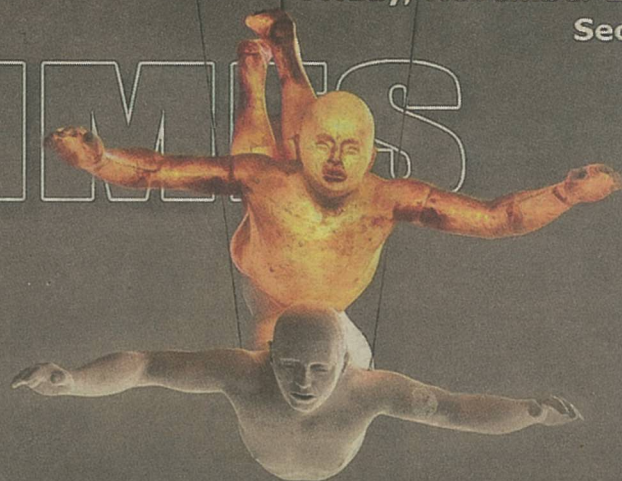


# GOOD TIMES

## Other worlds

Robert Taplin's three-part exhibit: "Heaven, Hell, and the History of Punch" at Grounds for Sculpture





FINE ARTS

# Planets, Purgatory and Punch

TAPLIN'S SUBJECTS IN GROUNDS FOR SCULPTURE EXHIBIT RANGE FROM COSMIC TO COMIC

**Robert Taplin:**  
**Multiple Exhibits**  
**When:** 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Tuesdays-Sundays, through April 2013.  
**Where:** Grounds for Sculpture, 18 Fairgrounds Road, Hamilton  
**Admission:** (609) 586-0616 or groundsforsculpture.org

**By Janet Purcell**  
FOR THE TIMES

Strange-looking men have taken over the Museum Building at Grounds for Sculpture. There are stout, middle-aged, translucent fiberglass and plaster men spinning, flying and tumbling in the downstairs main gallery. In the rear gallery, an eerie lifelike man is moving through scenarios toward the darkness of hell, and on the mezzanine, a strange little guy wearing a dunce cap cavorts from one audacious situation to the next.

Between now and next April, visitors to the Museum Building can surround themselves with an assembly of three series of works by nationally revered sculptor Robert Taplin.

"Heaven, Hell and the History of Punch," his most recent series, comprises "The Five Outer Planets," sculptures of Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune and Pluto envisioned by him as conjoined pairs of stout, middle-aged men.

The other series are "Everything Imagined Is Real (After Dante)" and "Punch," based on the shameless behavior of the Italian "commedia dell'arte" character Punchinello, the trickster.

The "Five Outer Planets" exhibition is in the main gallery. Each planet is exhibited in double, with one of the pair cast in plaster and the other in translucent fiberglass resin that is lighted from within, thus illuminating its plaster double and providing the main source of light in the darkened gallery.

Careful attention has been placed to position each in the relative proportions and positions of the planets. Jupiter and Saturn are close to twice life size, while Uranus and Neptune are not quite, and Pluto, which scientists have



PHOTOS BY MICHAEL MANCUSO/THE TIMES

**"Punch Receives a Prize" is one of the settings in Robert Taplin's "Punch" series, part of his exhibition "Heaven, Hell and the History of Punch" at Grounds for Sculpture in Hamilton.**

**"I tend to work in extremes, not middle-of-the-road. People feel life size is the natural scale, but that doesn't interest me. One-to-one just looks to me like limited imagination."**

