawn on top of the newspapers); and we readers of the *Times* seem passive compared to the implicit crusaders of the headless Christ. The installation felt like the End of Days from the point of view of those left behind.

Gober treats the new kitsch of post-9/11 America as a cultural program imposed on us. Yet he doesn't mock it: For all the ambiguity of his piece, it contains none of the sophisticated superiority found in camp and little of the secret affirmation sensed in parody. Although kitsch is all about false sentiment, it can possess a damaged authenticity, too, and Gober seems sensitive to the pathos in the expressions of loss after 9/11 (the fruit bowls on the mortuary slabs might call up the flowers, candles, and other mementos left at impromptu shrines that sprang up from Trinity Church to Union Square). In this regard he adapts his aesthetic of mourning vis-à-vis the AIDS epidemic to the terrible aftermath of the attacks; and in his commingling of bodies he also suggests a persistence of love as well as of ruins, of Eros as well as of Thanatos.

At the same time, Gober seems aware of the manipulation at work in this kitsch, of the subtle blackmail that acts through its tokens: the ribbons that exhort us to "remember our troops" (the yellow accents in the installation may key this association), the decals of the towers draped with stars and stripes, indeed the little flags that appear everywhere from antennae to lapels, the shirts and statuettes dedicated to New York City firemen and police, and so on. These last figures have become heroes in the way that workers were in the Soviet Union (or soldiers in any number of regimes); but rather than the Communist production of a new society, they emblemize a Christian story of sacrifice and wrath—of a violation taken to underwrite a far greater violence. Yet, again, Gober doesn't treat this American kitsch ironically (as, say, Komar & Melamid treated Soviet kitsch); obliquely, he evokes the pathos even as he questions the politics.

Gober prompts us to acknowledge that a new order of totalitarian kitsch is abroad in the culture today. As the Nazis rose to power, Hermann Broch historicized kitsch as the expression of a bourgeoisie caught between an asceticism of puritanical work and an exaltation of romantic feeling; in his view this cultural bind tended kitsch toward a

torturous mix of prudery and prurience, which is indeed the character of much Nazi art. A few years later, in 1939, Clement Greenberg specified the capitalist dimension of bourgeois kitsch: In his account it was an ersatz culture produced for a proletariat stripped of folk traditions. Importantly, he also elucidated how kitsch dictates its consumption through predigested forms. Finally, in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984), Milan Kundera elaborated on this aspect of kitsch in his evocation of an authoritarian society in which "all answers are given in advance." Could it be that, after the collapse of the Soviet bloc, this dictatorial dimension has returned in our own kitsch culture today? Among the signs are these: the trumping of basic civil rights by dubious "moral values"; the brandishing of the Ten Commandments at courthouses in open defiance of the separation of church and state; the obligation of politicians to make a show of faith during any national campaign; the appropriation of "life" (now defined as, optimally, the time between conception and birth and between coma and death) against all those who support personal autonomy on questions of reproduction and dying; and, of course, the clash of all fundamentalists—Christian, Muslim, and other. It is this last connection that Gober captures in the brilliant touch of his acephalic Jesus, for condensed here is not only a reminder of the beheaded hostages in Iraq but also a figure of America in the guise of Christ the sacrificial victim turned righteous aggressor, the one who kills in order to redeem. □

Hal Foster is Townsend Martin Professor of Art and Archaeology at Princeton University and the author, most recently, of *Prosthetic Gods* (MIT Press, 2004).

NOTE

1. For the US Pavilion at the 2001 Venice Biennale, Gober also orchestrated an installation that mixed the sacred (rooms arrayed like chapels) and the profane (allusions to contemporary events, such as the sodomization of Haitian immigrant Abner Louima with a toilet plunger by New York City police in 1997). The faux Styrofoam plinths appeared there, too (Gober found the original on the beach near his Long Island studio).



Top: Robert Gober, *Untitled*, 2003–2005, bronze, beeswax, human hair, pigment, sock, and shoe, 24 1/2 x 40 x 34". Bottom: Robert Gober, *Untitled*, 2005, pastel and graphite on paper, one of eight parts, each 22 x 26 1/2".

