

# GO Figure

*For inspiration, sculptor Robert Taplin mines 'the world that goes on in your head'*

BY MICHAEL HARVEY

**S**culptor Robert Taplin feels that the real real world is the one that goes on in your head. So he looks for art in the vernacular to confront heady ideas without getting lost in the cobwebs of pretentious obscurity. He likes digging through the culture and getting dirt on his hands.

His studio, part of an aged industrial building on a pitted West Haven street, has all the elegance of an old beer can squashed into the blacktop. It's a big factory floor of concrete and steel and works in progress on sturdy benches littered with tools. Plywood-crated sculptures are piled high along one wall, shelves stacked with cans and castings and models are everywhere. The floor is crowded with fabrication forms and buckets and bins and stools and steps and even a small crane. It's all about work.

But it is not all physical work. Taplin came to the idea of the vernacular in the early 1970s as a student of medieval studies at Pomona (Calif.) College, where he also studied theater design. He learned Italian so he could read Dante in the original.

"Dante didn't want to write in Latin; he wanted to write the way people spoke — in the vernacular. He invented his own religion, really," Taplin laughs. "He put his girlfriend Beatrice in there — it's about the world in your head." It's something he's been grappling with ever since — "the way you perceive that other world out there." And one's other self, that reflection, that other nature of shades and shadows.

Following college he left California with his wife-to-be, Nan Norene, for New England. In 1976 they moved to New Haven, where she got a job working with autistic and developmentally disabled children at Benhaven. He found pickup work here and



"The Source"  
(1985, forged steel).

"The Five Outer Planets" (2004, reinforced gypsum, fiberglass and lights): "Jupiter," "Saturn," "Uranus," "Neptune," "Pluto".



there — carpentry, welding, working at the Long Wharf Theater.

For a young artist interested in the hands-on making of sculpture, the Minimalists and the Conceptualists were not the place to look for inspiration. The best bet was another generation of abstract artists like Calder, David Smith, George Rickey or

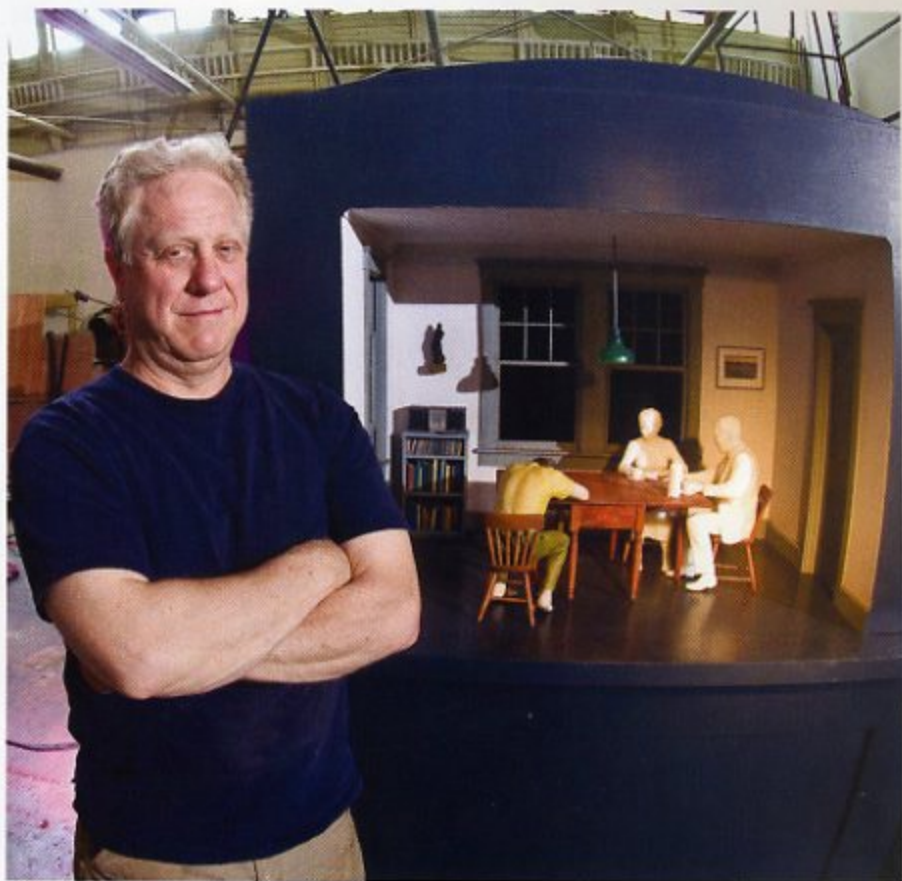
Di Suvero who made things themselves. Taplin became a "straight-on modernist abstract sculptor — all welded steel," he says. But abstract art aspires to a universal language, like music, and if doesn't hit the spot, Taplin quotes Kandinsky: "If it fails it's nothing more than necktie design."

In 1977 Taplin collaborated with his friend,

the poet Daniel Wolff, on a project that set nine dioramas around New Haven for a month. Each box depicted a verse of a ballad with the refrain "This is the place. It happened here" that was specific to the site of the box. It was new territory for Taplin — the model scale, the illumination, the staging, the narrative — but something he would return to in time.

