

# Art in America

September 2004

## REVIEW OF EXHIBITIONS

### MIDDLETOWN, CONN.

**Robert Taplin at  
Ezra and Cecile Zilkha  
Gallery, Wesleyan  
University**

Robert Taplin's sculpture installation, *The Five Outer Planets*, is a work both beautiful and affecting. Entering the long, darkened main room of the Zilkha Gallery, one encountered five pairs of sculpted male nudes suspended from the ceiling, each pair comprising a figure made of translucent fiberglass lit from within and its twin, identical in pose and size, formed of white plaster. The five pairs decreased in size down the length of the gallery, creating an illusion of deeper space than the room actually held, with the two pairs nearest the gallery entrance measuring (approximately) two times life-size, the next two life-size and the last pair two-thirds life-size. The comparative scales of the paired bodies roughly correspond to those of the five outer planets of our solar system: Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune and Pluto.

Comparing heavenly bodies and their attributes to human ones is a conceit seemingly as old as language, but Taplin makes it new by the tactic, as simple as it is surprising, of doubling each "planet," with

both figures cast from the same clay model. Contrasting opaque white plaster with the translucent, amber-colored fiberglass and intertwining or arranging the figures one behind or on top of the other gives rise to intimations of any number of not-necessarily-opposing dualities (sun and moon, moon and planet, thought and deed, past and present, body and soul, ego and id, etc.). Such symbolism, however, feels tangential to the specificity and ambiguity of the actual materials and forms before us.

The poses and interrelationships of each pair suggest various mini-narratives. The "Jupiter" figures stand back-to-back, arms outstretched, as though each were encompassing the universe but still watching his back. The two "Uranus" figures assume fetal positions in a yin-yang relation to each other, appearing to rotate over and over themselves, floating and slumbering seedlike in the amniotic fluid of space. "Pluto," perhaps the most evocative of all, crouches (in resin) with his hands grasping his feet, as if in contemplation of his mirror image, inverted beneath him (in plaster), to which he is joined at the feet and hands. This composition is duplicated in a sixth sculpture, quite

tiny compared to the others and, at the Zilkha Gallery, isolated without explanation in a separate room. The self-awareness implicit in the posture, reappearing in this context, is that this lonely planet may be intended to represent Earth.

[After Middletown, *The Five Outer Planets* traveled to Smack Mellon Gallery in Brooklyn.]

—Nathan Kernan



View of Robert Taplin's *Five Outer Planets*, 2001-04, reinforced gypsum, fiberglass, lights; at the Zilkha Gallery, Wesleyan University.