



**Robert Taplin**

Trans Hudson Gallery

Each figure sculptor must devise a set of strategies to animate the inert material of his or her figures, otherwise one ends up making mannequins—effigies frozen in a pose. We are so accustomed to this that we often overlook these various devices, which have traditionally included idealizing and simplifying forms and inventing gestures and poses that carefully balance emotion and narrative. In his recent works, Robert Taplin augments these traditional strategies. In one group he employs his characters' awkward positioning in space to bring their emotive narratives into vivid display. In a second, he intensifies the viewer's awareness of the hollowness of his materials (steel, paper, and resin), in some cases by illuminating them from the inside—playing this off the mass and location of the figures in space.

If some of Taplin's previous works vacillated between a deadpan realism and an earnest op-ed cartoonism, the pieces exhibited here reveal themselves in an imaginary world of suspended logic, of stories twisted outside their own plots. In a 1994 statement, Taplin, who is also a critic, described the previous works as striving

**Above and detail: Robert Taplin, *The Five Outer Planets*, 1999. Plaster, paper, and lights, 7 x 8 x 12 ft.**

“to illuminate paradoxes of human behavior and longing within the frame, not of a story, but of a situation.” If the best of those works freed themselves from their story, the ones here now embody their situation more fully—and are the better for it—becoming characters shed of simpler narratives in order to inhabit more complex arenas.

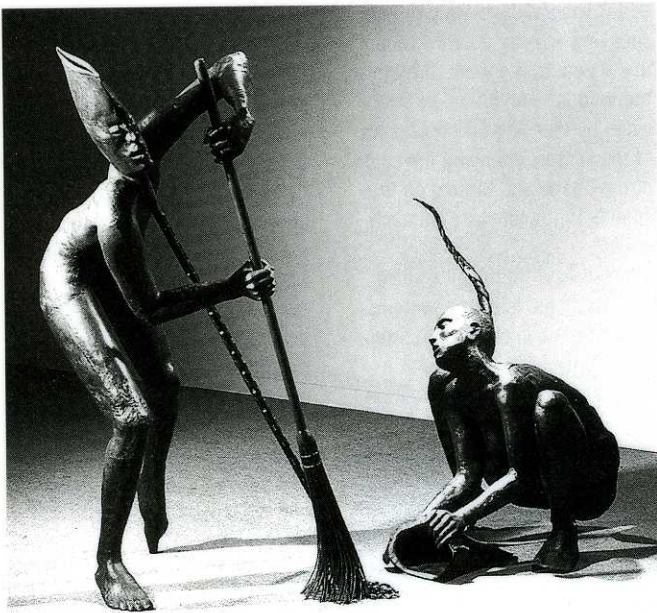
Three compositions, each slightly larger than life, of figures in forged steel exhibit one mode of Taplin's strange situational narratives: that of surreal parables without a conclusion. Each is an unpleasant allegory of human behavior and pointless activity, either driven by delusion or obsession. However, each also evokes and brings into play contradictory impulses that leave a final moral unattainable for the viewer. In the case of *Child is Father* (1986), the contending qualities are the force and the powerlessness of immature, partially formed impulses when they are given total control of adult behavior. In *The Coals* (1985), concentration and indifference, naturalism and nightmare, exist



together, unaware of the potential threats that each poses to the other. In both works, bodies are balanced physically and visually through lines that extend into space or across the floor, enervating their hollow masses. This skewing of the figures off their axes—especially in works this large—intensifies their emotional and physical presence.

Taplin's delightful and mysterious *The Five Outer Planets* (1999) inhabits a second world. Each personification of a planet is formed by a pair of identical figures: one of cast paper illuminated from the inside and one of dark-colored plaster. In a black room, Taplin's portrayal of planets through dark and light twin figures captures their dual celestial nature;





uniquely, they are bright objects that give off no light of their own, their dark masses illuminated by reflected light. Furthermore, through metaphorical characteristics that are almost corny when put into words—but work in the sculptures by being visually understated—Taplin merges characteristics of the planets with their mythological prototypes: Saturn, a large planet named for a deity who ate his children, is shown with an engorged, swollen belly; Neptune dives through space; and Jupiter with regal egotism turns around himself.

Easily overlooked in this show were two works related to *The Five Outer Planets*, *Pluto Rising* and *Uranus Rising* (both 2000). The latter, in particular, makes it clear that Taplin can evoke sculptural drama without the emotional flames and staged lighting of the other works—and this in turn makes it clear that the other pieces also work on broader levels. The hollow resin figure of a slumped Uranus, floating above the back of another man on all fours made of white plaster, depicts him as a prototypical human or god who eerily prefigures actions about to take place, but not yet determined.

Taplin's latest works continue to present a sort of hybrid realism

whose impact depends on the emotional resonance between the viewer and the figures depicted. It's hard to know, on the one hand, if the works exhibited here are more accomplished than his earlier ones, which in some ways seem more complete. On the other hand, these works are interesting precisely because they are unresolved in this way or that—bringing together qualities that don't always fit or striving to blend astronomy and myth. But most importantly, Taplin addresses all this through particular qualities that evoke both humanity and its situations. Like Goya in his engravings, Taplin not only invents images of people but implies the worlds that they inhabit, sometimes nightmarish, at other times fantastic or allegorical.

—Tom Csaszar

**Above left: Robert Taplin, *The Coals*, 1985. Forged steel and coal, 60 x 72 x 36 in.**