

# Review

THE CRITICAL STATE OF VISUAL ART IN NEW YORK

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## Exhibitions

### Robert Taplin

Sculpture

Trans Hudson Gallery through

November 15

BY ROBERT M. MURDOCK

I AM AN ADMITTED FAN OF TRANS Hudson Gallery and its director, Joseph Szoecs, and have been following his varied exhibition program since he opened the gallery on West 13th Street over a year ago. But when I walked in the other day to visit the current exhibition, I wondered what was up — what I saw seemed out of character for this gallery.

At first glance, Robert Taplin's sculpture looks not only traditional, but academic in the most literal way. It reminded me of a print ad I had seen for an art academy, in which a nude male figure, poised and leaning forward like a specimen of early man, is supposed to represent an academic ideal in figurative sculpture.

But as I suspected, Robert Taplin's work is not what it appears to be at all. His sculptures, which appear to be bronze, or perhaps painted plaster, in the academic tradition, are in fact made of concrete. Far from attaining classical perfection, his figures are intentionally flawed and awkward, and their faces, rather than adhering to some ideal type, reveal specific individuals who seem to be detached, troubled or depressed.

He even includes himself in one of the works, *THE BODY IS A FRAIL LEAF*, *THE MIND IS A FORTRESS*, 1994, a haunting image and a definite standout in the exhibition. This pair of seated nude figures, with the female blindfolded and the male passive, perhaps despondent, is a perceptive statement about communication, or lack thereof, which can occur in a relationship. The blindfold seems a bit obvious, like a 19th-century allegorical device, but it does add to the mystery of this work.

Reinforcing the reference to the academy, Taplin constructs massive table-like pedestals, some of which resemble sculpture stands used in art school. He was in fact trained as an abstract sculptor and self-taught in figurative sculpture, an odd reversal of the traditional passage from art school to mature work.

Taplin is clearly tuned into recent developments in figurative sculpture — the rough-hewn work of Stephan Balkenhol, for example — as opposed to the more classical bronze figures of Robert Graham.

Though initially off-putting, Taplin's sculpture is provocative, with considerable depth and psychological insight. His images stay with you.