

Robert
Gober



Ordinary Ambiguity

BY MICHAËL AMY

Untitled, 2000–01. Wood, paint, concrete, cast plastic, and human hair, approx. 80 x 48 x 72 in.
overall: above ground, approx. 32 x 48 x 48 in.;
below ground, approx. 48 x 48 x 72 in.



Left: *Two Partially Buried Sinks*, 1986–87. Cast iron and enamel paint, 2 elements, 39 x 25.5 x 2.5 and 39 x 24.5 x 2.75 in. Right: *The Flying Sink*, 1985. Plaster, wood, steel, wire lath, and semi-gloss enamel paint, 98 x 84 x 26 in. Below: *Two Bent Sinks*, 1985. Plaster, wire lath, wood, steel, semi-gloss enamel, and latex paint, 96.25 x 75 x 26 in.



Thirty years ago, Robert Gober produced several dozen sculptures of sinks, built up of plaster, wood, wire lath, and metal, and covered at the top with semi-gloss enamel. He began the series in New York in 1983 with the inexpensive materials he could then afford. When Neo-Expressionist painting was all the rage, the sinks constituted a critical response both to painterly exuberance and to Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917)—a white urinal that was a rebuttal not only of painting (most of which emphasized sensuousness, in Duchamp's view, at the expense of ideas), but also of the banal, sparkling white figural sculptures then flooding the market. The artist's touch, loaded as it was with connotations of authorship and intimations of sense and sensibility, was in fact absent from many 19th-century marbles, which were carved and polished by craftsmen, following directions provided by the artist—an approach revived in Jeff Koons's late '80s "Banality" series. It was likewise absent from *Fountain*—excepting, perhaps, the stiff and playful signature—thereby drawing extra

attention to the subversive intentions behind Duchamp's action emphasizing intentionality, choice, context, and thus, conceptual thinking as the generative force behind the materialization of the work of art. Gober's sinks—which are likewise intended to unsettle, by being installed in the most unlikely of spaces—drag this art historical baggage in their wake. Gober, however, did not purchase brand-new objects and re-present them unaltered on stands or within Plexiglas boxes in exhibition spaces—as Koons had begun doing in 1980. Instead, he made simulacra of ready-made objects with his own hands (that is, before he was able to hire assistants to carry out part of the manual labor)—something we only discover when looking closely at the work. There is almost always something a little off in Gober's early sculptures, which makes them somewhat endearing. With these simulacra of ready-mades, Gober reaches back to Duchamp by way of Jasper Johns, who produced a trompe-l'oeil *Painted Bronze* (1960) of a Savarin Coffee can, holding paint brushes

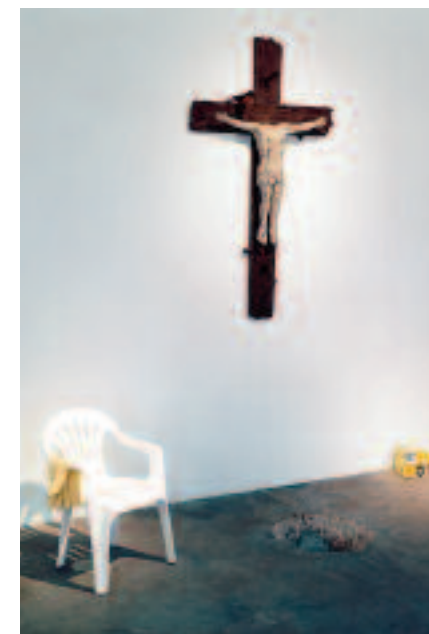
TOP LEFT: ANDREW MOORE, © ROBERT GOBER, COURTESY MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY / TOP RIGHT AND BOTTOM: D. JAMES DEE, © ROBERT GOBER, COURTESY MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

encrusted with medium—the kind of accretion of working tools we expect to find in an artist's studio, though we anticipate the real thing and not a three-dimensional illusion.

The singular focus that Gober brought to so many austere, minimal, and clunky sculptures of sinks recalls John Cage's famous dictum about repeating something uninteresting until it becomes anything but. Cage's ideas proved highly stimulating to Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, and he was a vital source of information on Duchamp at a time when the French master

remained relatively unknown in the United States—though that would change, thanks in part to the work of Johns and Andy Warhol, another artist who produced trompe-l'oeil sculpture ("Brillo Boxes," 1964) and explored quasi-obsessive repetition. Additionally, at a time when the gay community was losing more and more people to AIDS, Johns, Cage, and Warhol almost certainly registered with Gober as prominent artists who, like him, had come to New York, where one could—more or less—be oneself and test out ideas before an audience open to experimentation.