The New York Times

'Monumental' Gober Acquired by MoMA

The Museum of Modern Art has made what may be one of its most challenging acquisitions, not necessarily in subject matter, but certainly in presentation: Robert Gober's churchlike installation that was shown last month at the Matthew Marks gallery on West 22nd Street in Chelsea.

The untitled work, which consists of 15 sculptures and 8 pastels, is the artist's comment on the ravages of terrorism and war; religion; family sexuality; and memory. It is also Mr. Gober's homage to Duchamp.

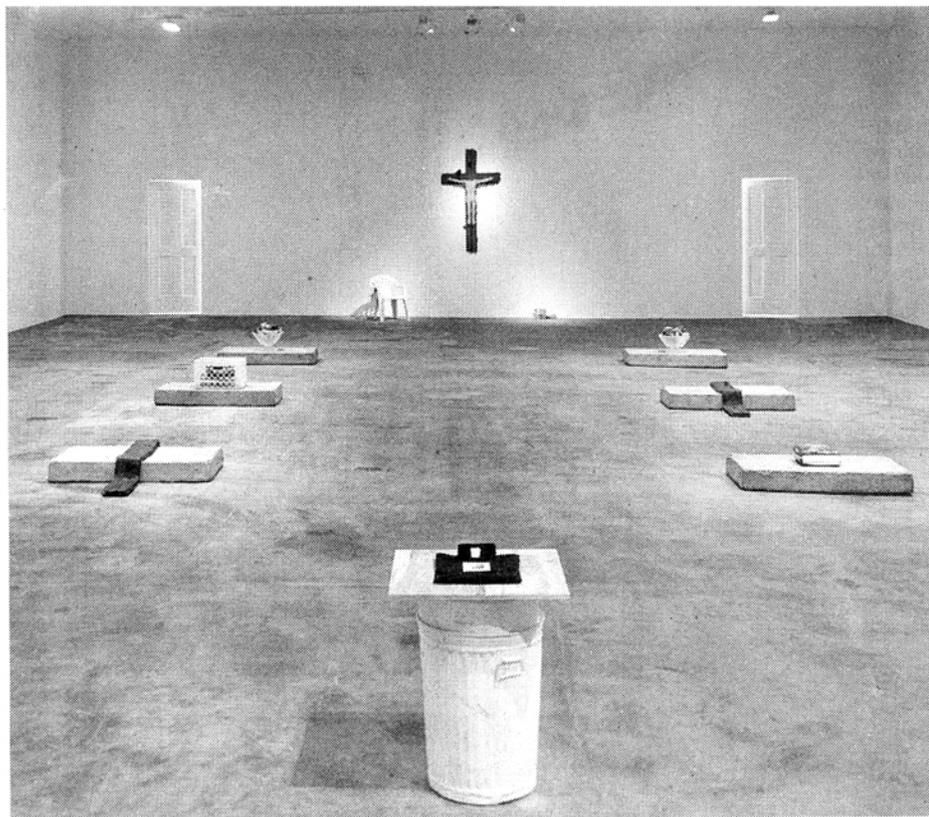
The installation centers on a patinated bronze Crucifix with a robin perched on it. The Christ figure is headless and has water pouring from its nipples. On either side are a pair of doors, slightly ajar. Each reveals the legs of a figure — a mother on one side, her son on the other — soaking in a bathtub with water running from its handmade pewter faucet.

The installation has been laid out like a place of worship, with a central aisle, an altar and a pair of side chapels that contain the bathers.

On the two side walls are pastels of couples making love, each executed on replicas of pages from the Sept. 12, 2001, issue of *The New York Times*, reprinted on archival paper.

Every object in the installation shows the artist's hand. There are a priest's shirt and collar, and a pressed-glass compote filled with wax fruit. To the left of the altar is a porcelain chair with an oversize yellow rubber glove draped over it, and to the right, at the base of the Crucifix, are slightly oversized blown-glass Bug Lites. The artist has also used a package of disposable diapers, but he has altered the image of the baby on the packaging.

