

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