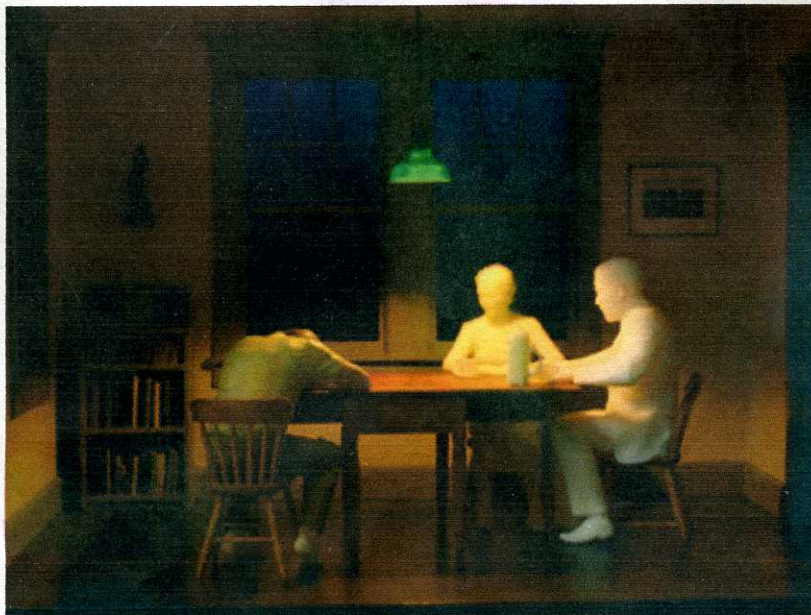


Robert Taplin (<http://www.nccsc.net/2009/6/1/robert-taplin>)

In his recent exhibition, "Everything Imagined Is Real," at Winston Wachter Fine Art in New York City, Robert Taplin presented a series of nine sculpted contemporary scenes (all 2008) based on Dante's *Inferno*. In the first, *I. Thus My Soul Which Was Still in Flight (The Dark Wood)*, a groggy, naked man climbs out of a bed in which a woman is still asleep. The bed—a large doll's size—stands on a small sisal rug, set on a Pottery Barn diagonal to its massive pedestal, as if on a rotating stage. The man's thick-necked, middle-aged body, the woman and the bedclothes are all cast in resin and sketchily painted. The polychrome on the man's torso and limbs is in harmony with the rendering of his form, but on his face it's more detailed, emphasizing his indeterminate expression, with half-open mouth and one eye more bruised and wearier than the other. This tableau is taken from Dante's first canto, "as he, who with laboring breath has escaped from the deep to the shore, turns to gaze at the churning waters, thus my soul, which was still in flight, turned back to look again at the pass which had never yet let any go alive." Taplin, who studied medieval literature and theater design and learned Italian so that he could read Dante in the original, has posted his direct prose translations of fragments of the *Inferno* next to his sculptures, so we can see that he has sculpturally translated and adapted rather than illustrated them. By setting Dante's encounters with unrepentant sinners in our ordinary present, among common American architecture and furnishings and sometimes bathed in the blue glow of television screens, among the hellish circumstances we watch as news, he has created vivid narrative sculptures that twist and teach our perceptions.



Robert Taplin, II. *She Turned Away (Beatrice Sends Virgil to Dante)*, 2008
Courtesy Winston Wachter Fine Art, New York City

This first one is, bluntly, a painted sculpture and not a miniature special-effects model. There's wit in the color choices: the forest green blanket that still covers the woman is crumpled and peaked, like a textbook illustration of a mountain pass, and the wrinkled blue sheets suggest Dante's churning waters. Taplin has clearly studied the painted sculptures of Raymond Mason,

Duane Hansen, John Ahearn and others, but this piece is more reminiscent of Edward Hopper's interiors with their paltry, humdrum furnishings, figures with startling flesh tones and women, like this sleeper, with hair painted light red.

All but two of these nine sculptures are dioramas in which the cantos are represented by scenes staged within a proscenium. In these scenes, the protagonist is the only figure to be polychromed. The other characters are presented in softly modeled, faintly translucent, waxy off-white resin that could be the substance of a dream. The small furniture, by contrast, is precisely crafted and perfectly scaled. Tiny lighting fixtures illuminate the scenes. Taplin draws deeply on the associations implicit in vernacular design and décor, and uses materials subtly for symbolic effects. He recalls the favorite *pietra serena* of Florentine Renaissance architecture in the dark grey trim of the white-walled, ordinary American dining room (an exact replica of Taplin's old house) in *II. She Turned Away (Beatrice Sends Virgil to Dante)*. The dark glossy paint on the floor of the room in *IV. I Saw the Master (Limbo)* creates a surface that visually drops away, leaving the figures and furniture suspended in a spooky void. He uses lighting more dramatically, as stage magic, in *III. Across the Dark Waters (The River Acheron)*, a scene with generic refugees crowded on a riverbank, standing in clusters, crouching to pack belongings or crossing in small boats. What transforms this broad panorama from a history painting or a still from news footage or movies we can play in our heads to a beautiful nightmare is the diffused blue light which the black river absorbs but which makes the unpainted figures glow as if irradiated. In *VII. One Nation Rules (Fortune)*, a theatrical scrim partly sprayed with paint makes smoke drift from a burning car, while one ray of orange light focused on a spray of lumpy plaster on the back wall of the diorama forms a convincing illusion of a column of flame and billowing smoke.

