# Robert Taplin

## Recent Narratives

BY KAREN WILKIN

Above and detail: *We Went In Without A Fight (Through The Gates Of Dis)*, 2008. Wood, resin, and lights, 92 x 62 x 66 in.

COURTESY THE ARTIST

Among last season's most haunting exhibitions, Robert Taplin's "Everything Imagined Is Real (After Dante)" (2007–09) featured nine eerie "tableaux" enacted by small, life-like figures contained in massive wooden "shrines." Like miniature dioramas with unstable perspectives, the equivocal "stages" were lit in various ways, their characters agile, oddly solid, simplified little ghosts, usually devoid of color like classical statues bleached by time. Each of the tableaux, their sequence announced by Roman numerals from I to IX, was accompanied by lines from Dante's *Inferno*, from one of the nine cantos chronicling the poet's descent, following his guide, Virgil, downward into the circles of Hell.

These mysterious constructions were first seen early in 2009 at Winston Wachter Fine Arts in New York and later included in "These Days: Elegies for Modern Times," at Mass MoCA in North Adams, Massachusetts. If you find Mass MoCA, that bastion of cutting-edge efforts, an unlikely location for figurative, illusionistic work with an explicit narrative rooted in the bedrock of the Western literary canon, think again. "Everything Imagined Is Real (After Dante)" defies categories. "I'm interested," Taplin says, "in representational images whose logic doesn't necessarily follow the logic of the thing they represent—representations that give you what you *think* you see all at once, but you

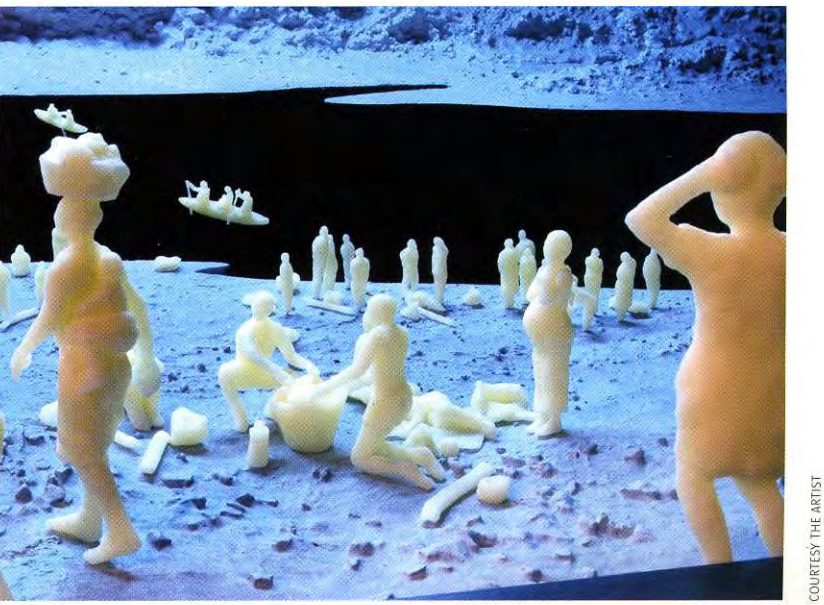
*She Turned Away (Beatrice Sends Virgil To Dante)*, 2008. Wood, polychromed resin, and lights, 78 x 56 x 47 in.

don't." The tableaux appear, at first, to be perfectly congruent with Taplin's selected verses. "And so they go forth over the dark waters and before they arrive over there a new crowd gathers," from Canto 3, for example, accompanies shrine III, a long, horizontal scene of figures on a riverbank, in keeping with Dante's account of doomed souls waiting for Charon's ferry.[1] But we soon discover that in III, titled *Across the Dark Waters (The River Acheron)*, Taplin plays havoc with spatial coherence, invoking a kind of Mannerist space that seems to expand and contract as we watch. Scale and temporal logic are distorted. We struggle to impose a rational reading on the figures, some busy with baggage, some watchful, some self-contained. What era do they belong to? What have they brought with them? Where do they come from? In the end, we accept the disjunctions as equivalents for the disquiet provoked by the entire series.

Like all of Taplin's work, "Everything Imagined Is Real (After Dante)" pays homage to the inherited traditions of Western sculpture, from antiquity through the Middle Ages—he was trained as a medievalist—to the High Baroque, at the same time that it resonates with the most vexing concerns of present-day society. Dante's verse is at once a generating impulse, a connecting thread, and a commentary on Taplin's tableaux. "I re-read Dante over six months," Taplin explains, "and I got involved with the images he draws from his own experience. He's supposedly describing Hell—battles and landscapes and things—but he's really talking about his own world. I decided to pull one image per canto from the first nine, and I saw how to stitch those images into a new narrative."