The urinal itself—an object in front of which, when situated in its proper context, a man unzips his pants and pulls out his penis—may have struck a chord with a gay artist, especially since Duchamp had explored homosexuality and gender in his appropriation of Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*, outfitted with a mustache and goatee, and in his self-presentation under the guise of the sultry Rose Sélavy—an idea Gober later picked up when he had himself photographed in a bridal dress fitted for a curvaceous woman (*Untitled*, 1992–96). Gober also fashioned some urinals, thereby making the Duchamp connection explicit.



Left: *Untitled* (detail), 2003–05. Plaster, fir, wool, linen, oil and semi-gloss enamel paint, bronze, cast plastic, lead crystal, fiberglass, wood, water, recycling pumps, stoneware, urethane rubber, cement, aluminum, pewter, beeswax, human hair, socks, shoes, and mixed media. Below: *Untitled*, 1995–97. Cast concrete, bronze, steel, copper, nickel silver, brick, fiberglass, urethane, cast plastics, motors, water, pumps, leather, wood, iron, beeswax, human hair, and mixed media, figure: 13.25 x 9.75 x 7.83 ft.; staircase: 29.75 x 8.33 x 25 ft.



TOP AND BOTTOM RIGHT: RUSSELL KAYE, © ROBERT GOBER, COURTESY MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY / BOTTOM LEFT: JOSHUA WHITE, © ROBERT GOBER, COURTESY MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY



TOP LEFT: THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART/LICENSED BY SCALA/ART RESOURCES, NY, © ROBERT GOBER, COURTESY MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY / TOP RIGHT: GEOFFREY CLEMENTS, © ROBERT GOBER, COURTESY MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY / BOTTOM: BILL JACOBSON, © ROBERT GOBER, COURTESY MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

Left: *Untitled Leg*, 1989–90. Beeswax, cotton, wood, leather, and human hair, 11.375 x 7.75 x 20 in. Right: *Untitled Candle*, 1991. Beeswax, string, and human hair, 8 x 4.875 x 6.5 in. Below: *Door with Lightbulb*, 1992. Paper, twine, metal, and light bulbs, approx. 96 x 120 x 32 in.



political leaders and all too often shunned by friends, colleagues, and family. *Two Partially Buried Sinks* (1986–87) rise like tomb slabs out of the grass or, conversely, sink down beneath the surface. The allusion is to a couple joined together, again, in death. The window of Gober's Mulberry Street studio, which he occupied from mid-1985 to the summer of 1991, looked out on the cemetery of St. Patrick's Old Cathedral. Death must have seemed omnipresent.

Lacking handles, faucets, and pipes, Gober's sinks appear neutered, neutralized, and emasculated—an apt metaphor for powerlessness in the face of a devastating, disfiguring illness that brought early death. Instead of plumbing (a possible allusion to male internal organs and genitals), Gober

offers two smallish, symmetrically placed orifices that stare at the viewer—thereby transforming some of these objects into cartoon-like heads, while also introducing the motif of the glory hole. In this association, Gober again follows Johns, who had paired plumbing and male genitalia and sex and death some years earlier. The sinks also mutate, as if subject to a genetic code gone awry. *Two Bent Sinks* (1985), for instance, become unrecognizable, framing a large, almond-shaped opening, a vaginal image par excellence that also carries a distinct echo of the mandorla in Catholic iconography. And in *The Flying Sink* (1985), shaped like an enlarged, lowercase “y,” the basin is situated uselessly at the slanting end of the tail.

Water is key to all forms of life, but Gober's faucet-less sinks cannot supply or hold water. In the Catholic Church, water is used during the sacrament of baptism, a rebirth by way “of water and the Spirit,” in order to “enter the kingdom of God” (John 3:5). Dry sinks, however, can offer no promise of salvation. Gober, who was raised Catholic and served as an altar boy, used explicitly Christian imagery in works both before and after the sinks, including a sculpture of a church with a white-flooded interior (*Prayers Are Answered*, 1980–81), an installation centered on a statue of the Virgin Mary with a culvert pipe running through its midsection (*Untitled*, 1995–97), and an installation featuring a headless crucifix (*Untitled*, 2003–05). Water flows behind and under the statue of Mary (which stands on top of a storm drain) and from the nipples of the crucified and headless Christ. This is clearly mystical water, the source of life and redemption.

