

look. look again.

Taplin

The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum

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The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum advances creative thinking by connecting today's artists with individuals and communities in unexpected and stimulating ways.

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The Young Punch Goes Shopping with His Mother, 2010
Installation view at The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum



Robert Taplin: Selections from the Punch Series, 2005–10

October 31, 2010, to March 27, 2011

The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum



The Young Punch Goes Shopping with His Mother, 2010

Introduction

Robert Taplin has been actively pursuing the issue of figurative representation in sculpture for three decades. During a period when the art world's relationship with representation has been uneasy at best, Taplin has forcefully recast the human form to reflect our present circumstances. He imbues the figure with both individual personality and archetypal meaning, a position that is based on a deep engagement with the Humanist traditions in Western art.

In 2004, Taplin became interested in exploring the charged subject matter of sexuality and aggressive behavior, as manifested in the male adolescent attitude prevalent in much contemporary culture. Looking for an antagonist he could use to fully explore this topic, he turned to the fictional character Punch. Rooted deep in Western mythology, Punch is the Anglicized version of Punchinello, the trickster figure that played a major role in sixteenth-century Italian commedia dell'arte. Interestingly, Taplin began working on his *Punch* series before he came across the extraordinary series of 104 drawings led to a fuller understanding of Punch's role in European folklore: not only his lazy, lecherous, and mischievous nature, but also his alternating comic and tragic persona. While Tiepolo's Punchinellos offer us humorous commentary on life in the eighteenth century, Taplin brings Punch into the present day, where he uses him as a vehicle to express his personal anxieties by infusing the character's hi-jinks with both psychological and political undertones.

The works in this exhibition bring together four of Taplin's small *Punch* works, along with a major new outdoor sculpture that was commissioned by The Aldrich. *The Young Punch Goes Shopping with His Mother* has been sited directly in front of the Museum on Ridgefield's Main Street. The sculpture portrays Punch as a five-foot-tall child being led by his towering, eight-foot-tall mother. Cast in hollow, translucent fiberglass it displays a curious, marble-like quality in daylight, and is transformed after dark into an eerie presence by internal lighting. Taplin has had a long-term interest in the internal lighting of his fiberglass works as a way to both emphasize their hollow, shell-like construction as well as a device to radically animate the work under the cover of night.

In choosing *The Young Punch Goes Shopping with His Mother* for enlargement, Taplin was acutely aware of the nature of the location where it would be sited. Main Street is an active pedestrian thoroughfare, frequently populated by strolling families; the young Punch, walking hand-in-hand with his mother, conveys a sly comment on a preexisting situation. Taplin, by casting Punch in an uncharacteristic role—that of being awkward and subservient—has arguably created the most psychologically complex work in the series. Additionally, through its monumentality, its heightened surface definition, and its very public location, *The Young Punch Goes Shopping with His Mother* exhibits a gravitas distinctly different from that of the smaller sculptures.

I would like to thank Marie and Edmund Morgan for generously supporting this publication, as well as Daniel Wolff for contributing the lively and informative essay on Taplin's *Punch* series that follows.

Richard Klein, interim co-director

The Outrageous Joke

The two figures hold hands. They could be headed anywhere, although the title tells us they're going shopping. Mom looks business-like in a pants suit with a little shoulder bag and fashionably short hair. She's looking down at her son, who.... Oh dear. This isn't the child we expected. Our first instinct is to back off.

We recognize the grotesque man/boy as Punch from the old Punch and Judy puppet shows. He's wearing a dunce cap and clown suit. His gait is so clumsy that he seems to take his mother's hand less out of affection than for balance. Again, we want to back off.