A piece of wood that Mr. Gober found washed up on the beach near his Long Island home has been cast in both plaster and bronze and reworked in various forms, including one where the knots in the wood seem to be coming back to life. He



Russell Kay

This untitled Gober installation was recently given to the Museum of Modern Art, its first large-scale work by the artist. It was shown recently at the Matthew Marks gallery.

has draped the wood over a piece of Styrofoam in much the same way Salvador Dalí depicted watches draped over objects like tree branches in his 1931 painting "The Persistence of Memory."

The work has been given to the Modern by Maya Oeri, a trustee from Basel, Switzerland, and her partner, Hans Bodenmann. She is the president of the Emanuel Hoffman Foundation, which collects, conserves and displays contemporary art; he is a businessman. While neither the museum nor the gallery would say what the installation cost, contemporary-art experts familiar with Mr. Gober's market said it was around \$5 million.

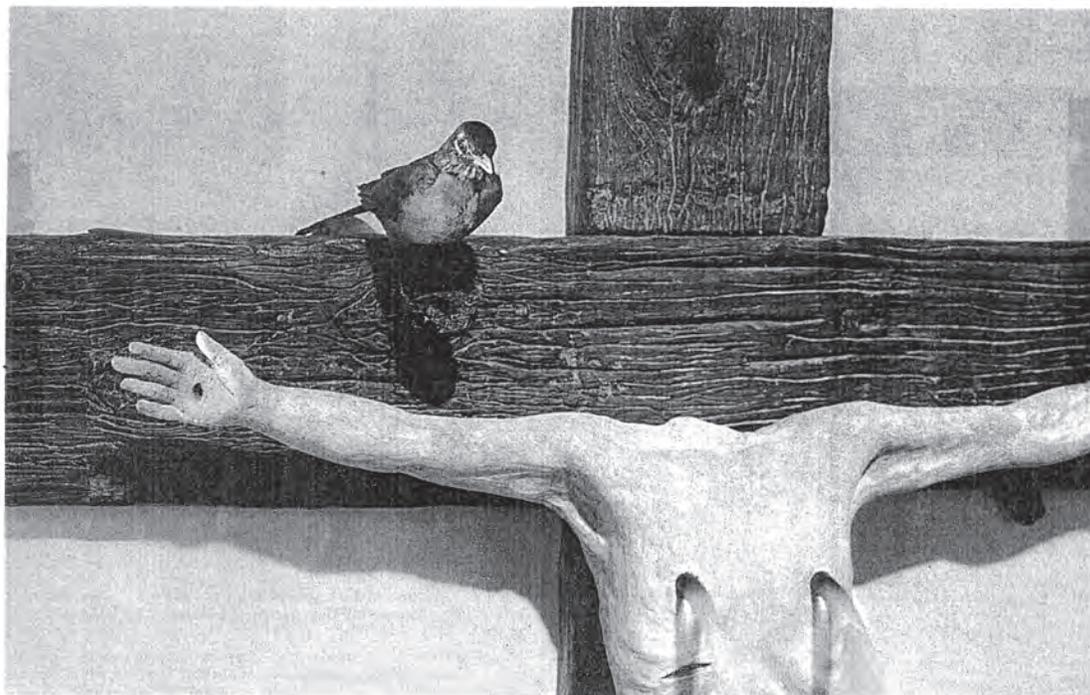
"It's a monumental work," said Glenn D. Lowry, the director of the Museum of Modern Art, who added that Gober was one artist the museum wants to collect in depth. The Modern already has a considerable collection of works by Mr. Gober, among them seminal sculptures from 1996 that include a urinal, a bed and part of a man's leg, as well as

drawings, prints and photographs. But until now it has not had an installation of this scale and magnitude.

After showing the work, which takes up 5,000 square feet, at its newly expanded home on West 53rd Street, Mr. Lowry said the museum was considering showing it in affiliates like the P.S. 1 Center for Contemporary Art in Long Island City, Queens.

Other recent gifts to the Modern from trustees include two sculptures by Giacometti, "Gazing Head" (1928-29) and "Head-Skull" (1933-34); and "Solar Bird," a 1966 Miró sculpture that is a companion piece to his "Moonbird" of the same year, which is in the museum's collection.

