

# HAIM STEINBACH

## IN THE STUDIO WITH STEEL STILLMAN

HAIM STEINBACH GAINED PROMINENCE in the 1980s, along with Robert Gober and Jeff Koons, for work that pushed the Duchampian assisted readymade into new territory. But unlike Gober (who had been Steinbach's student) or Koons, Steinbach has never fabricated his objects. He uses the real thing. Working with a diverse assortment of found items—from basketball sneakers, cereal boxes and lava lamps to antique toys, elephant-hoof stools and ancient pottery—Steinbach typically arranges his finds on wall-mounted, wedge-shaped plywood shelves, sheathed in plastic laminate, whose precise facture and refined color relationships recall works by Donald Judd. (Like Judd, Steinbach began his career as a painter.) But Steinbach also presents objects in wood boxes and in elaborate, room-filling installations that often include wall texts appropriated from magazine ads and other sources. To appreciate his work is to become an etymologist of things, reading the objects as if they were words, in order to uncover sources and resonances. A lava lamp, for example, is not just a '60s novelty object but a sleek modernist form and an invention with roots in Aladdin's lamp. In Steinbach's world, looking is a game of deciphering relationships: what are four lava lamps, six blinking digital clocks and a stack of nine red-enamel cooking pots doing together? There are no explicit narratives or easy answers. But there are always connections—associations of form, color, memory and meaning—that emerge from his surprising juxtapositions.

Steinbach was born in Rehovot, Israel, in 1944, and moved to the U.S. in 1957, when his family settled in New York. He received a BFA from the Pratt Institute in 1968 and an MFA from Yale in 1973. Since the 1980s his work has been both remarkably consistent and surprisingly multifarious. He is still producing wedge-shelf and box pieces, but, unbeknownst to many in this country, he has also created dozens of tremendously varied large-scale installations. Steinbach's work has

been featured in over 80 solo shows and hundreds of group exhibitions worldwide—including Documenta 9, in Kassel, in 1992, and the 47th Venice Biennale, in 1997—but for the past two decades has been more visible in Europe than in the U.S. Yet that may be changing. As of last year, he has a second New York gallery; having been on Sonnabend's roster since 1986, he is now also being represented by Tanya Bonakdar. Steinbach has taught for much of his career, most recently at the University of California, San Diego, from which he retired last year. In addition, his work with found objects has inspired legions of younger artists, including Carol Bove, Rachel Harrison and Matt Keegan.

Steinbach has lived and worked in Brooklyn since 1982, in a large, airy loft that he shares with his partner, the photographer Gwen Smith, and their seven-year-old son. We talked in his studio at the end of October about the development of his work and about his just-closed solo exhibition, "creature," at Bonakdar. This year, his work will be featured in the traveling museum show "This Will Have Been: Art, Love & Politics in the 1980s," and in solo shows at Galerie Laurent Godin in Paris (April) and Galleria Lia Rumma in Milan (September).

**STEEL STILLMAN** What was it like to come to the U.S. as a teenager?

**HAIM STEINBACH** I'd had a happy childhood in Israel, surrounded by a large, close-knit family, so coming here meant losing my community, and I felt that absence very much. But, at the same time, coming to America was an eye-opening adventure. Having grown up in the '40s and '50s on the outskirts of Tel Aviv, I suddenly found myself living in a 17-story apartment building in the Bronx and taking subways to get around. Space and time opened up, and I developed a new sense of my own identity.