Far from illustrating Dante's invented cosmos of the damned, this "new narrative" is based on Taplin's own world, beginning with scenes of reassuring normalcy. Dante, tinted in life-like hues, rises from an ordinary bed; a ghostly Beatrice sends Virgil to him from a banal dining room. Along the two poets' journey, familiar domesticity gives way—color drains from everyone but Dante—to images of the devastation wrought by war and natural disasters. Rather than period dramas, Taplin gives us glimpses of modern-day people, refugees and ruins, book-lined interiors, *pressoire* coffee pots, and Scandinavian-style lamps in a world that includes airplanes, burning cars, and an apocalyptic vision of collapsed high-rises built of shoddy pre-cast concrete. The disaster images have their origins in the mass media; others are more

**Below left and detail:** ***Across the Dark Waters (The River Acheron)*, 2007. Wood, resin, plaster, and lights, 84 x 94 x 50 in.**



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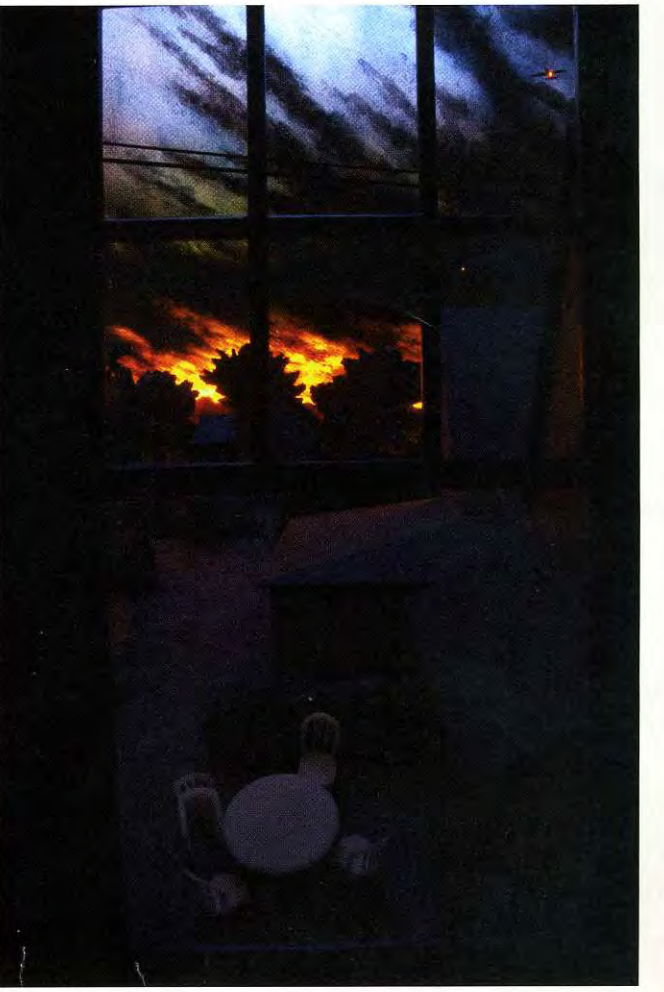
*I Saw The Master (Limbo)*, 2008. Wood, resin, and lights, 78 x 56 x 47 in.

personal. One tableau takes place in a replica of a house where Taplin once lived, and the revered figure in IV, *I Saw the Master (Limbo)*, carries a replica of David Smith's early sculpture, *Spectre Riding the Golden Ass*, an homage to a sculptor whom Taplin greatly admires. These allusions to the present can also be seen as parallels to Dante's practice of populating Hell with the political malefactors of his day and people chosen from his personal "enemies list."

Taplin's control of light within the tableaux heightens their sense of immediacy and currency while intensifying their theatricality. In a dimly lit view out a window onto an inexplicably dark but flaming sky, we slowly discover the tiny lights of a distant plane; a strategically placed scrim, a luridly lit background, and a single streetlight add menace to a scene of enigmatically related figures and a burning car. The postures and gestures of the protagonists, like their vaguely hip-hop clothes, seem familiar but ritualized, accurate but ambiguous. The framing of the scene

Below and detail: *I Saw Shadows Coming (The Second Circle)*, 2008. Wood, Plexiglas, plaster, resin, and lights, 92 x 62 x 66 in.



