

## EXHIBITION REVIEWS

### ROBERT TAPLIN WINSTON WÄCHTER

Hell as described by Dante is re-envisioned by sculptor Robert Taplin in the works that comprised the exhibition "Everything Imagined Is Real (After Dante)." In a technical and expressive tour de force, Taplin leads us through the *Inferno*, beginning with the upper rings of hell where the venial, "lite" sinners are trapped. He follows Dante as the poet descends into the dark wood of his own psyche, meeting Virgil, crossing the river Acheron, and passing through Limbo on the way to the gathering storms of lust, the slime of gluttony and tyranny of avarice. Finally, he crosses the river Styx to the city of Dis, where all hell really breaks loose.

Taplin, a midcareer artist who began his professional life as a student of medieval studies and theater design, drew on those experiences in creating these nine dramatic tableaux (all 2007 or 2008). Two are freestanding tabletop sculptures with figures—modeled in wax and cast in resin—that are roughly a foot high. The rest are dioramas built into large, black, mausoleumlike cabinets standing 6 or 7 feet tall. These are atmospherically lit, the dead souls, or "shades," all white and the Dante figure in full color. And like the poet, Taplin uses the vernacular: realism, and contemporary settings and allusions.

In *I Saw the Master (Limbo)*, for example, the cabinet for which is reminiscent of a big old TV console, Dante, an average-looking middle-aged man, sits in a living room reading the newspaper. In the *Inferno*, Dante meets the master Homer in Limbo; here, the master is sculptor David Smith, a shade carrying one of his own sculptures. The settings Taplin establishes for the early cantos are colorful and substantial; as he travels deeper into hell, colors drain and the scenes turn ashen.

Robert Taplin: *Across the Dark Waters (The River Acheron)*, 2007, wood, resin, plaster and lights, 84 by 94 by 50 inches; at Winston Wächter.



Taplin uses the cabinets' openings to control the viewer's perspective on the dioramas, like a camera cutting from one angle to another. In the second circle of hell you are forced up close to a small window, through which you peer in on a German Expressionist streetscape—a distorted, *Dr. Caligari's Cabinet*-like lane; a lurid, Emile Nolde-inspired sunset. In the next circle, you look down through a hole in the ceiling at an anguished scene of dust-covered figures huddled in a primitive cave. The next is a wide-screen, cinematic image of contemporary urban ruin, complete with a man torching a blasted minivan.

The tabletop itself becomes the river Styx in one of the freestanding sculptures. Dante and Virgil are in Phlegyas's small boat when a shade comes up out of the filthy water—here, over the side of the table—and, trying to climb in, tips the boat to a precarious angle. Taplin shows Virgil pushing him down with an oar. "Get back with the other dogs!," Dante has him shout in his poem.

The city of Dis, in Taplin's depiction, is the bombed-out remains of Beirut, Baghdad, Dresden—you name it. Rubble is piled on rubble, and downed phone lines crisscross the street, which recedes in exaggerated perspective. Virgil stands rigid, watching Dante descend deeper into the underworld.

What is hell? Desolation, godlessness, other people? Interpreting the creations of Dante with inventions of his own, Taplin dramatically suggests that what goes on in your mind is every bit as significant as the world outside it. Everything imagined is real.

—Michael Harvey