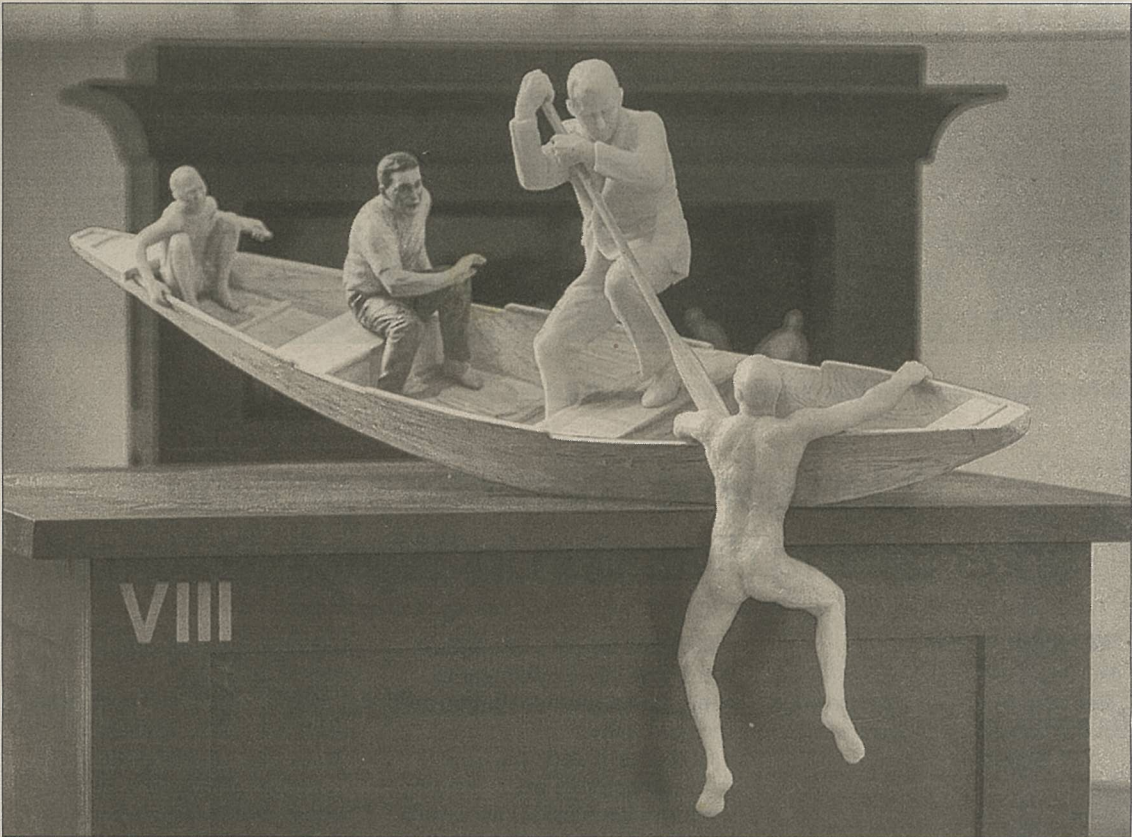
ROBERT TAPLIN

demoted to "dwarf planet" status, is about two-thirds life size.

The five figures represent a family group consisting of a grandfather, father and three sons. Jupiter is the current head of the family, Saturn is his father, and Uranus is his grandfather. Neptune and Pluto are his brothers.

Accompanying the exhibition are materials not only briefly describing the supporting Greek mythology, but also Taplin's intent in portraying the planets as figures that metaphorically represent the situations and people we all live with today.

Moving to the rear gallery on the museum's ground floor, you will find Taplin's series based on the first nine cantos of Dante's



"Get Back! (The River Styx)" is part of Taplin's series "Everything Imagined Is Real (After Dante)."

"Inferno" — the Upper Hell. Displayed in nine stagelike cabinets designed and constructed by Taplin himself, you can follow his small life-like figures descending toward hell.

Repositioned into contemporary situations, the figures are both eerie and lifelike. Because Dante is alive, his figure is in color, wearing today's clothing. The other figures, also appearing in modern garb, are unpainted.

In the first setting, Dante is jumping out of bed in the middle of the night. Next he meets with Virgil in a room setting that Taplin has modeled after one of his own. In another, he crosses the dark river into Hell. He traverses through several scenarios, and in cabinet No. 9, he passes through "The Gates of Dis" into Lower Hell, where the ghostlike Virgil stops on the threshold, and Dante goes forward by himself.

The mood of the exhibition is lightened upstairs on the



Conjoined pairs of middle-aged male figures represent each of "The Five Outer Planets," Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune and Pluto in Taplin's newest series of sculptures.

mezzanine, where the "Punch" collection, which Taplin describes as little toys, is on display. These are cast resin miniature scenes in which Punch cavorts shamelessly

through one situation after another, all relating our own era. Scenes ordinary people may not encounter in everyday life but that

