

Robert Gober at Museum of Modern Art

SOBER EXPLORATIONS OF LIFE AND DEATH

The most regrettable aspect of Robert Gober's practice, and thus by extension this forty-year survey, is that he prefers 'Untitled.' Titled works, like 'Leg with Anchor,' 'Slip Covered Armchair' or 'Chair with Pipe' prove descriptive. With such obvious referents as human legs, sinks, candles, beds, houses, playpens and dog beds, titles seem superfluous. Absent evocative titles, some viewers find his sculptures a little flat-footed. His survey's title 'The Heart is Not a Metaphor' says it all. Metaphors mystify, but they don't clarify, which explains his preference for descriptive titles: better yet, none at all.

Immersed in Gober's survey, one starts to amass the list of artists known for producing quotidian objects, a strategy that dominated sculpture only twenty years ago. The parade of sculptors famous for replicating domestic objects includes Frances Cape, Peter Fischli & David Weiss, Katarina Frisch, Jeff Koons, Jorge Pardo, Charles Ray, Doris Salcedo, Jonathan Seliger, Robert Therrien, Rosemarie Trockel and Rachel Whiteread. There's no easy explanation for this trend, save Postmodernists' preference for pastiche, irony and appropriation.

Gober hardly considers his artworks ironic or pastiche. Such sober explorations of death, birth, spirituality, survival and well-being rather reassure spectators to take them seriously. Although many of his works are playful, their playfulness engenders enigma and surprise, rather than the sense of joy or levity common to works by Koons or Pardo. Given critical tendencies to anthropomorphize his 1980s sinks, his denying all metaphorical possibilities seems odd. Is it possible for any artwork, let alone an over-sized enamel sink, twisted playpen, ice skates or a dog bed, to free itself from connotations? Does it really matter whether an 'extra-button pouch' (as art) is handmade or produced in a Chinese factory? These are the kinds of questions Gober's art still commands us to ponder. Are his domestic replicas art because they've been rendered functionless or are they art because we appreciate their potential? Here I have in mind objects like his actualized bed, doll house, plywood board or bag containing donuts. Just imagining someone using his sculptures in the manner that their appearance indicates is often funny enough.

Fortunately, this exhibition touches on Gober's two greatest strengths: his influence as an installation artist and his role as a curator. These two gifts distinguish his career from peers listed above. This exhibition features ten installations, depending on how you count them, ranging from the fabulously installed 'Two Partially Buried Sinks' (1986-1987) to 'Untitled,' his rather enigmatic 2014 curatorial endeavor. The sinks look great because they're buried in a small grass field (most likely on a fire-escape) outside the gallery

window. While it's not clear how the artworks presented in 'Untitled' hang together, one can easily imagine these five artists having been seminal influences on Gober's development as an artist.

Included here is Gober's best known installation 'Untitled' (1992), which Dia: New York commissioned. 'Untitled' combines the sound of running



Robert Gober, Installation view of 'Robert Gober: The Heart is Not a Metaphor' at The Museum of Modern Art, © 2014 The Museum of Modern Art, photo Jonathan Muzikar, © 2014 Robert Gober

water, small sinks, prison bars and faux newspapers, immersed in a hand-painted forest mural. Also recreated here is an installation featuring three sets of hairy male legs and an over-sized cigar, first exhibited in his 1991 *Jeu de Paume* survey. By contrast, only one of four elements is on view here from his monumental 'Troubling the Banal' (1997) at Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art. Still, this singular element proves crucial, as it acclimatizes spectators seeking to glimpse more from his work. To discover the male figure immersed in water, holding a baby boy, requires staking out a particular stance. I can easily imagine visitors overlooking male and female bathers in 'Untitled' (2003-2005). One thing this survey reveals is that Gober's more recent sculptures are far more complex than his earlier objects. One could easily describe his earlier works in 4-5 words, but it's increasingly difficult to describe his increasingly hybrid objects. 'Untitled' (2006-2007) blends sink and a worn out picket fence. 'Untitled' (2012) weaves sink, twigs and putty ribbons into one object. 'Untitled' (2011-2012) merges two sinks and folded panels. On another note, the Museum of Modern Art owns enough Gober-works to organize a survey just from their collection, so it's especially amazing that they went the extra mile to select his best works to date.

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Robert Gober, 'The Heart is Not a Metaphor' until 18 January 2015 at Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York, USA.
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