These dioramas are housed in big, somber cases with heavy cornices, built of dark wood. They are reminiscent of the heavy theatrical frame Frederic Church used for the traveling exhibition of his huge, detailed painting *The Heart of the Andes* and of ethnographic museum furnishings, as well as puppet theaters or old-fashioned cranked peep-show boxes. These hulking cases imply internal machinery, as though one could insert a nickel and watch a flickering locomotive race toward its victim, or comic hoodlums cavort with guns, but the cases outweigh and overwhelm the viewer, as if to entomb the scenes or present them as memorials. What the cases are most literally like, however, are the big dark pieces of furniture most people live with, look at and call "entertainment centers."

Taplin's boldest translation from Dante comes in *V. I Saw Shadows Carried on That Wind (The Second Circle)*. This scene is set into the darkest, most narrow and vertical of the cabinets. Dante does not appear in the scene, but the viewer takes his place and looks down from his window. The viewer must peep through, and out of, a double-hung window, like the windows in the rooms in the previous dioramas, to see a view of a small backyard, crowded and overshadowed by neighboring houses, all grey beyond one house painted a deep red. The sky is streaked with a bloody sunset, or the flare of a burning city. Across this sky, several planes fly toward and over us as if in formation. Down in the yard are shrubs, a boat on a trailer under a cover or sail, and a table with four chairs, one of which has toppled over. In the corner directly below is a fleeing figure, a frozen runner. In Dante's *Inferno*, the Shadows scourged by the wind are of those who, like Paolo and Francesca, have allowed lust to overcome reason, and Dante implicates himself among those who, as poets who write of love, spark desire. Taplin has transformed the famous lovers into fighter-bombers, destructive, phallic and merciless. In so doing he politicizes desire and transforms it from a life force to a death wish. His vision of small-town America under attack is one we have all recently imagined, and

perhaps, by analogy to Dante's implication of himself in Canto V, Taplin is saying that we implicate ourselves by our ability to imagine it and yet do nothing to prevent it.

The most impressively detailed and poignant is the final diorama: *IX. We Went In Without a Fight (Through the Gates of Dis)*. Virgil's figure of flattened, unpainted resin stands in the foreground, looking onto a scene of bombed buildings, a street or perhaps a cul-de-sac. Dante, who is not lit except by a faint general blue glow, is lost amid the rubble in the middle distance. The effect of bombs on typical apartment buildings, the broken walls, fallen wires and curtains twisted violently aside by suction, seem very real and affecting in this painstaking miniature. This is a night scene, as are most of the sculptures, and the sky under the proscenium's arch is dotted with stars. The effect is genuinely spooky—Dante going on ahead to a dead end.

As both a translator and an artist, Taplin has chosen material that has inspired many an artist before him, but he has largely succeeded in making it his own. Taplin did not choose each canto's most expository lines, as Gustave Doré or George Grosz did for their illustrations. Nor has he presented a ghostly transcription of the media's perceptual and spiritual confusion, as Robert Rauschenberg did with his transfer drawings for the *Inferno*. It is only in *VIII. Get Back! (The River Styx)*, which like the first tableau is not a diorama, when one sees a figure of a damned soul—who in attempting to climb aboard the ferry across the Styx is driven off with an oar and dangles over the pedestal's edge—that one is reminded of Rodin's *Inferno*, his massive *Gates of Hell* with their tangle and spill of small figures. In his earlier polychromed bronze tableaus, Taplin played with and upon our perceptions and expectations of narrative sculpture and portraiture. With these sculptures, far more beautiful and evocative in spite of the banality of their materials, he attempts something much more ambitious. With Dante as his Virgil, he brings us into engagement with our ability to live with ourselves, to tolerate evil and to consume images of suffering and destruction. By working on a small scale, with the magic of toys and play and theater, he pulls those images out of their virtual reality on our screens, reawakens them in our imaginations and makes that engagement a pleasure.

Winston Wachter Fine Art, 530 West 25th Street, New York, New York 10001. Telephone (212) 255-2718. On the web at <http://www.winstonwachter.com/> (<http://www.winstonwachter.com>). Taplin's work is also on view (through February 28, 2010) in "These Days: Elegies for Modern Times," at Mass MoCA, 87 Marshall Street, North Adams, Massachusetts 01247. On the web at www.massmoca.org (<http://www.massmoca.org>).

American Arts Quarterly, Volume 26, number 2.