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# Advocate

NEWS & ARTS WEEKLY

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## The Lives of the Gods, at Wesleyan

The mythic sculptures of Robert Taplin

## No Sign of Bush in Alabama

Guard fliers say he never showed

## The Pink and the Blue

Gay life in Connecticut, 1642 - 2004



# A Planetary Pantheon

Robert Taplin's luminous colossi at Wesleyan's Zilkha Gallery

By Patricia Rosoff

## Robert Taplin's *The Five Outer Planets*

Through Feb. 29  
Ezra and Cecile Zilkha Gallery  
Center for the Arts  
Wesleyan University, Middletown  
(860) 685-2684

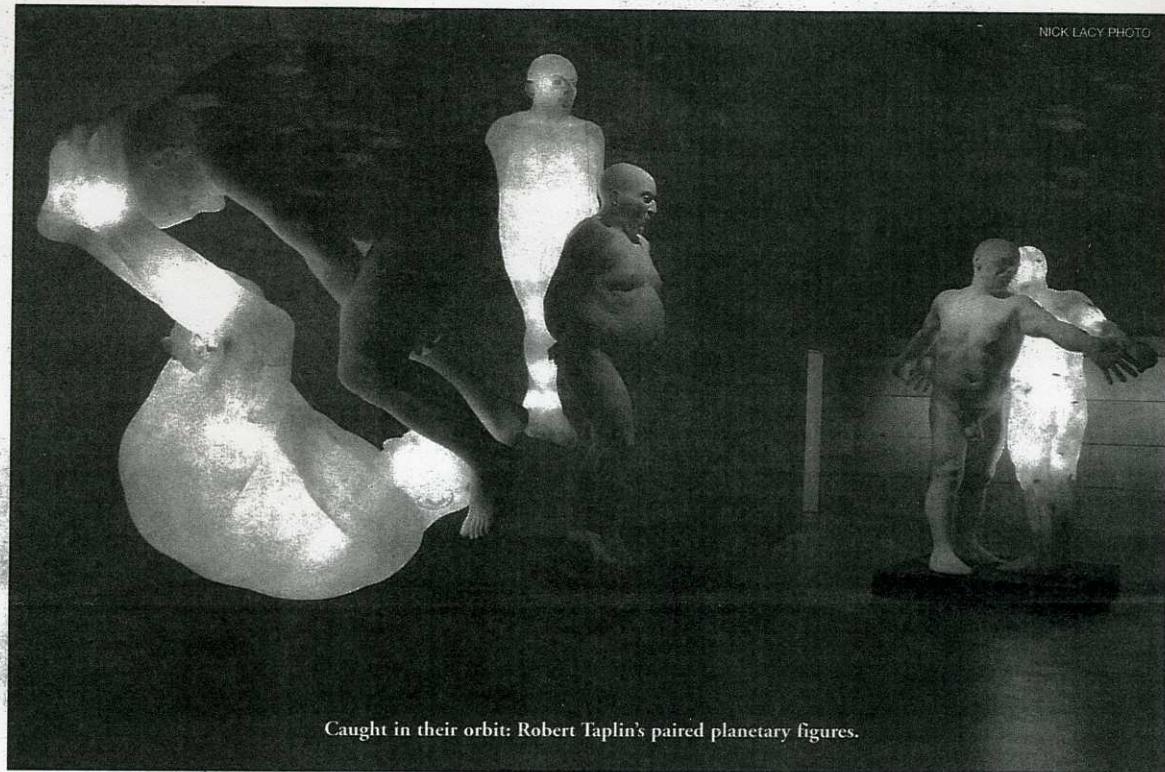
There's just no denying an exhibit like Robert Taplin's "Five Outer Planets" at Wesleyan's Ezra and Cecile Zilkha Gallery. You enter a room installed with five "planets" of the solar system — Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune and Pluto — each one envisioned as a couple of decidedly unlovely, bald, middle-aged men. Each of the couples are identical, cast from the same mold, although one is illuminated from the inside (like a paper lantern) and the other is cast in white plaster.