The New York Times



Matthew Marks Gallery

A detail from Robert Gober's "Untitled" (2004-5), part of an installation that explores the intersection of religion and current events.

Robert Gober

Matthew Marks Gallery
522 West 22nd Street, Chelsea
Through April 23

Robert Gober's last New York gallery show was 11 years ago, but judging by his new work, it seems like yesterday. Stylistic innovation has never been Mr. Gober's goal; in a purely formal sense, his art has more or less stood still since the early 1990's. That's when he established his vocabulary of Americana-infused remade ready-mades and pale wax body fragments and his themes of family, religion, sexuality, alienation and memory, both collective and private. (This also, notably, helped start the return to realism that is such a force in contemporary art.)

Instead of formal change, Mr. Gober has always concentrated on iconography with an old-fashioned moral vehemence, combining the hermetic with the familiar in ever more mind-twisting ways. Here, in some of the most ambitious work of his career, he tries to fuse references to 9/11 and the Bill Clinton years with traditional Roman Catholicism, and to link recent events to the cycle of death and rebirth, fall and redemption, that is the story of Jesus.

As usual, everything in sight has been made by the artist and his assistants, whether it is a package of disposable diapers, a pressed-glass compote filled with fruit or a banged-up slab of Styrofoam. Like many of Mr. Gober's objects, this last one has been remade in painted bronze and functions repeatedly as a kind of pedestal; it is weirdly radiant and comes to seem more and more like an abstracted torso or part of a Pieta. In the best instances, the transformation is signaled in strange shifts of surface or scale; sometimes it succumbs to trompe l'oeil or Surrealist gimmickry.

As always, the gravity and stillness of the objects, their almost nagging sense of worldly weight, is relieved by an inspired use of light and moving water, most dramatically in a headless cement Crucifix with water streaming from its nipples. There is also, more than ever before in Mr. Gober's work, an amazing transformation of space.

Mr. Gober has turned the Marks gallery into a kind of church, complete with a central aisle, an altar and two inaccessible side chapels. When we peek through the nearly closed doors of those chambers, we see the legs of a figure (male in one case, female in the other) seated in a bathtub with water running from its handmade pewter faucet.

There is even clergy: the first work on display involves a priest's shirt and collar. And also the suggestion of stained-glass windows, with their traditional tales of trials and tribulations: a suite of eight drawings, four on each side wall, that depict fleeting, partial views of embracing couples. They are drawn on replicas of two-page sheets from *The New York Times* of Sept. 12, 2001, which have, appropriately, been drained of color. The newspaper pages on one wall have been reproduced normally; the opposite wall has mirror images of the same pages, a device that knits the room together spatially and also implies that in some way we are still stuck in the reported events.

Some of the 14 sculptures and tableaux here suffer from an overdose of Goberesque obscurity. And the drawings seem a bit close to works that Adrian Pipe made 30 years ago. But this difficult show becomes more compelling and beautiful with each visit. As usual, Mr. Gober offers no easy outs: each object is a piece of a puzzle that fits into several gaps; the possible meanings and the ties to previous art (that of Johns, Dalí, Grünewald) will be parsed for years.

A bit of advice: Do your own parsing before referring to the show's detailed catalog, a brilliant lexicon of Goberese amassed by the art historian Brenda Richardson.

ROBERTA SMITH

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047



ART REVIEW

Religion That's in the Details

A Madonna and Drain Pipe Radiate an Earthy Spirituality

By Roberta Smith

No matter how you tally it, any list of great works of modern religious art made since the century's midpoint is not very long. Mine begins with Matisse's great chapel at Vence, Barnett Newman's austere "Stations of the Cross" cycle of paintings, perhaps Brice Marden's "Annunciation" paintings with their palette of tamped-down primaries, and many of Mark Rothko's evanescent canvases with their clouds of dark, glowing color intimating a diffuse otherworldly presence.

