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.
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 clumsy 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-obscure 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, out-fitted with a mustache and goatee, and in his self-presentation under the guise of the sultry Rose Selavy—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.

The wall or corner-bound sinks, despite Gober’s objections, have been read as direct responses to the AIDS crisis of the 1980s—including by Hilton Als in the main essay for the catalogue accompanying the 2014–15 Gober retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art. Appearing early in the history of the epidemic, when the disease was poorly understood and contamination was dreaded, the sinks hint at cleaning, cleansing, and cleanliness—a rite of purification, to take Als’s observations a little further. Significantly, Gober’s sink is often of the large rectangular type usually found beyond domestic living areas, namely a slop sink in which buckets are filled and emptied and mops rinsed, the kind of sink relegated to factories, farms, or the basement of a house. This association makes Gober’s sinks more disturbing than their bathroom or kitchen counterparts—basements are often dark, dank, dusty, and, at least in popular culture, a bit scary. I wonder, in light of Duchamp’s and John’s love of word play, whether the sinks might also refer to a feeling of sinking, a sensation that would sum up the gay community’s sense of abandonment in the ‘80s, betrayed by religious and political omission.

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 kind of sink relegated to factories, farms, or the basement of a house. This association makes Gober’s sinks more disturbing than their bathroom or kitchen counterparts—basements are often dark, dank, dusty, and, at least in popular culture, a bit scary. I wonder, in light of Duchamp’s and John’s love of word play, whether the sinks might also refer to a feeling of sinking, a sensation that would sum up the gay community’s sense of abandonment in the ‘80s, betrayed by religious and political omission.

The 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 hagiographic. With these simulacra of ready-mades, Gober reaches back to Duchamp by way of Jasper Johns, who produced a trompe-l’oeil Painted Bronze (1966) of a Savarin Coffee can, holding paint brushes...
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 Gober’s 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-floored interior (Players Are Answered, 1980–83), an installation centered on a statue of the Virgin Mary with a culvert pipe running through its midden (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 John (Untitled Leg 1989–90), which 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. John was 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.

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 John, 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 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 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 auto- biographical 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 like- wise 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 indirection, while the two long sides of X Playpen (1987) intersect in the middle to
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 Papophone (2002), embodies a world gone awry. The X-shaped version amounts to a blunt cancel- lation of play, an obliteration of what is so vital in childhood. These hard, Spartan translations of play, an obliteration of what is reduced to two, smallish triangles. The X-shaped version amounts to a blunt cancella-


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 legs 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 juxtapo-
sitions 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, con- text, history—the more affective the work. Ambiguity becomes him, a fact that he well understood, as he fought over-interpreta-
tion with deadpan non-titles that still manage to unsettle with their very ordinariness, just like a sink.

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