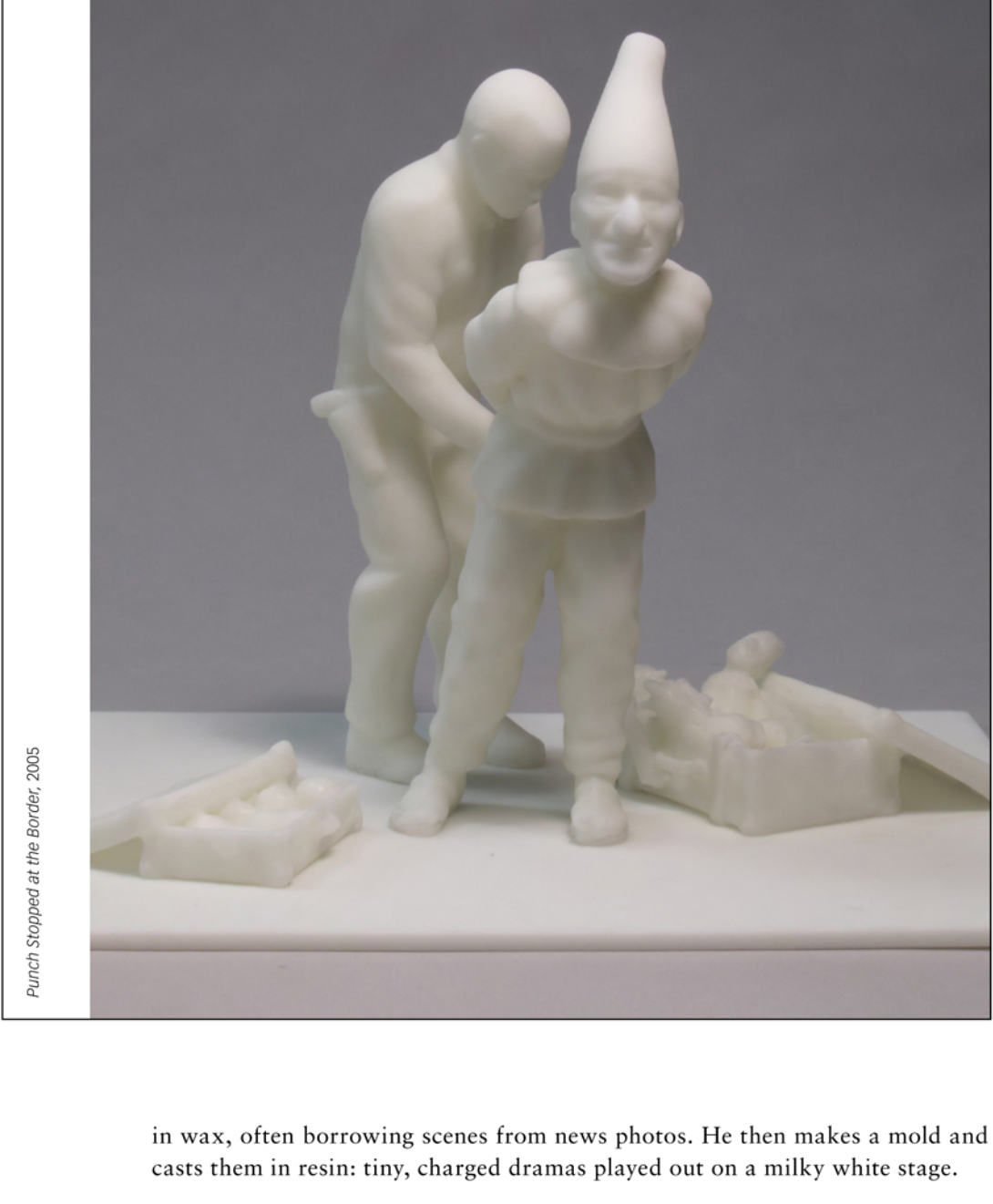
But something draws us closer. From a distance, these larger-than-life white figures seemed to be carved out of marble; classic Greek statuary. But they turn out to be cast in fiberglass resin. They're hollow, and at dusk, when internal lights come on, they go golden. They beckon.

The white resin makes the figures blur slightly, as if in a dream. But we're close enough now to see how realistically they've been modeled: Punch's confused and anxious expression, the muscles in his mother's leg, the carefully sculpted drape of their clothing. What's wrong with the boy? How concerned is his mother? We find ourselves caught in a narrative we don't know how to read.

The young Punch and his mother are only part of the story. Before they were enlarged into this eight-foot-tall outdoor sculpture, they were a small tableau, one in a series, the figures just eleven inches high. Robert Taplin sculpts these



The Young Punch Scratches His Burro's Ears, 2007



Punch Stopped at the Border, 2005

in wax, often borrowing scenes from news photos. He then makes a mold and casts them in resin: tiny, charged dramas played out on a milky white stage.