Now there's another entry: Robert Gober's theatrical, revelatory installation piece at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. An untitled work in four sculptural parts, it creates a virtual chapel within the museum's experimental annex space, a former warehouse of vast proportions known as the Geffen Contemporary that is its home until Dec. 14.

The piece also set off a storm of protesting

letters from some of the city's Roman Catholics, including the director of media relations for the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, when it received a positive review, with a photograph, in *The Los Angeles Times*. For unlike the religious works mentioned above, the Gober is not at all distilled, abstract or diffuse, but highly specific, unsettling and thematically complex. And it is the clearest, strongest thing this influential, famously enigmatic artist, who is 42 and lives in New York City, has ever done.

Briefly, the work's most visible parts, all more or less colorless and set in a large space painted entirely gray, are these: Center stage and giving the most offense, is a life-size statue of the Madonna made of gray cement with a large, steel culvert, or drain pipe, running through her abdomen. She resembles a generic dashboard or garden ornament, but softened and writ large, and the culvert turns her into an eccentric crucifix at once shocking

Smith, Roberta. "Religion That's in the Details: A Madonna and Drain Pipe Radiate an Earthy Spirituality."
The New York Times, November 18, 1997

and grandly tragic.

About 25 feet directly behind the Madonna, cut into the back wall of the installation, is a homey wood staircase down which water cascades ceaselessly at the fairly furious rate of 180 gallons a minute, charging the atmosphere with moisture and sound. To either side of her on the floor, at a distance of about 15 feet, are two identical objects: big, slightly old-fashioned suitcases, made of black calfskin with brown leather trim, whose lids are wide open.

There are amazing, less visible parts: four thick metal grates resembling sewer drains set into the floor over handsome brick shafts and opening onto an underground grotto that, in contrast to the colorlessness above, is heaven below. One grate, enormously scaled up, supports the Madonna. A normal-size grate surprises the viewer at the bottom of each of the two suitcases. Finally, there is a fourth grate at the bottom of the stairs, receiving the gushing water. Through it one sees only roiling waves and foam, but through the three other grates, one is transported by the sight of a sun-dappled tidal pool, or at least a convincing replica of one, complete with barnacled rocks, mussel shells, starfish and undulating seaweed -- a scene that is all beautiful serenity, light and color.

Two final details: below the Madonna's big central grate, and calibrated to its scale, is a dense scattering of enlarged pennies, nickels, dimes and quarters, a wishing well that is also a collection plate. And most mysterious of all, through the suitcase grates, one can just barely see the bare legs and feet of a man standing in the tidal pool; dangling between them are the small soft feet of an infant. The open lids of the suitcases create such a narrow, angled sight line that you can almost think you are imagining the legs, or guiltily spying, seeing something forbidden.

Part of the Cost Paid by the Artist

This effort is an impressive tour de force for both Mr. Gober and the museum, where it was overseen by Paul Schimmel, the museum's chief curator. The Geffen, which previously had no basement, has one now: roughly 8,000 cubic feet of earth, almost enough for a small earthwork, were removed during a carefully planned installation that took only six weeks, despite an intricate plumbing system and new electrical wiring for the grotto's water circulation and lighting. No one will specify the total cost of fabricating and installing the piece. The museum puts its expenses at

nearly \$200,000. The commitment of Mr. Gober, who likes to be as autonomous as possible, is thought to have been considerably more, as is suggested by the fact that this piece has consumed nearly four years of his time.

Mr. Gober has been surprising viewers for more than a decade with baffling objects that are both resoundingly familiar and startlingly altered. An openly gay artist and a lapsed Catholic, he has repeatedly contrasted the normal with the deviant, while also probing such discomforting topics as childhood memory, sexuality and gender. He started with oddly truncated sinks and urinals and went on to malformed home furnishings and nursery items, like X-shaped playpens and cribs. Then came the meticulous wax replicas of men's legs, complete with hair, that seem to come out of walls, sometimes with burning candles stuck in them. Running water, drains, culverts, suggestive of both hygiene and a more redemptive kind of cleansing, are among his artistic staples.