**STILLMAN** Were you already interested in art?

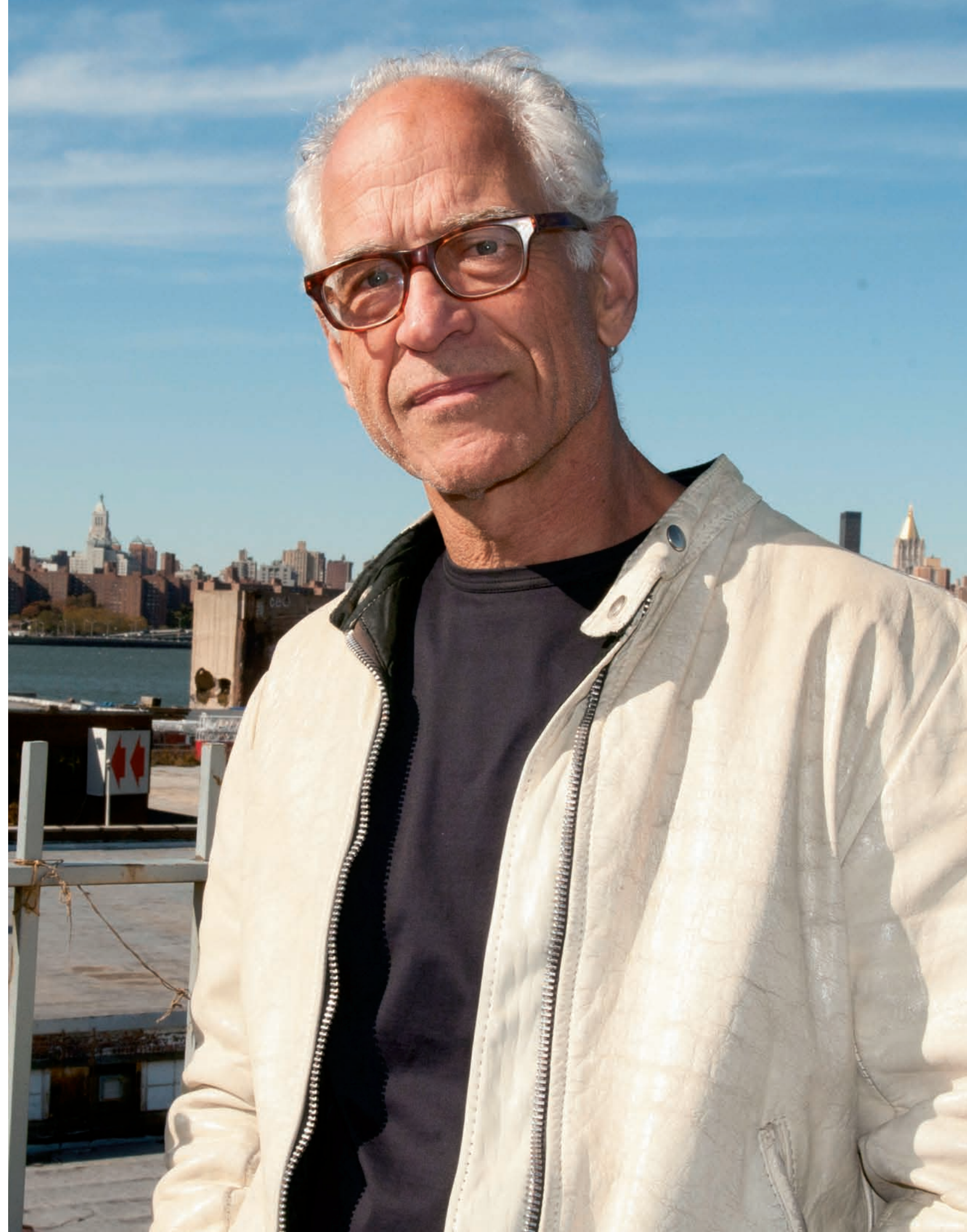
**STEINBACH** I'd wanted to be an artist since childhood, but in New York my learning curve accelerated. I attended the School of Industrial Art [now called the High School of Art and Design], which was then located a few blocks from the Museum of Modern Art, and I spent hours standing in front of the Picassos, Matises and Mondrians, absorbing

Opposite, Haim Steinbach on the roof of his studio building in Brooklyn, 2011. Photo Paola Ferrario.

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### COMING SOON

Steinbach will be included in "This Will Have Been: Art, Love & Politics in the 1980s" at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Feb. 11-June 3, traveling to the Walker Art Center, June 30-Sept. 30, and the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, Oct. 26, 2012-Jan. 27, 2013.







## “WHAT DIFFERENCE IS THERE BETWEEN AN ART SETTING AND A DOMESTIC ONE? DON’T THEY BOTH INVOLVE EXHIBITION?”

everything I could. Then I had a great first year at Pratt, with excellent teachers, including Robert Slutsky, a former student of Albers, who taught a color class. But my second year at Pratt was less interesting. So, in the summer of 1965, I took a year off and flew to Europe, and eventually wound up in Aix-en-Provence. There, I took courses in existentialism and the nouveau roman and worked on my painting. Cézanne was one of the reasons I’d gone to Aix; I even painted a few studies of Mont Sainte-Victoire. In those early years, I was teaching myself about the modernist masters, not so much by reading but by analyzing them on my own.