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**Above and detail:** ***Recognize Me If You Can (The Third Circle)*****, 2008. Wood, resin, plaster, and lights, 80 x 54 x 42 in.**

reminds us of its origins as a photograph, while its scale and staged violence trigger associations with such unlikely prototypes as Punch and Judy shows. Taplin's history supports the comparison. A fairly recent series chronicling the life of Punch—a wizened child in his traditional costume, seen with his mother (chic contemporary pants suit) or misbehaving in very adult ways—in some ways anticipates the Dante-inspired tableaux with their updating of the past, monochrome pallor, and weird alterations of scale.

"Everything Imagined Is Real," in fact, sums up many of Taplin's most passionate concerns of the past three decades. He first attracted critical attention in the late 1970s with an urban "peep show" installation made partly in response to a poem written by his friend Daniel Wolf: "The idea of working from text stuck, only 30 years later, I'm working with a dead poet." Incorporating contemporary mass-media images has also long been part of his working vocabulary. A series of intimate tableaux made in the 1980s was based on newspaper photos of paradoxically neutral but apparently loaded events: a family at a funeral, men at a crucial political moment.

"In the 1980s, everyone was media-scavenging, but I was always one step out of sync," Taplin recalls. "They were all trying to expose the perfidy of the media, and I was finding compelling images and working forward from that. I found that I gravitated toward images of violence, both international and domestic—man's cruelty to man. I've always had a lot of involvement with photography, a love/hate relationship, with everything from Muybridge to Arbus."

At first, Taplin used photographs as a substitute for working from the model, but part of what interested him in these sources was the challenge of translating two-dimensional graphic imagery into sculptural language. In his 1980s tableaux, figures caught in fraught moments are often cropped, shown only from the waist up, as if sliced by a displaced plane that survives as a memory of traditional relief, transposed from vertical background

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***One Nation Rules (Fortune)*****, 2008. Wood, resin, and plaster, 84 x 94 x 52 in.**

***Get Back! (The River Styx)*, 2008. Wood, resin, and polychromed resin, 82 x 64 x 52 in.**

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to literal horizontality. The slicing at once emphasizes the mass of the figures, reminds us of their origins as photographs, and underscores the artifice of Taplin's inventions. In the Dante series, which Taplin describes as "reverse reliefs," each of the deeply recessive tableaux demands a different relationship from the viewer. Nothing is quite what it seems. Scales shift. Some figures loom; others are so diminished that they suggest impossible distances. Some tableaux, such as III, *Across the Dark Waters (The River Acheron)*, prove to have multiple perspectives, so that we are forced to keep changing our angle of vision—and our assumptions—simultaneously strengthening our sense of engagement and distancing us from the image.

Our relationship to Taplin's confrontational dramas is further altered in two tableaux unconfined by the framing shrines: Dante's awakening, I, *Thus My Soul Which Was Still in Flight (The Dark Wood)*, and the largest of the series, VIII, *Get Back! (The River Styx)*, a version of the barque of Dante so beloved by Romantics such as Delacroix. "In the poem," Taplin says, "sometimes we see Dante as a character and sometimes we see what he sees. In my piece, we first see him, then we see what he sees, then by VIII, we're part of it, and at the end, we see him again." Initially, we watch Dante wake, then share his perceptions. Often, what he sees is as tightly framed as a peep show. "I like that theatrical Baroque aesthetic," Taplin says. "Bernini puts you exactly where he wants you." We peer down a viewing hole into an interior where refugees huddle with their meager provisions, a bitter reversal of Dante's text, which is about the punishment for gluttons. In VIII, *Get Back! (The River Styx)*, as in Delacroix's painting, Virgil repels an evildoer trying to climb into the boat as he and Dante cross a pestilent lake. The would-be boarder links our space to the fictive space of the boat. We join the dead souls in the water and become metaphorical actors rather than passive spectators. Finally, in IX, *We Went In Without a Fight (Through The Gates Of Dis)*, from Canto 9, we see both Dante and what he sees, as he stares at a destroyed city. We are witnesses and participants, kept at a distance but with our perceptions sharpened by framing, focus, and lighting.

Dante's poem begins: "In the middle of our path through this, our life, / I found myself in a dark wood, / where the straight road was hard to see."[2] Taplin, in the midst of his path through life, has found a straight road to some of his most fascinating and enriching sculpture to date. Reversing roles, he becomes Virgil, the guide, who leads us on a journey that makes us question some of our most firmly held assumptions about the relation of past and present, naturalism and invention, distance and engagement. If he draws parallels between the horrors of the *Inferno* and our own troubled planet, he also reminds us of the power of art to move us deeply as compensation for our gritty quotidian world.

**Notes**

[1] Translations, unless otherwise noted, by Robert Taplin.

[2] Translation by Karen Wilkin.

*Karen Wilkin is a writer living in New York.*