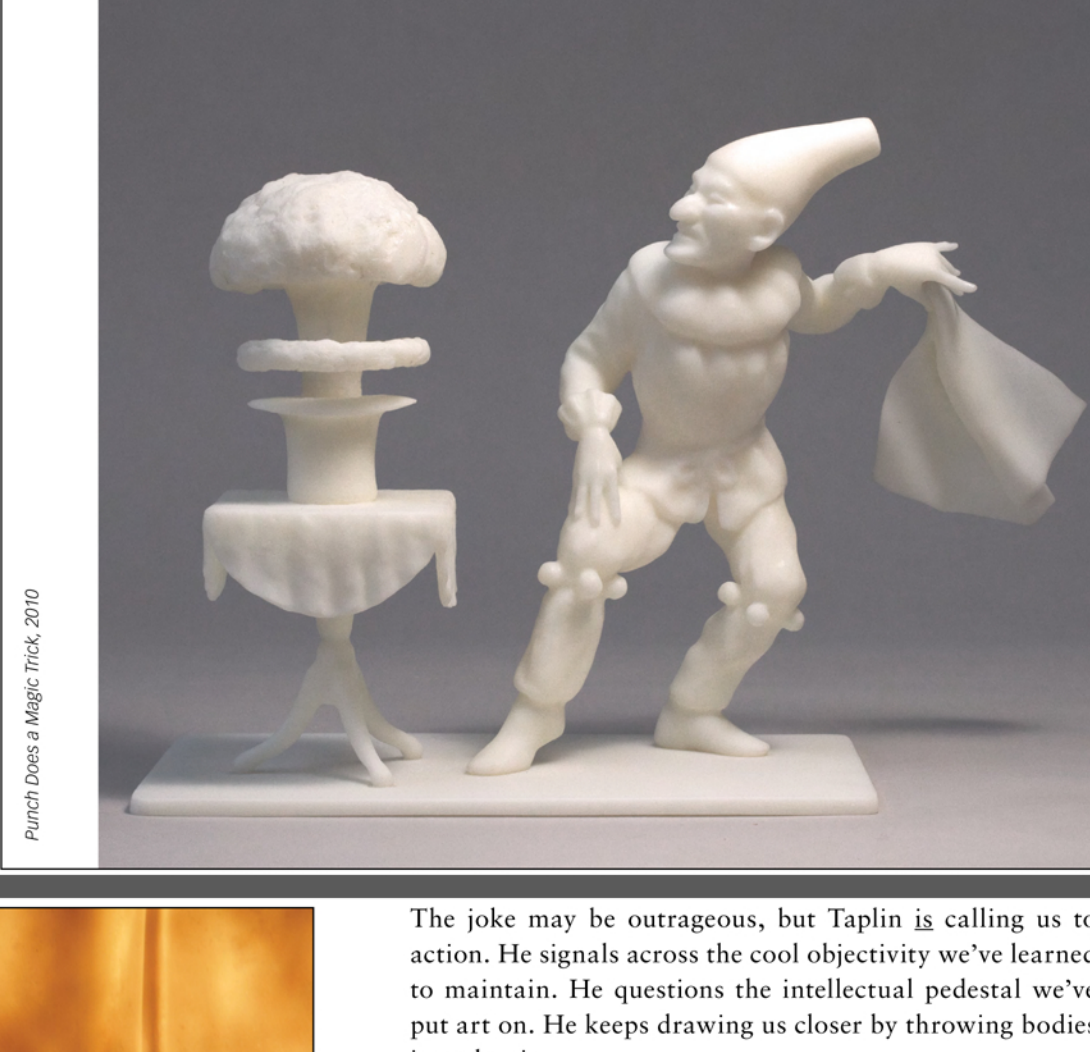
Each tableau features Punch. His hook-nosed, hunch-backed image dates back to the sixteenth-century Italian commedia dell'arte. But we know him as a hand puppet, beating or being beaten by his various partners. In one scene, Taplin's Punch teams up with a burro, whose ears he gently scratches till the animal brays with pleasure. Like mother and son, the boy and his ass are a touching, unnerving pair.

off. He's homeless after all; we've learned not to look at the homeless.

There are more figures in Taplin's studio. *Punch Relieves Himself in a Vase*, short white pecker in hand. *Punch Makes Love to the Duchess*, his beaked nose and dunce cap at fierce attention as he rams an apparently pleased, rather elegant woman from behind. There's even Punch receiving a prize: the committee standing and applauding as the winner hugs his own, misshapen body in a kind of feral pride. Taplin's Punch is eager to fit into the modern era—as eager as we are—but can't quite. He makes the fundamentals of our society seem faintly ridiculous. Shopping, for example.