Gober was always more overt about his sexual orientation than Johns. *Untitled Leg* (1989–90) depicts the lower half of a male leg, jutting out from the bottom of a wall, with a bit of flesh exposed between the hem of the pants and the top of the sock. Gober reported being “transfixed by this hairy bit of being,” which belonged to a handsome businessman spotted on a commuter plane. Johns famously included a set of male genitalia in *Target with Plaster Casts* (1955) and a cast of an entire male leg in *Watchman* (1964), but he bypassed the subject of his sexual preference in public statements. Then there is the photograph



Left: *Half Stone House*, 1979–80. Wood, stone, glass, stainless steel, paper, paint, and linoleum block print, 42 x 32 x 41 ft. Right: *Slanted Playpen*, 1987. Wood and enamel paint, 23.5 x 50 x 36 in. Below: *X Playpen*, 1987. Wood and enamel paint, 27 x 37 x 37 in.

of Gober wearing a bridal dress, set in what resembles an ad for Saks Fifth Avenue, printed on a simulacrum of a page from the *New York Times*; the image appears below an article titled “Vatican Condones Discrimination Against Homosexuals” (*Untitled*, 1992–96). In this and other works, Gober introduces the messy world of politics tangentially, adding a clipping from a New York tabloid or a page from the *Times* or carefully reproducing stacks of newspapers as in *Door with Lightbulb* (1992), a door leading to a glowing-red hell, judging by some of the headlines.

Sometimes the spirit and the flesh mix up in unexpectedly droll ways. Male buttocks imprinted with a musical score—a fleshy partita—hang suspended in front of a surreal wooded landscape (*Untitled*, 1990, installed on *Forest*, 1991). Or the rectangular wax base of a (liturgical) candle sprouts human hair, thereby transforming the thick shaft rising above it into an erect penis and the stiff mesh crowning it into a jet of sperm (*Untitled Candle*, 1991).

In work this allusive—and the allusions are cultural, political, and personal—it is easy to miss cues, which may or may not affect our appreciation of Gober's achievement. The exhibition catalogue, for instance, recounts that Gober's father had his workbench set up in the basement of the house he built, close to a large sink. Thus, the sink achieves an additional autobiographical resonance in the context of a difficult childhood, when Gober realized that he was being marginalized, and it



intimates at the strained relationship with his father. Gober's love for making objects, and for finding solutions to all manner of manufacturing problems, was inspired, in part, by watching his father handle materials and tools. Gober senior, however, reportedly did not share his know-how with his son. *Untitled* (2000–01) features two open doors that offer a view of steps leading down toward a basement.

All works of art are about memory, and Gober's particularly so. His childhood refused to let go of him, and in this respect, his work shows some affinities with that of Louise Bourgeois. Gober's oeuvre is likewise redolent of the home, though

expressed in the American vernacular, and in an elegiac voice. As he struggled to make a living in New York in the late '70s, Gober began—reportedly, without a moment's hesitation—making dollhouses, as if this were the most obvious way to proceed, and he sold most of them. The MoMA show closed with a large dollhouse (*Half Stone House*, 1979–80), thereby tying the late works back to the artist's beginnings.

After the sinks, Gober began making playpens. *Slanted Playpen* (1987), with leaning sides, appears to be in a state of inebriation, while the two long sides of *X Playpen* (1987) intersect in the middle to



Above: *Untitled*, 1993–94. Beeswax, human hair, sock, and leather shoe, 12 x 28.5 x 33.5 in. Below: *Untitled*, 1991–93. Wood, beeswax, human hair, fabric, paint, and shoes, 9 x 16.5 x 45 in.



form an X, so that the space of the object is reduced to two, smallish triangles. The leaning crib, a premonition of Robert Lazzarini's optically confounding *Payphone* (2002), embodies a world gone awry. The X-shaped version amounts to a blunt cancellation of play, an obliteration of what is so vital in childhood. These hard, Spartan works suggest that as infants, we immediately get placed behind bars — so that we stay out of trouble. Later in life, we may be put behind bars again — once we get into trouble. There is a humorous dimension to these cruel, surreal things, though they

are tinged with sadness and supply further hints of an unpleasant childhood.