They vary in size, too, each pair in accordance with the size of their planetary counterpart: Jupiter is huge (over 11 feet tall, weighing nearly 500 pounds), Saturn is slightly smaller (a mere 300 pounds), and so forth, down to the distant pair that represents tiny Pluto on the far wall of the gallery.

This exhibition, curated by Nina Felshin, operates on two levels at once: scientifically and poetically (as planets and as mythology) as well as pictorially and sculpturally (as an image of the heavens and as figural colossi). Moving among the figures, suspended, seemingly weightless, in space, is the kind of experience that sends perception reeling, since their scale keeps changing with every step you take. Jupiter, for instance, who stands so hugely at the entrance, keeps shrinking as you move away; Pluto, who from a distance glows dimly, brightens and enlarges as you approach — revealing his cloned identity only as you get near.

Part of the puzzlement is due to the fact that you "read" these planets from a school-book understanding of the movement of the planets, which magically lends "movement" to stationary figures and disguises earth-bound passage as flight. Likewise, the pairing of a glowing "body" and an inert one

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mimics the relation of our own sun and its encircling offspring.

The installation is staged against the rugged neutrality of the Zilkha's austere concrete chasms, the entire space darkened but for the light of the figures themselves.

Then again, there's the immediacy of these effigies, something that rises from their, well, humanity, rather than from any conventional expectation of divinity. Title them what you will, this isn't "Jupiter" and that's not "Uranus," instead, what we encounter is the wish-you-could-forget-it image of your portly father caught stepping out of the shower, big belly, huge feet, flapping ears and all.

Taplin, always brisk and ebullient, is a 28-year fixture in the art scene of New Haven. He lives and works in New Haven, and exhibits throughout the eastern United States. He has received grants from the Connecticut Commission on the Arts, the National Endowment for the Arts and from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation. For Taplin, who also writes for *Art in America*, the stories of these contentious divinities make for the liveliest of soap operas. In Greek myth, the titan Saturn plots against his sons, swallowing them

whole; Jupiter, saved from the same fate by a conniving mother, retaliates, and, with the help of his disgorged brothers, castrates Saturn. In this installation, the character of each persona is reflected in the taciturn character of these human bodies — and their body language, variously pugnacious, stentorian, pensive and lyric.

Imbedded in all of this narrative, however, is the planet's cosmic relation — suggested as a kind of dance, choreographed in relation to the scientific truth about the solar system. Cosmic position and body language, like scale, set the dialogue into motion. Neptune's twins, for instance, swim together in graceful arcs. As it does for real, Uranus tumbles in its orbit, its twin personae punch-drunk like a pair of old boxers, galactically askew from some unrecorded collision of heavenly bodies in space. And Pluto's doubled personage, small and dim, haunts the perimeters of the gallery "space."

Taplin's visualization of Saturn (with great big ears) makes reference to what Galileo saw through his imperfect telescope; what we know today as rings were described, until better telescopes came along, as "ears" — based on the great scientist's blurred and imperfect impression.

So, a funny thing happens in the silence of Zilkha's austere concrete bunker of a space — the tangled dramas take on a cast of quite another sort.

The simple pairing of the figures, suspended in space, tumbling, rising, diving forward in a lyric arabesque, is complicated by the brute nature of the figures themselves. These are represented not as divinity but as Everyman — blunt and pugnacious, big-bellied and thick in the thigh — far from the Neoplatonic notion of the ideal that we inherited from the Renaissance and the likes of Michelangelo and Bernini.

Even if you bag all the cosmic nonsense and the mythological soap opera, and inure yourself to the scale and the metaphor and the science, there's something just compelling about these so-very middle-aged men — posturing and twitchy, beaky and patriarchal, and also, like old men and infants, pudgy, portly and bald. It is magical to walk among them, to see them floating there in space, so real and at the same time transported.

*Following its run at the Zilkha, The Five Outer Planets will travel to Smack Mellon in the DUMBO section of Brooklyn in March.*