



Gober, Robert (b. 1954)

by Richard H. Axsom

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Sculptor Robert Gober is among only a few openly gay American artists to achieve an international reputation as one of the great artists of our time. Significantly, Gober's art proceeds from his sensibilities and experiences as a gay man.

In 2001, Gober represented the United States at the 49th Venice Biennale, the key international exhibition of modern and contemporary art since the beginning of the twentieth century. His haunting art, characterized by enigmatic dualisms, weaves together themes of childhood, sexuality, memory, loss, and spiritual redemption. In the artist's words: "Most of my sculptures have been memories remade, recombined, and filtered through my current experiences."

Gober's art has its context in the concerns of gender, race, and ethnicity, often politicized, which marked much of the art of the later 1980s and 1990s. Yet, it is never didactic, the artist preferring to keep meaning open-ended through ambiguity and allusion. Gober's sculpture and installations, for which he is especially noted, carry a rich historical resonance that evokes the found objects of Dada, the dream narratives of Surrealism, and the reductive strategies of Minimalism.

Gober was born on September 12, 1954 in Wallingford, Connecticut and raised in a devout Catholic family. His father, a skilled tradesman, taught him early how to make things with his hands.

Gober knew he was gay when very young. Almost fifteen years old at the time of the Stonewall Riots in New York in 1969, he came of age when homosexual identity was becoming more open.

He took art classes in high school and went on in the early 1970s to study literature and fine art during his undergraduate years at Middlebury College in Vermont. He took his junior year abroad in Rome at the Tyler School of Art, a division of Temple University.

Gober settled in New York City in 1976 to begin a career as a painter. He initially earned his living as a carpenter, renovating lofts and building stretchers for artists. He worked as an assistant to the established American artist Elizabeth Murray, whose themes of domestic life would influence him. Gober's gifts as a skilled craftsman and his penchant for the handmade object would later be critical aspects of his art.

Gober's original ambition was to be a painter. His first solo exhibition in New York at the Paula Cooper Gallery in 1984 featured one work: *Slides of a Changing Painting* (1982-83). Eighty slides were projected in a sequence of dissolves on the gallery wall. They documented the history of Gober painting and repainting a small board over a period of a year, effectively creating a visual diary of the artist's inspiration, decisions, and revisions. The images included motifs such as an armchair, drainpipe, and human torso.

These subjects and the themes of memory and metamorphosis would remain central to Gober's art as it soon took sculptural form. From this point on, the artist's primary form of expression was sculpture, around which he would generate a voluminous number of drawings that received their first critical

acknowledgement in an important exhibition at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis in 1999.

In 1984, Gober began to make handcrafted, everyday objects. Starting with a series of plumbing fixtures consisting of sinks, wash basins, and urinals (1984-86), which quickly established his reputation, he continued through the decade to produce, among other simulated objects, door sculptures, dog baskets, baby cribs, playpens, slip-covered armchairs, cast body fragments, and facsimile wallpapers, newspapers, and commercial box containers.

Gober meticulously made these objects with great attention to detail. At first they seem to be the actual manufactured commodity; yet, they are always handmade and altered in form. Their meanings, too, go well beyond the mundane. Gober called one category of these objects his "psychological furniture."

Gober made *Subconscious Sink* (1985) by coating plaster over wire lath and then covering it with semi-gloss white enamel paint to resemble porcelain. The splashboard is flattened and attenuated and split into a yoke. There are no faucets or drains, only a gaping hole. The sink is useless; yet in its grand scale, it is overpowering.

Although an innocent domestic object, the work raises larger issues suggested by its title and distorted form, and by how Gober has described it. He speaks of a recurring childhood dream of a room full of sinks with faucets open and water running. The odd form of the sink hints at the nightmarish and at domestic discord.

A good friend was dying of AIDS at the time Gober was fabricating *Subconscious Sink* at the very beginning of the epidemic. The sink suggests cleansing rituals, although with no running water there is no ability to wash clean or purify. In this regard, a font of Holy Water comes to mind, but one disabled with no blessed water to sanctify--not an implausible association given Gober's Catholic background and the emergence in the 1990s of overt religious imagery in his work.

The artist's Catholicism, although lapsed, is the basis for a genuine spiritual dimension of his art, most especially as set in uneasy alliance with Gober's homosexuality.

Although he invokes the human body through its absence in his domestic objects, triggers of both troubled and consoling childhood memories, Gober began to present the human figure in a series of beeswax casts in 1989. At this time, he also began to present his objects and figures as interrelated and component parts in art installations, orchestrating them into a single work of art in the site-specific spaces of a gallery.