So, forgive us if we don't know how to look at these sculptures. They take away our contemporary props. They aren't ironic. They aren't detached. They don't presume a world of unanswerable, existential questions. Instead, there's a poignancy that leaves us spinning somewhere between tenderness and rage. In the nineteenth century, Charles Dickens wrote reassuringly that Punch was "an outrageous joke which no one in existence would think of regarding as an incentive to any kind of action, or as a model for any kind of conduct." Which might be true when he's a puppet. But when he's a realistically rendered sculpture—when his hand looks like our hand, and he's in the same room with us—he's harder to dismiss.

These aren't the quaint little porcelain harlequins that decorated eighteenth-century European homes. They work more like medieval gargoyles, or the satirical ceramic figures you can pick up for a few pesos on the Mexican border.



Punch Does a Magic Trick, 2010

But most of these sculptures place Punch in more contemporary situations. There he is yanking a kerchief off a magician's top hat to reveal—presto!—a tiny atomic explosion. He looks both delighted and squeamish at the monstrosity he's created. Here's Punch stopped at the border: a security guard handcuffing him, his suitcases open to reveal juggling pins and a little set of Punch and Judy puppets. He's being busted for what exactly? Crossing state lines with the intention to entertain? And then there's Punch pushing a shopping cart. The title tells us he's homeless, so those must be all his earthly possessions, bulging like body parts in big sacks. In this instance, it feels strangely familiar to back



The Young Punch Goes Shopping with His Mother (detail), 2010

The joke may be outrageous, but Taplin is calling us to action. He signals across the cool objectivity we've learned to maintain. He questions the intellectual pedestal we've put art on. He keeps drawing us closer by throwing bodies into the ring.

Until, finally—presto!—Punch's encounters have become our own. Seduced by the physical beauty of the work—the gorgeous white flank of the burro, the splayed fingers of the duchess—we find ourselves in a familiar, dream-like comedy. Trusting, bewildered, we stumble forward. And take the hand that's offered.

Daniel Wolff

Daniel Wolff collaborated with Robert Taplin on *Nine Views of New Haven* in 1977. He has written art and photography criticism and published poetry in *The Paris Review* and *The Parisian Review*, among others. His most recent book is *How Lincoln Learned to Read*.

In scale, Taplin's Punch figures might be the descendants of the little clay creatures left in Mesopotamian temples, or India's small castings of household gods. And in his disturbing realism, this Punch resembles the life-size, all-white, ceramic babies found in Olmec burial grounds.

But to learn how to look at these tableaux, we'd do better to go back to the coruscating etchings of Goya, especially *Los Caprichos* and *Los Proverbios*. Critic John Berger has called Goya's vision "essentially theatrical. Not in the derogatory sense of the word, but because he was constantly concerned with the way action might be used to epitomize character or a situation.... His works always imply an encounter."

Taplin's theatrics have something yet inherently subversive about them. Punch is cartoonish, so are the situations, yet we can't help but empathize. We're drawn in by that unique ability of the figurative: to let us see ourselves, to examine our character.



The Young Punch Goes Shopping with His Mother (detail), 2010

Works in the exhibition

All dimensions h x w x d in inches unless otherwise noted

Punch Stopped at the Border, 2005
Cast urethane resin
11 x 14 11/16 x 12 9/16

Punch Is Homeless, 2007
Cast urethane resin
11 x 11 15/16 x 11

The Young Punch Scratches His Burro's Ears, 2007
Cast urethane resin
8 x 8 9/16 x 5 7/8

Punch Does a Magic Trick, 2010
Cast urethane resin
10 x 9 1/16 x 12

The Young Punch Goes Shopping with His Mother, 2010
Fiberglass, aluminum, internal lighting
101 x 58 1/4 x 42 1/4

All works courtesy of the artist and Winston Wachter Fine Art, New York

Robert Taplin received a B.A. in Medieval Studies from Pomona College in 1973. He has exhibited throughout the United States, most recently at Winston Wachter Fine Art, New York, and MASS MoCA in North Adams, Massachusetts. He has executed public commissions for the New York MTA Arts for Transit program and the state of Connecticut's Percent for Art program. Taplin has received numerous grants and awards, most notably from the National Endowment for the Arts and the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation. His work has been featured in publications such as *ARTnews*, *Art in America*, *Sculpture Magazine*, and *The New York Times*. He has also written extensively on sculpture, most prominently for *Art in America*, publishing a number of articles and dozens of individual reviews. He has taught at a variety of institutions, including Yale University Art School and the Rhode Island School of Design. Taplin is represented by Winston Wachter Fine Art, New York.

The Young Punch Goes Shopping with His Mother, 2010

