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SCULPTURE

A Meeting of Past and Present

Heaven, Hell And the History Of Punch

Grounds for Sculpture
Through April 2013

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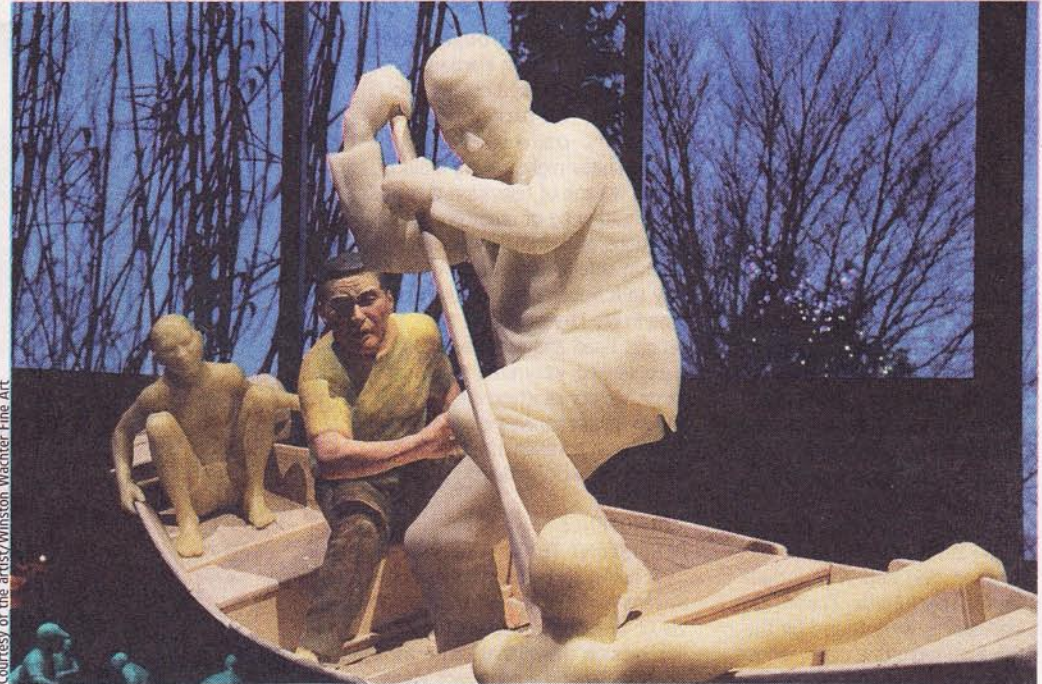
Hamilton, N.J.

‘H’eaven, Hell, and the History of Punch,” the title of Robert Taplin’s arresting survey show at Grounds for Sculpture, is not simply a provocative phrase designed to draw visitors to the sculpture park and exhibition center in this New Jersey suburb. Rather, it is an accurate catalog of the wide-ranging themes of the works included—although “the heavens” might have been more accurate, if less catchy, than “heaven.” More important, the unlikely string of nouns is also an effective equivalent for the hard-to-pin-down character of Mr. Taplin’s sculpture itself.

His compelling narrative works, at once deeply personal and dispassionate, are figurative, illusionistic and rooted equally in contemporary actuality, the history of art from antiquity to the present, canonical literature, and the mass media. Unignorable, nonironic associations with the fundamental texts and images of Western culture resonate with things we’ve just seen on the news, all of it enacted by figures whose disposition and formal relationships are driven by acute sculptural intelligence. Despite Mr. Taplin’s desire to suggest stories, he never resorts to illustration or settles for received ideas about the body; instead, he is wholly engaged by the expressive potential of manipulating masses in space, while keeping us off balance intellectually.

In “Heaven, Hell, and the History of Punch,” these ambitions first manifest themselves in “The Five Outer Planets” (2004), a group of paired male nudes—one twin opaque, cast in pale gypsum; the other translucent with internal lighting—representing Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune and Pluto. Ranging from twice life-size to two-thirds life-size, in approximation of the relative sizes of the planets, the pairs float, tumble, swim and crouch in a darkened space, the illuminated figures glowing while the solids dissolve into shadow.