SEE **TAPLIN**, PAGE G08



## FINE ARTS

## Taplin

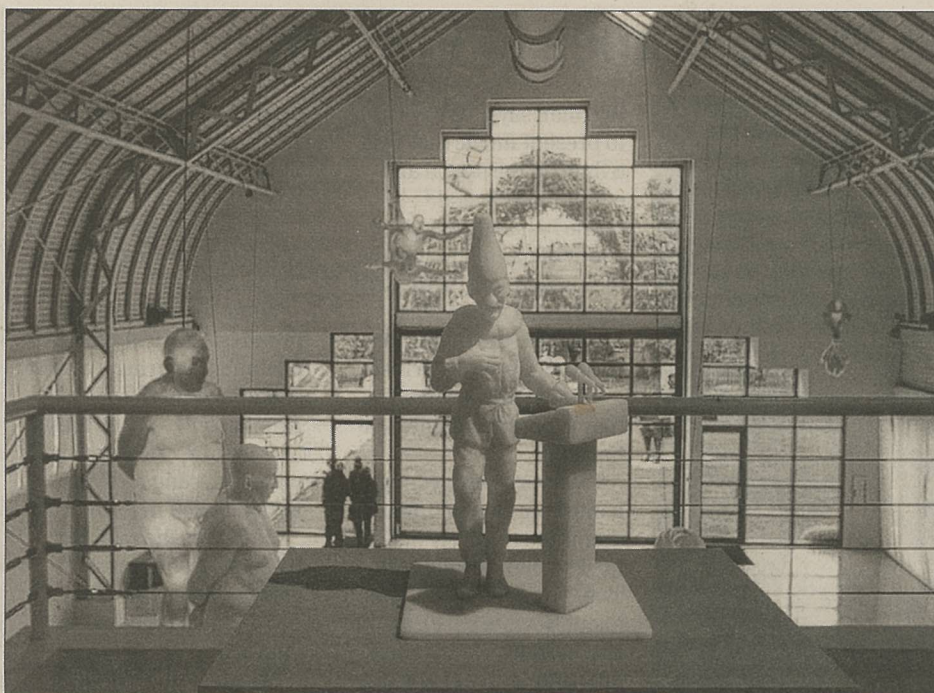
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we all enjoy reading about in the newspapers or having voyeuristic looks at on television.

As Taplin says, "Punch is a little hook-nose humpback clown, a pain in the neck who is oversexed and unreliable. He doesn't play by the same rules we do, and he gets away with a lot."

We see him making love to a duchess or doing a magic trick at a birthday party, where he pulls a cloth off a top hat, and instead of making a rabbit appear, he releases an atomic bomb complete with its mushroom cloud.

In another scene, he's arrested at the border for crossing lines with his puppets. He's seen watching TV with the maids (about which Taplin comments, "He likes all that back-of-the-house stuff.") He's seen as a homeless person pushing a shopping cart full of his sad



PHOTOS BY MICHAEL MANCUSO/THE TIMES

"Punch Makes a Public Confession" is part of Robert Taplin's exhibition "Heaven, Hell and the History of Punch" at Grounds for Sculpture.

belongings.

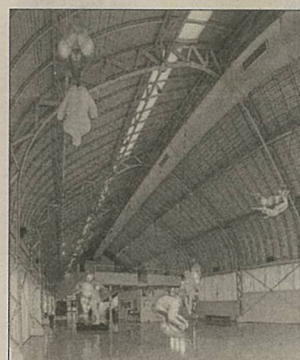
He is also shown making an "OK" sign with his circled fingers, watching

a nude woman tumbling in the lap of a seated man at a stag party, and in yet another scene he receives a prize while surrounded by people in contemporary dress applauding as he, looking pleased as Punch, stands next to a small Statue of Liberty on a table.

Punch is also on display in Grounds for Sculpture's seven-acre Meadow. There you'll come upon "Shopping Punch," where he is a 5-foot tall child walking with his 8-foot mother, both cast in aluminum and hollow translucent fiberglass with internal lighting. The incongruity of the situation is evident in the mother dressed in elegant modern clothing while Punch, holding her hand, is led along wearing his dunce cap. He also appears in the Meadow as "Homeless Punch," in milled foam and reinforced gypsum.

These four genres of Taplin's work could not be more different from each other in theme, in materials used and in size variations.

"I tend to work in extremes, not middle-of-the-road," Taplin says. "People feel life size is the natural scale, but that doesn't



Pairs of figures represent "The Five Outer Planets" in Taplin's exhibition.

interest me. One-to-one just looks to me like limited imagination."

From the floating flying positional planets, to Dante's journey through Upper Hell to Lower Hell, and then to Punch's audacious hijinks, Taplin leads us through ancient myths and classic poetry to the humorous misadventures we all catch glimpses of in today's world.

The added value of each of these exhibitions is, as Grounds for Sculpture marketing director Coby Green-Rifkin says, "The actual stories are really not necessary. You can approach the art and just appreciate it for what you are seeing."

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