**STILLMAN** Back in the U.S., you then spent the late ’60s and early ’70s, including two years at Yale, finding your way into Minimal and Conceptual art.

**STEINBACH** I was moving from the picture plane to the object. I began to think of my paintings as chessboards on which visual elements could be distributed to construct a game. By 1976, I was working on unpainted square particleboards, arranging black geometric shapes along the perimeters almost as though they were pieces on a Monopoly board.

**STILLMAN** What prompted you to introduce found objects into your work?

**STEINBACH** Challenged by Conceptual art, Minimalism and, of course, Duchamp, I’d been trying since the late ’60s to understand art’s relationship to its context. Then, during the early ’70s, when I was living with my then wife, the artist Nancy Shaver, her remarkable sensitivity to objects affected me deeply. She was always going to flea markets and yard sales and coming back with the most surprising things. Often I didn’t much



like what she found, but my reactions made me question my esthetic inclinations. After a while, I began to arrange some of the things she brought in. Among the first were three small plastic toys—a Snoopy, a baseball player and a locomotive. I made a narrow shelf out of two foot-long lengths of one-by-two-inch lumber and put these objects on it. The result, I realized, was a relief sculpture.

**STILLMAN** In 1979 you did an installation at Artists Space, in New York, using everyday objects borrowed from friends. You seemed to be testing the border between art and domestic life.

**STEINBACH** Exactly. I was investigating how context influences the meaning of objects. What difference is there between an art setting and a domestic one? Don’t they both involve exhibition? And aren’t the objects being presented, in either case, loaded with significance? For *Display #7*, I staged a room, incorporating features of Artists Space’s architecture and adding wallpaper, furniture, plants, shelves and even music. The shelves held functional objects, and nothing was screwed in

place—as in everyday life, items could be removed and replaced by others.

**STILLMAN** You created a series of handmade shelves in the early ’80s. How did they come about?

**STEINBACH** The shelves at Artists Space were generic wood plank and metal bracket ones, and yet they still had their own identity, a specific and familiar presence. I wanted to see what would happen if my shelves took on other identities. I tried to imitate various styles—modern or Baroque, say—by cobbling together scraps of material in a bricolage manner. In one instance, *Shelf with Coach* [1983], I took a toy-size metal replica of an 18th-century carriage and built a shelf for it. Using a jigsaw, I cut up some used two-by-fours and an ornate, gold-painted wooden sconce that I’d found in a Dumpster, and rearranged the pieces to support a platform, aware that the carriage’s design would echo the rococo motifs of the cut-up wall sconce.

**STILLMAN** The bricolage shelves still feel very contemporary. Why did you move on?

**STEINBACH** I wanted to use more objects; there was only room for one on each of the bricolage shelves. I wanted

Opposite, Steinbach: *Shelf with Coach*, 1983, wood, paint and ornamental fragments with metal coach model, 33 by 20 by 15 inches. Courtesy the artist.

Above, view of Steinbach’s studio. Photo Paola Ferrario.



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to make a shelf that functioned like the staves of a musical score—a device, in other words, that would enable several objects to be seen, measured and reflected on in relation to one another. Experimenting with plywood and a table saw, I quickly came up with the triangular shape and the proportions I still use—of 90-, 50- and 40-degree angles. I made the first one out of raw plywood and put a pair of stainless steel teakettles on top, but I soon began covering the wood with plastic laminate skins. I tend to think of the wedge-shelf works in relation to language: each object is like a word, complete with its own history and meanings; and when you put four or five objects together you make a sentence, a kind of interdisciplinary space, in which things from many contexts flow into one another and develop new relationships. Objects have meaning and memory embedded in them. That is what Proust’s madeleine was all about; for him it wasn’t just a pastry, but a means to connect the ordinary to the extraordinary.

**STILLMAN** When your work emerged in the mid- to late ’80s, some critics dismissed it as commodity art.

**STEINBACH** My work always refers to a human presence. The objects I employ all have specific identities, derived as much from the needs and desires that produced them as from the uses and meanings they’ve accumulated over time. There was considerable debate in the ’80s art world about the mass production of objects and images—and my work was part of that debate—but I never thought of myself as making art about commodities. My interests were broader than that: I was responding to people like Smithson, Kosuth and Sherrie Levine.

