

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*