Mr. Taplin describes the installation as “part planetarium, part pagan temple.” Yet though the classical origins of the planets’ names—the mythical conflict between the Olympian gods and



‘Get Back! (The River Styx)’ (2008) from Robert Taplin’s ‘Everything Imagined Is Real (After Dante).’

their parent Titans—clearly provoked his personification of heavenly bodies as heroic male nudes, the beefy figures seem contemporary. “I thought of the Titans as having lived a long time, aging, thickening, with mileage on them,” Mr. Taplin says. The immortals, improbably suspended above us, are impressive and timeless, weary and of the moment, once powerful but going to seed. Ancient Greek prototypes and people we’ve seen at the gym co-exist in these eloquent figures.

Compelling narrative works, at once deeply personal and dispassionate.

A similar conflation of past and present obtains in “Everything Imagined Is Real (After Dante)” (2007-09), nine tableaux inspired by “The Inferno,” installed in massive, wooden, confessional-scaled structures. We peer into their dimly lit interiors, sometimes looking down into secret spaces, sometimes disoriented by distorted perspectives and scale shifts. Small, agile figures dressed in today’s casual clothing—the poet, his guide Virgil and the characters they encounter on the journey through the underworld—evoke the mood of Dante’s cantos in modern terms. Mr. Taplin finds parallels between today’s political unrest and international disasters, and Dante’s visions of the damned,

reminding us that “The Inferno” was itself a metaphor for early 14th-century politics. But the result is never literal. The otherworldliness of Mr. Taplin’s images is announced by the monochrome pallor of his figures; only Dante, who belongs to the living, is polychromed.

Studying the tableaux, we become aware of what cannot be seen—things out of our line of sight, indecipherable, or lost in darkness. The exception is the largest and sole free-standing piece: the celebrated moment, painted by Delacroix, among many others, when Dante and Virgil cross the River Styx. Their boat tilts ominously over the edge of the supporting plinth, as Virgil repels a would-be boarder. Yet here, too, Mr. Taplin plays with our perceptions, adjusting scales slightly and blurring detail.

Works from the continuing “History of Punch” series (2005-12) also confound our faith in what we see. Mr. Taplin departs from the celebrated drawings of Punch’s ancestor, the *commedia dell’arte* figure PUNCHINELLO, by Giandomenico Tiepolo (son of Giambattista). Mr. Taplin imagines Punch, young and mature, traditionally costumed, in modern situations: shopping with his pant-suited mother, at a stag party, watching television, as a homeless person. Cast in sugary white resin, the small, complex groupings conjure up everything from the animated figures on Romanesque capitals (Mr. Taplin was originally trained as a medieval-art historian) to Renaissance

bronzes to 18th-century figurines to Edgar Degas’s bronze bathers, while remaining wholly in the present.

Suggestive as the enigmatic narratives are, it’s the sculptural qualities of the groups that distinguish them—the way, for example, the extended limbs of Punch and his companions define geometric chunks of space. But the closer we look, the less detail we find. Despite their apparent specificity, Mr. Taplin’s figures, like much of the best Romanesque sculpture, threaten to become abstractions.

Outdoors, over-life-size versions of two “History of Punch” sculptures broaden the discussion. “The Young Punch Goes Shopping With His Mother” (2010), far more detailed and crisply articulated than its small relative, was enlarged by the artist himself. “At this scale,” he says, “I needed more incident.” The digitally enlarged version of “Punch Is Homeless” (2012), nearby, is remarkably economical. The chunky figure with a shopping cart loaded with bulging bags is as “abstracted” as the foot-tall sculpture on which it was based. Mr. Taplin is fascinated by the difference.

“I’m interested,” he says, “in representational images whose logic doesn’t necessarily follow the logic of the thing they represent—representations that give you what you think you see all at once, but you don’t.” The works in “Heaven, Hell, and the History of Punch” do just that.

Ms. Wilkin writes about art for the Journal.