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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

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.

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 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.

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.

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.

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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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