Another important characteristic: whatever he does announces itself as adamantly and tenderly made by hand, a labor of love that is also implicitly penitential. At the Geffen, everything down to the mussel shells and seaweed has been made by the artist and his assistants, to incalculable visual effect, both liminal and subliminal. The surfaces of the steel culvert and the grates, which are made of bronze, are all delicately faceted, touched, as are the wrought iron clasps on the suitcases.

In the past, Mr. Gober's work has been more oblique, hinting at such forms as the crucifix. For example, he has run culverts through a recreated armchair or greatly enlarged boxes of tissues and lard. But the new piece has an openness and accessibility that he has previously avoided; it shows him wrestling with the issue of having been raised in a faith that does not accept his sexuality, while also creating a wide, well-illuminated space for other, conflicting interpretations.

Attacking the Work Without Seeing It

So what does all this add up to? Something greater than the sum of its strange and disparate parts. It is understandable that some people might find the piece upsetting, especially those who, like many who wrote outraged letters to *The Los Angeles Times*, seem to have seen only a photograph of its central figure. But it is depressing to be reminded, once more, that there are always those who know what they don't like,

even if they haven't actually experienced it.

Because the Gober is about the literal and the actual, it is profoundly experiential and even interactive, a journey that must be traveled before an informed opinion can be arrived at. Its possible meanings play in the mind, but its narrative subject matter is continually upstaged by its content, which concerns the transformative powers of love, forgiveness and revelation. These powers emanate only, and with almost pedestrian clarity, from an immediate encounter with the work's physical attributes: its atmosphere, light and sound; its different forms and materials, and its contrasting scales: normal, large and huge.

The Gober starts out nondescript and modest. It's like a small, untended, out-of-the-way church in Italy that, on first sight, doesn't seem worth the trouble. But soon one is enveloped, first by the sound and atmosphere of the water, then by the unfolding sights and meanings.

Throughout, redemption and revelation are repeatedly evoked, but intertwined with domestic references, alternately charged and mundane. The water both cleanses and floods down from "upstairs," as Mr. Schimmel points out in his perceptive catalogue essay, the realm of bedrooms and therefore sex, birth, death and dreams. The light at the top of the stairs is welcoming, as if it was left on for a loved one coming home late. But the light also gilds the water with heavenly moonlight, making the inversion of heaven and hell suggested by the peaceful grotto below and the thundering water above much less simple.

A Vision of Heaven Through a Suitcase

The suitcases, opening onto a heavenly underworld that seems almost a vision, can help take you to another place, to cross over. At the same time this luggage, with its beautifully detailed silk lining complete with side pockets, can easily throw baby boomers (at least older ones) back to childhood. You may land near those moments when your parents, in the process of packing for a trip that didn't include you, acquired an exotic, glamorous aura that made them feel a little like strangers.

Similarly, the man spied through the grate might be a father taking his child for a summer wade, or a preacher conducting a baptism. He might even be giving birth. Whatever is happening, it is a moment of nurturing bliss, sublimely pure. Beneath the Madonna, the scattered coins may evoke a wishing well and

a collection plate, but they also contrast the Founding Fathers, profiled on the money, with the Savior's mother.

The conflicting scales are tremendously important here: the giant grate can be scary; after all, saints were burned on them. But its size also supports the Madonna with a generous power, a force larger than she is, not unlike the hand of God.

And finally there is the offensive culvert. Much has been made of it as a phallic violation or vulgarization of the Virgin, as if older, traditional depictions of the story of Christ, the Apostles and saints never represented violence or pain. Yet the culvert also makes two of the Madonna's salient attributes palpably real. The culvert makes her sacrifice, her burden, literal with a memorable -- and a modern -- force that sends a strong current of empathy from viewer to statue. In addition, the culvert underscores the Madonna's purity, reminding us that she was a conduit, through which God gave the world His Son. This gift passed through her, as the culvert does, without penetrating her, leaving her intact.

It's not every day that an artist, with the help of a museum, does something as moving as Robert Gober's installation piece. Ideally, it should be kept together and given a permanent public home, but realistically, it could be dismantled and never exhibited again. Anyone who can see it now should do so; Sister Wendy's is the reaction I'd most like to hear.