The home — idealized in Gober's doll-houses — is where we are less than perfectly formed. It is another type of womb, as in *Untitled* (1993–94), which shows an adult male leg exiting the vagina of a truncated female form, shoe first. Memories of home reverberate throughout Gober's work in the form of single, handmade pieces of furniture or household items, seemingly new and obviously off limits — the single bed of *Untitled* (1986), a *Slip Covered Armchair* (1986–87), an *Untitled Closet* (1989), an

Untitled Door and Doorframe (1987–88), bags of *Cat Litter* (1989), and a box of *Rat Bait* (1992). Then, there is the wallpaper, which evokes the home elliptically. It opens up the walls with imagery conjuring dreams (both pleasant and horrific, as in the repeated juxtaposition of a lynched black man and a sleeping young white man, *Hanging Man/Sleeping Man*); desires (awkwardly rendered drawings of male and female genitalia); and an uncanny nature (*Forest*).

Gober also engages walls in remarkable three-dimensional ways, recalling Jean Cocteau's 1946 film *La Belle et la Bête* in which candelabra-bearing arms pierce the walls. In *Untitled* (1993–94), a dramatically cropped, slim female torso emerges from a corner, thighs spreading apart to bury themselves back into the walls. And that object of desire, *Untitled Leg* (1989–90), stands out stiffly from the bottom of the wall. With the portrait bust, the Romans used about a fifth of the body as a stand-in for the totality of a person, a completely arbitrary choice to which we have long been accustomed. In *Untitled Leg*, Gober gives us more — about a third of a person — but from the bottom, and so, instead of an individual, we get an everyman.

Body parts emerging from walls would seem to bestow life-giving force on architecture — after all, buildings, particularly houses, to which we attach importance acquire individual personalities. But more perversely, the limb sticking out of the wall introduces the idea of the glory hole. Through this reference, the body is imagined on the opposite side of the wall, and anonymity is preserved. In the 1989 installation featuring wallpaper covered in images of male and female genitalia, holes appear intermittently at torso level, filled with cast pewter drains — another surreal image, evoking the sinks with their missing plumbing, that turns the world on its side (drains are usually placed at the lowest point of a basin and installed horizontally). Drains also evoke the passage of fluids.

Some of Gober's wall-emerging body fragments bring to mind Hans Bellmer, a master of erotic imagery with a pronounced sadistic charge. In *Untitled* (1991–93), for instance, the male body, facing downward,

meets the wall at the hips. Holes filled with waxy drains puncture the flesh and even run through the underwear, like horrific sores, draining life out. The white waxen legs seem dead. The holes also read, on and off, like the ball joints on Bellmer's mixed-media dolls. The sandal-footed lower legs of young girls, snapped off and placed like logs inside a glowing fireplace (*Untitled*, 1994–95), can also trace their roots to Surrealism, and the same is true of a woman giving birth to a full-grown man (*Untitled*, 1993–94) and a gigantic *Cigar* (1991), which, as in a painting by Magritte, dwarfs everything around it. Like the virile candle, *Cigar* — the size of a body — alludes to life, which, once initiated, will eventually be reduced to nothing. This brings us back to the theme of the still-life as *memento mori* — *Cigar* recalls a shrouded body, but it remains a decidedly phallic and disturbing image.

In his room-size installations, including *Untitled* (1995–97) and *Untitled* (2003–05), Gober brings together unexpected juxtapositions in an effort to give each constituent part greater depth than it would have in isolation. Here, one thinks of a proto-Surrealist painting by de Chirico, or an assemblage by Miró or Dalí, taken apart and judiciously rearranged with plenty of breathing space between the elements. The exact meaning of Gober's poetic, occasionally pseudo-mystical scenarios, often loaded with personal concerns, remains happily elusive. Though his work is capable of powerfully conjuring trauma, disaster, melancholy, violence, political opportunism, hatred, discrimination, bigotry, and the battle between flesh and spirit, it can too often come across as a sermon, in which every inflexion is of the utmost consequence — an outcome only reinforced by a critical approach that is determined to drain meaning from every last detail. In the case of Gober, sometimes the less we know — about biography, context, history — the more affective the work. Ambiguity becomes him, a fact that he well understood, as he fought over-interpretation with deadpan non-titles that still manage to unsettle with their very ordinariness, just like a sink.

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Above: *Cigar*, 1991. Wood, paint, paper, and tobacco, 15.75 x 15.75 x 70.875 in. Below: *Untitled*, 1994–95. Wood, beeswax, brick, plaster, plastic, leather, iron, charcoal, cotton socks, electric light, and motor, 31 x 31 x 30.5 in.



TOP: JAN ENGSMAR, MALMÖ. © ROBERT GOBER, COURTESY MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY / BOTTOM: ANDREW MOORE. © ROBERT GOBER, COURTESY MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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