

COLUMN: IN THE STUDIO

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Robert Taplin: Surprise of the Thing

There are bodies in crates inside Robert Taplin's studio. Yet this is not a laboratory of sinister purpose, though to see Taplin leaning over his newest sculpture like an enraptured anatomist might suggest otherwise. These wrapped figures are exercises in the relationship between stuff and story—the sculptor's most provocative subject of late.

Given that much of figurative sculpture is funerary, Taplin sees it as “a substitute body for

the dead” and not merely an “object to be looked at.” The tension between memorial and material should not be resolved by viewing the work, in Taplin's words, “as just a thing.”

In France, Taplin was moved by the Romanesque sculptural quality of Arles Cathedral, “partly because it's architectural...it enforces a physical body type of looking,” but also because the structure is narratively and emotionally driven. It's this same quality that

ROBERT TAPLIN: MAIN STREET SCULPTURE PROJECT

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appeals to Taplin in looking at Indian sculpture, which he considers “highly naturalistic in narrative ways.” Here the emotional tone is quite formal; its practitioners “never try to fool you about verisimilitude.”

The human forms that emerge in the artist's studio are rarely life-size. “From my point of view,” says Taplin, “scale is very malleable.” There is an Alice in Wonderland effect that alters a viewer's body image in an encounter with any figurative sculpture. One grows or shrinks imaginatively to gain a bodily sense of the work, to “feel Marcus Aurelius on that horse.” With an Alberto Giacometti figure, the exercise can result in vertigo. “Very disconcerting,” agrees the sculptor.

Taplin's approach to the question of realism is philosophical as well as sculptural. Mistaking the representation for reality, as in the furious reaction to the editorial cartoons depicting the prophet Mohammed, is obviously going too far. “As an artist, [there is] nothing left to fight with if representations are meaningless,” says Taplin. Describing himself as a “conditional realist,” he argues that “representation does have something to do with reality.” The relationship may be changeable, yet it is not illusory. “Representations are living things that you use to negotiate the environment,” according to Taplin; without them, “you are helpless.”

Taplin refuses the view that “the only reasonable attitude towards representation is skepticism.” Rather, he is willing to accept the flawed aspect and create art that embraces the idea of imperfection. There is no perfect realism. He says that there is something to St. Paul's claim that we see only as “in a mirror, darkly.”

In this new work, Taplin's theater design and medieval studies resonate. In one corner of his studio, a former industrial space, boxed stages contain his series of meditations on Dante, *Everything Imagined Is Real*. He wasn't



Robert Taplin, *The Young Punch And His Mother Go Shopping*, 2010, fiberglass, aluminum, internal lighting, 101 x 58 x 42". Courtesy of the artist and Winston Wächter Fine Art, New York.



Robert Taplin working on *The Young Punch And His Mother Go Shopping*.

going to illustrate the *Inferno*—instead he wanted to extract something personal. With these miniature tableaux, frozen in one moment of performance, he carefully reversed terms of the pilgrimage. “In my hell,” he says, “everyone is innocent. The guilt is on you the viewer, the Dante.” His hell is also recognizably nearby. In each of these small theaters there is a landscape of the moment, such as the war-ravaged city street that is the first gateway to the damned.

Five years ago, Taplin undertook a series of narratives with a reimagining of Punch, a character rooted in Italian *commedia dell’arte*. Fashioned of urethane resin, they have the look of wax, or of fifteenth-century French alabaster tomb figures, giving a delicacy to the small monster in his guises. The sculptor describes the response to his traditional comic figure as a paradoxically “kind of envious; kind of appalled.” Taplin recognizes the

“needling aspect of these sculptures” that emerges in the conflicting questions they provoke: “Shouldn’t he be guilty?” or “Should I feel like him...guiltless?” The piece titled *Punch Stopped at the Border* begs what Taplin calls the Marquis de Sade question: “Should this libertine be locked up or not?” Is Punch a warning or an invitation?

Taplin’s sculpture reads with a “wonderful ambiguity,” according to Richard Klein, exhibitions director at the Aldrich Museum, where an eleven-foot-tall *The Young Punch And His Mother Go Shopping* will be on display on the museum grounds through March 20, 2011. Klein anticipates a vigorous response to Taplin’s work, which he describes as “alive and breathing.”

As a public monument, Punch also poses a challenge. Taplin recalled a poem by Robert Haas that evokes the ordinary guilt that Punch is incapable of, giving him all the threatening

power of the circus clown. Yet Haas further argues that “where shame lives,” we also learn “a certain practical cunning, and what a theater is, and the ability to lie.” These are all the defining skills of art making, and though Punch may be shameless, he is an artist, too.

Perhaps that is what also draws Taplin to this trickster as a subject. As he works to assemble the armature and wiring that will light the figures from within, without knowing exactly what the final effect will be, he is fashioning a surprise for himself. Punch would gleefully approve.

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