**STILLMAN** What is your work process like? Do you think of yourself as a collector?

**STEINBACH** We are all collectors; it’s part of our nature. And we live in a society in which shopping is a form of collecting. But I don’t specialize

in particular categories of objects. My process is all about looking and about maintaining a certain detachment. Being almost indifferent gives me the freedom to consider anything worthy of attention. At times, my sensibility even operates in reverse: I’ll stop and wonder why I chose *not* to look at something. What if I looked at it? Who would want it? Much of what I do in the studio involves moving objects around and taking note of the relationships between them. At best, my approach is a bit like child’s play, and embraces incongruity and chance. I place objects on the floor and try to capture the moments of unanticipated meaning that arise in the play between sense and nonsense.

**STILLMAN** Since your 1979 Artists Space show, you’ve done many installations using other people’s objects. I’d like you to describe “North East South West,” which opened in Berlin in 2000.

**STEINBACH** A decade after the fall of the Berlin Wall, I was invited to do an exhibition at the Neuer Berliner Kunstverein. In preparation, I arranged to meet a number of people, of different ages and social backgrounds, from what had been East and West Berlin, to talk about their objects. I went to their apartments with a video camera and, with their help, selected an arrangement of items to discuss, with the idea that I would borrow the objects for the show. I focused the camera on an arrangement, and, while it recorded, I asked my hosts about the objects’ histories, and why they were displayed where they were, and in that configuration. The resulting videotapes—each a still life with its owner’s voice, my questions edited out—were displayed on separate monitors around the periphery of a gallery at the Kunstverein. I filled the main part of the gallery with construction scaffolding, configuring it to guide viewers through the space and to support glass panels, used as shelves, which were placed at various heights. The borrowed arrangements were each given a shelf, and viewers encountered them from multiple perspectives. The scaffolding became an architectural habitat, and the instal-



View of *Display #55A—North East South West*, 2000, steel scaffolding, glass panels, objects from Berlin residents’ homes, video monitors with interviews of the objects’ owners; at the Neuer Berliner Kunstverein. Courtesy the artist.





Right, *the roots*, 2011, plastic laminated wood shelf, plastic pipe fittings, plastic Darth Vader figure, wood figurine, wood root, rubber dog chew, 43 by 134¾ by 20 inches.

Below, *dancer with raised right foot*, 2011, wood, plastic laminate and glass box, wood stool, painted bonded bronze Degas statuette, 52 by 56 by 25⅝ inches.

All photos this article, unless otherwise noted, courtesy Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York.

lation a kind of gridded X-ray of the city; walls became transparent and groups of objects interacted with one another.

**STILLMAN** Though you've been making the wedge-shelf sculptures for more than 25 years, your choice of objects has lately taken a pronounced figurative turn. Let's talk about that shift in relation to your show "creature" at Tanya Bonakdar Gallery.

**STEINBACH** A good deal of my earlier work employed objects related to still life, but in the past decade I've become interested in figurative objects because they are more animate. They represent us and encourage our projections. The piece that convinced me to make an entire exhibition about figures was *mr. peanut* [2008], which I made a few years ago, incorporating a folk art representation of the Planters mascot that I'd bought from the antiques store that



Nancy owns, in Hudson, N.Y. As I assembled the work for "creature," I wanted *mr. peanut* near the entrance, standing there with his cane like a circus barker, inviting viewers in.

**STILLMAN** Of the new shelf sculptures, one of my favorites is *the roots* [2011].

**STEINBACH** *The roots* consists of objects that came together over a period of months, laid out on a three-part red, green and black shelf. Moving left to right, it begins with two black plastic pipe fittings—like giant Lego connectors—which I stumbled upon at Home Depot. The next three objects—Darth Vader, a hand-carved wooden man with a backpack, and a bulbous growth from a tree—all came from dif-



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ferent vendors at the San Diego flea market and were found on the same day in the order in which they appear, almost as though one thing led to the next. The final object is a small black rubber dog chew, an item I discovered about five years ago that has since become a recurring motif, and perhaps a kind of punctuation.