Gober's figures are body fragments: a leg, the lower portion of the body, an armless torso, but never the head. They are often casts of his own physical self, which serves to personalize and make intimate the work of art, which is also made by Gober's own hand. They can be dual in gender, and by their severed nature they imply violence.

Untitled (1990) is the upright, stuffed-pillow torso of a figure with the breasts of a woman and the hairy stomach of a man, Gober's unsettling visualization of the two-fold nature of his identity and, by extension, ours.

Untitled (1991) is a beeswax cast of a male body from the waist down. Prone on the floor, the figure is flush with the wall, seemingly extending from it and shoved partially out of sight. It is shod in soiled white sneakers and sports socks and wears a pair of white briefs. Each hairy leg--stitched with the artist's own hair--is embedded with several circular metal drains.

The figure is erotic and deeply disturbing. As the buttocks provocatively face up, inviting anal intercourse,

the drains advance this association and call to mind conflicting images of water cleansing and the disfiguring lesions of Kaposi Sarcoma, the opportunistic cancer that often afflicts gay men suffering from AIDS. In another similar figure, the drains are replaced with lighted candles that endanger the figure and at the same time read as sacramental. Dualities lie at the core of Gober's art.

In 1992, Gober created a site-specific installation for the Dia Art Center in New York. He drew into this work the familiar motif of the white porcelain sink, although now with running water. New objects, here the barred cellblock window and a trompe l'oeil mural representation of a woodland scene, expanded the artist's personal iconography. Actual and facsimile newspapers, stacked in bundles, carried headlines and stories of oppressive sexual stereotyping, discrimination against gay men, premature deaths, and the AIDS epidemic. Gober offered another phrasing of thwarted and potential redemption in allusions to the natural and the unnatural, Paradise and Hell, and the trapped psyche and its potential release in nature.

Gober staged a large-scale installation in the Geffen Contemporary space of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles in 1997. *Untitled* (1997) had as its centerpiece a monumental Holy Mother cast in concrete. She is pierced through her stomach with a six-foot length of standard screw-ribbed culvert pipe, alluding to her role as a conduit to God and as the great empathizer for humankind's suffering.

With arms outspread in the protective attitude of the Madonna of Mercy, the Holy Mother stands on a large metal grate resembling a storm drain. To her side are two identical open leather suitcases, whose metal-grated bottoms allow the sight of an underground grotto with swirling water in brightly lighted tidal pools littered with coins, seaweed, and colorful shells. Through these grates, Gober's own cast lower legs appear, partially submerged to mid-thigh in water, supporting the dangling legs of a child.

Behind the Holy Mother is a doorway open to reveal a steep cedar staircase over which cascades a torrent of water spilling through a fourth open grate. Gober's chapel-like tableau, which plays upon a mix of personal and cultural symbols, is a metaphor for salvation, whose terms are purification and the transformative powers of love.

Two installations presented in 2005, continuing in the ambitious manner of *Untitled* (1992) and *Untitled* (1997), are likewise ambitious summations, recalling the grand history paintings of the Renaissance and Baroque traditions.

Untitled (2002-04), installed at the Matthew Marks Gallery in New York, loosely follows a floor plan of a church with a Surrealist mix of political, Catholic, and personal iconographies that respond to the tragic events of September 11, 2001. The focal point is a human wall fountain, a crucified and headless Christ from whose nipples water spews and drains into a hole in the concrete floor.

The Meat Wagon (2005), which Gober presented at the Menil Collection in Houston, was a critical examination of the museum as an exhibition space, intermixing works from the institution's permanent collection with Gober's objects, both earlier and new. In this work, Gober broke new ground in his continuing self-examination of personal identity. This installation is Gober's assessment of the artist's relationship to museum curators, and the relationship of works of art to the culturally determined context of the art museum.

Gober's art is deeply poetic, drawing its strength from the artist's multifaceted reflections on who he is. Hence, his art is a kind of cumulative, non-representational self-portrait. His compelling sculptures and installations are coded for emotional and cultural binaries: childhood experience / adult recollection, life / death, loss / redemption.

Gober sets his personal vocabulary of forms in play with our own memories and public symbols to create

universal statements that address the fragility of being human and the hope of transcendence.

An intensely private man, Gober, who continues to reside in New York City, protects the details of his personal life. At the same time, however, he has from early in his career been open about his homosexuality and its deep relevance for his work. In February 2003, he appeared at Yale University in one of the first events sponsored by the Larry Kramer Initiative for Gay and Lesbian Studies, "A Conversation with Robert Gober," thus explicitly acknowledging the connection between his sexuality and his art.

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