In the 1980s abstraction receded and the figure emerged as the dominant force for Taplin. Already an expert welder, he consulted with a couple of blacksmiths and taught himself to forge life-size figures from sheets of steel. There is no pedestal: They are right there on the floor, caught in a moment of action, like desolate Beckett characters naked on an empty stage — crouching, dancing, pulling, about to jump or trip. There is always the expectation of before and after that engages the viewer in the figures' enigmatic story. In "Walk Like a Man (Heavy Sledding)," a naked man carries a child on his shoulders. The child clings to his head clasping his hands tightly over the man's eyes. With one hand the man reaches up to steady the child, clutching his knee, with the other hand he drags a heavy sled behind them. There is a stout metal box on the sled containing a head with bulging eyes. Is it father and son, game or struggle, burden or delight? And whose head is that — a vanquished foe, his father, or what the Germans call his *doppelgänger* — a "double goer"? The mythic quality of these figures and their actions charge all manner of speculation.

Only the women have hair; the men are bald with a similar shapes to their bullet heads, symbols rather than individuals. "I



PHOTOGRAPH: Anthony DeCarlo

The artist with a new work: 'She Turned Away (Beatrice Sends Virgil to Dante)' (2008 wood, resin, lights).



"Heide Twice" (1999, polychromed concrete on wood base).

made 'em up," explains Taplin. "It wasn't until the '90s that I started to use models." And in the process several things happened: The figures were reduced in size, they were modeled in clay and then cast rather than forged, and they became recognizable as contemporary individuals.

In a series of small bronzes Taplin made tabletop tableaus of possible incidents, curious little scenes that were more like scraps of events — a youth being arrested, a book burning, a lap dance — incomplete figures and ambiguous situations. "They set up narrative expectations, but what's left out makes them interesting," he notes.

At the same time he was modeling a series of "Double Portraits" — two images of the same person side by side: one clothed, one nude or one full-length, one head. "It's like film," Taplin explains. You have the long shot then you get a close-up. You zoom in; it introduces the element of time." And with time the narrative, but always the enigmatic narrative, the hint, the suggestion, the half-told story that leaves room for endless possibilities.

Toward the end of the 1990s Taplin conceived an ambitious project of ideas, symbolism, sculpture, materials and staging. *The Five Outer Planets* is an installation in which the planets appear as the mythological characters they are named after. Their relative size, rotation and distance from one another is based on the actual planets: Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune and Pluto. The figures themselves defy any Greek ideal. These are no "ripped" athletes with god-like bodies but mostly overweight balding guys with love-handles. "I was playing the classical against the anti-classical," he laughs.

Each figure was cast twice, once in opaque gypsum and again in translucent fiberglass. That "second self" again, that doppelgänger. The two were then partnered with each other in their whirling, tumbling dance through space — one the dark side, the other illuminated from within.

Originally constructed in 1999 at tabletop scale, a full-size version was completed in 2004. Standing on a low base, Jupiter is more than 11 feet tall. The others figures are suspended proportionally throughout the gallery illuminated only by the planets themselves. An installation of the large version was shown at the Zilkha Gallery at Wesleyan University in 2004.

After such a large commitment, Taplin in 2005 returned to tabletop scale when he made a series featuring an alter ego he calls Punch. There is young Punch going



"Punch Stopped at the Border" (2005, urethane resin).

shopping with his mother or being arrested at the border. "He's a figure of guilt and shame on one level, and all bets are off on another level," Taplin says. Much like a painter's sketchbook, the small size and the ease of modeling in clay allow him the freedom to play with new ideas.

And now, in his latest work, many of the thoughts and explorations of the past — the medieval studies, the street dioramas and the variety of materials — have gelled into a rich experience he calls *Everything Imagined Is Real (After Dante)*.

This work in progress depicts moments from the first nine cantos of Dante's *Inferno*. And immediately in the first tabletop tableau, "Thus My Soul Which Was Still In Flight," Dante, that inspiration for the vernacular, can be seen as a contemporary everyman, a little heavy around the middle, getting out of bed while his wife sleeps on. In the second tableau, a diorama called "She Turned Away," Dante is slumped, head down, at one end of a dining room table while Beatrice and Virgil (as all-white shades) sit taking coffee at the other end. The French plunger coffee pot is a sly reference to stylish sexuality.

So far six of the nine cantos have been completed and, stepped back from the group, they appear as large black, mausoleum-like cabinets standing seven or eight feet tall. Moving in, you are either peering into a dimly lit scene of intimacy or confronted with wide-screen mythic drama.

Taking on such a classic as source material offers an immediate problem that Taplin is well aware of: "I know," he says, anticipating the question, "is it just illustration?"

He turns his hand this way and that. "If it's Gerome, it is. If it's Ingres, it's not." He plucks a pair from art history to make his point that the better the art, the less the pejorative label "illustration" is likely to be applied. And in these pieces he has avoided illustration, giving a personal, contemporary interpretation of the cantos. "In my hell everyone is innocent," Taplin says. And the vernacular is very close to home: The scene in Canto Four, he points out for example, "That's an exact replica of my old house. And the shade, that's David Smith, carrying a David Smith sculpture."

All nine pieces of the complete *Everything Imagined Is Real (After Dante)* will be shown next January at the Winston Wachter Gallery in Chelsea, New York. Following that, in March 2009, they will be included in an exhibition, *Modern Elegies*, at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (Mass MoCA) in North Adams, Mass. ❖