**STILLMAN** How did you decide on its title?

**STEINBACH** The title came afterward, culled from a list I keep of words or phrases that I’ve found in the newspaper or overheard. *The roots* is named after a band that Gwen is fond of, but the suggestion of origins is what made the title fit. I usu-

ally think of a title as another object added to the shelf, and I’ve made it a practice to put found ones in lower case, to avoid their being read as grand signifying gestures.

**STILLMAN** In addition to shelves, “creature” included boxes and wall texts. In two instances you displayed Degas figurines on antique stools inside glass-fronted wall boxes. What does a box offer as a mode of presentation that a shelf doesn’t?

**STEINBACH** Objects on a shelf can be moved, while placing them behind glass encases and protects them. And with a box, the viewer becomes part of the piece because the glass is naturally reflective. The Degas figures are copies

of bronze sculptures. We were using the stools in our living space when I decided to put them together with the figures. I’d often stood on one of the stools to open a window, and I eventually made the link between the dancers and my own body. Placed on glass shelves, a few inches from the bottom of each box, the arrangements appear to defy gravity, with their shadows adding further dimension.

**STILLMAN** Upstairs at Bonakdar, you created a mazelike installation that incorporated at least one dramatic surprise: perched on a chest-high, white horizontal beam in the larger exhibition space was a bright green, 2-foot-tall replica of the amphibi-





Left, view of the exhibition "creature," 2011, at Tanya Bonakdar Gallery.

Opposite, detail of the installation *creature*, 2011, vinyl "Creature from the Black Lagoon" figurine, wallboard beam, triangular wallboard incline, oblique wall and painted metal gate valve. Photos this spread Jean Vong.

ous monster from the 1954 movie *Creature from the Black Lagoon*.

**STEINBACH** To get upstairs you climb a narrow staircase that takes three right-angle turns. I continued that twisting movement and reconfigured the second-floor spaces to be a bit like a walk-through triangular shelf, with viewers becoming part of the arrangement. So I constructed a set of angled walls—two were covered in wallpaper—that became obstacles and partly obscured the entrances to the upstairs rooms. The larger room required a special solution because of its big, cagelike skylight—something that could stand up to the architectural play between inside and outside. As I thought of outdoor figures, I recalled the creature, whom I'd first spotted last year at the Manhattan store Forbidden Planet. Once I'd settled on the creature, images of its mysterious black lagoon became mixed in my mind with the clean white gallery space. I kept thinking about water. Then one day I noticed the gate valve under the sink in the bathroom here—it controls the flow of water into our loft—and I decided to replicate it on the wall facing the creature. I wanted to bring the

creature's element into the exhibition space—and to connect it with the air and sky brought in by the skylight. Hardly anyone noticed the gate valve, nestled in its circular cut in the gallery wall at ankle height, but that made it all the more interesting to me, as though it were a secret, or something repressed.

**STILLMAN** In the smaller room upstairs, you installed an appropriated wall text that you've used in other exhibitions, which reads: "You don't see it, do you?" What don't we see?

**STEINBACH** We don't see the connections—between objects, pattern, space, hardware, architecture and language. We don't see the gate valve or the cultural surface that the white walls represent. In the hallway upstairs was a framed print, on pale green wallpaper, whose text says: "I went looking for peaches and came back with a pair." My work is about the all-too-frequent disconnect between looking and seeing, between being aware that something is there and knowing what it means.

**STILLMAN** Speaking of connections, the creature reminds me of Yoda, another alien you've used in your work

and whose mask you've donned in photographs. Is the creature a self-portrait?

**STEINBACH** I wasn't consciously thinking about Yoda, but their characters are distantly related. And I, like them, am an outsider. Though English is now my primary language, it is not my original one. When we make art we tap into unconscious experiences that have powerfully affected us, which we reconstruct in stories, images or spaces. In the end, my work is not just about objects; it's about the remaking of a space. When I was three or four my mother would occasionally let my younger brother and me play with a beautiful doll, kept from her childhood, that had a ceramic head, blond braids and big glass eyes that opened and closed. One day we were playing with the doll on the edge of a table when she fell and smashed her head. I remember my mother being very upset. But there wasn't any discussion about it, and we never saw the doll again. It now occurs to me that the creature might be a

stand-in for the doll—he is about the same size. And there he was in the gallery, balancing on that ledge, ready to fall off or jump. ○

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