

# Art in America

March 1998

## REVIEW OF EXHIBITIONS

### Robert Taplin at Trans Hudson

Realism in sculpture is different than in painting. It has little to do with questions of mechanical image production, which realist painting can't seem to escape, but is concerned with the most primitive art-making impulses, especially the urge to imbue inanimate materials with the breath of life. At least, that's the way Robert Taplin makes it seem. Often the lips of his subjects are slightly parted, as if caught in the very moment of inspiration—of accepting the divine spark. Intense, even anguished concentration and radiant calm are the work's emotional poles. But there is no getting away from the materiality of Taplin's men and women. They are cast in extremely fine-grain concrete; some of them are solid. Left raw, with marks from the casting process coloring their skin a ruddy brown, or painted in slightly sallow approximations of living flesh, or displaying effectively trompe l'oeil shades of patinated bronze, they remain dense, obdurate, supremely resistant.

In scale, too, they pull sharply away from easy accessibility. When Taplin portrays full figures, they are slightly less than half life-size. Three of the five sculptures shown involve pairings of these diminutive figures with comparatively colossal (roughly twice life-size) disembodied heads. Making sense of the whole involves mentally

breaking down and synthesizing information about work that is (literally) very hard and already fully complete. Even the titles, borrowed from literature, seem to wrap the work tight.

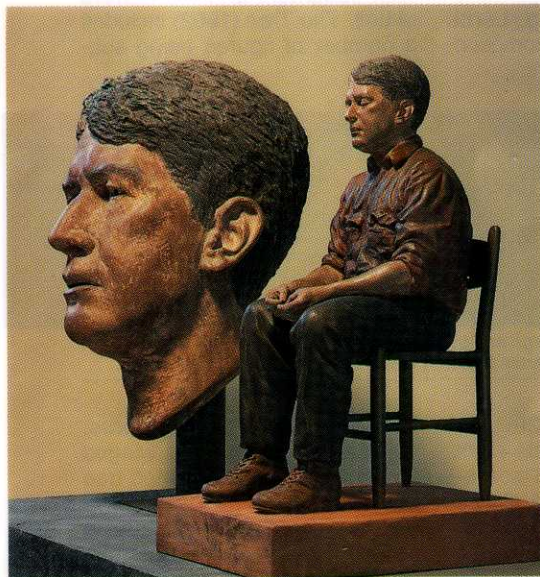
There remain, however, many imponderables. *The Body Is a Frail Leaf*, *The Mind Is a Fortress* (1994) is a bitter and engrossing tableau combining a flaccid, despondent man and a blindfolded woman, chin to chest, her heels drawn up and knees spread, making her at once clenched and vulnerable. Both figures are seated, naked, on woven lawn chairs, which rather deflatingly situates their psychic pain somewhere in Cheever country. Less complicated but just as compelling is *Don't Look Away (Alex)*, 1997, in which a red-haired woman stands proudly exposed, hands

clashed behind her back, torso thrust forward, weight firmly on both feet, eyes serenely closed. Adjacent is her enlarged head, eyes staring right at the viewer and mouth slightly ajar in an expression of such active engagement that it fairly insists on the violation involved in considering her naked self.

Without much fanfare, a great deal of tremendously interesting figurative sculpture has recently appeared. Stephen Balkenhol, Robert Gober, Charles Ray, Kiki Smith and even the Chapman brothers have all, in one way or another, set up flags on terrain once occupied only by a few eccentric realists—Robert Graham, Duane Hanson. Embodiment as a problem—social, psychosexual, even spiritual—is about the only issue that can be said to unite them. Taplin's contribution combines

penetrating psychological insight with what seems to be profound skepticism about the possibilities of intimacy. But his work might also be said to stand for a kind of deep and heartening faith in each subject's essential wholeness and privacy.

—Nancy Princenthal



Robert Taplin: *All the Nails Pointed In (Bob)*, 1997, concrete, steel, 70 by 44 by 26 inches; at Trans Hudson.