# ROBERT TAPLIN UPITER

November 5-December 6, 2001

Hampden Gallery

University of Massachusetts at Amherst



# Robert Taplin's Jupiter

Back to back, arms spread wide as if for flight, outstretched fingers nearly touching, the massive doubled figures (they are nearly 11 feet tall, and bulky) of Robert Taplin's *Jupiter* are caught in a ponderous pas de deux. Though each twists and reaches toward his second self with unstinting energy—their very toes curl with the effort—their hands will never touch, nor their eyes meet: as with Narcissus, the pursuit of union with a desired reflection is doomed.

Identical in form, Taplin's mated Jupiters are made of contrasting materials. One is cast in fiberglass resin, a vaguely flesh-colored material that is, like skin, mottled and dimpled, but also visibly hollow, a husk. The other is cast in plaster, spotless white and seemingly heavy as stone, obdurate, enduring. Or, that is the way they look in full daylight. But when the ambient light level drops, their roles are recast. Set aglow internally by more than half a dozen small lights, the resin figure comes alive, his features growing more pronounced, and his body seeming to enlarge, its limbs extend. The inner illumination is at first soft and subtle but eventually, when full darkness approaches, it grows almost livid, making this body glow big and fierce as any god glimpsed in lambent firelight. Reciprocally, his plaster mate sinks into a ghostly pallor, his body's recesses shadowed a soft blue, the whole chalky, friable, lunar.

Though no one would call their proportions ideal—they are just slightly too heavy, too soft—these Jupiters attain near-perfect allegorical stature. As in a smaller version of this sculpture, part of a recent installation that modeled the five outer planets of our solar system as a group of doubled male figures (one of each pair was made plaster, the other translucent rice paper), this doubled—or, split—Jupiter has at least dual identities. The biggest planet to orbit our sun, Jupiter is also the primary god in classical myth. Called Zeus in Greek, he was the mightiest deity on Olympus and the most wise: Hesiod described him as "father of gods and men, by whose thunder the earth is shaken." The root meaning of Jupiter (as of Zeus) is "bright": he was a god of light, his most characteristic attribute a lightning bolt. But Jupiter, third in a line of patricides (or, victims thereof), was also thoroughly intemperate: lusty, jealous, and wrathful, ambivalent toward humankind; a god divided against himself.

Taplin's use of classical mythology is a return, after a ten-year hiatus, to a subject he explored in the 1980s. Originally, myth was in part an escape route from the limitations of Modernist abstraction, and in part an extension of Taplin's academic training, which was in medieval literature (remarkably, he is self-taught as an artist). In Christian symbolism (which is of course deeply

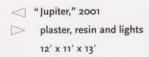


"The Five Outer Planets," 2000 rice paper, plaster and lights
7' x 8' x 12' (overall)

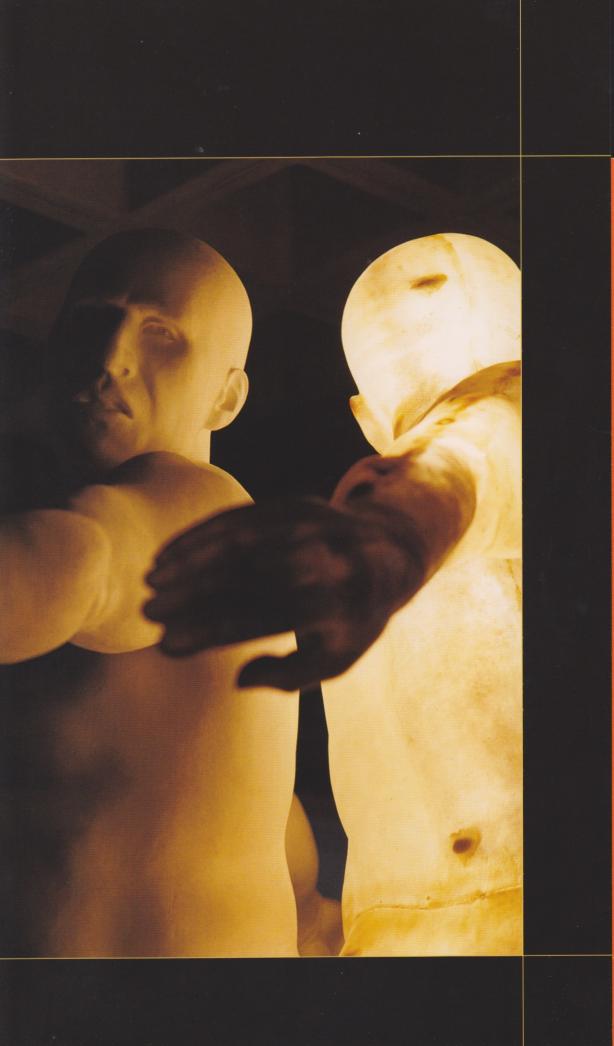
indebted to pagan theology), light is also associated with divinity, perhaps nowhere more ecstatically than in Dante. Then too, heroic scale itself has manifold symbolic readings, of which Susan Stewart is an astute observer. "The gigantic [is] at the origin of public and natural history," she says. That is, it was developed as a means of resolving the boundlessness of the natural world to the scope of human enterprise. For instance, "the children of Uranus represent physical force and lawlessness, a superfluity of nature over culture," Stewart writes. And, most suggestively, "Giants, like dinosaurs, always seem to be the last of their race."

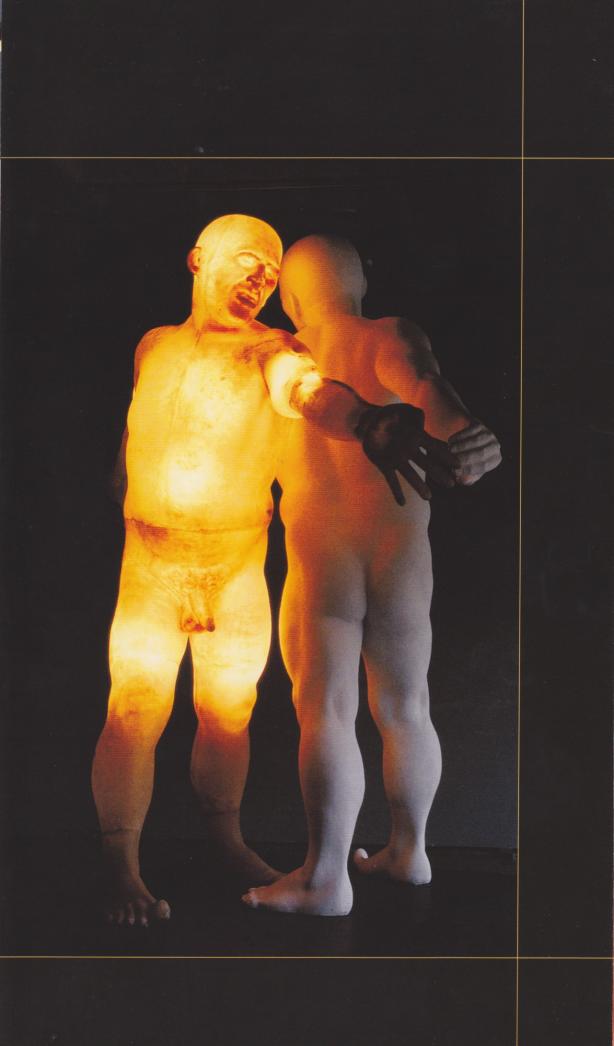
So it surely appears with Taplin's *Jupiter*. Engaged in a dignified, stately duet that is at the same time a perfect folie à deux, and perhaps not even that—a man alone, the last of his kind, in search only of himself, spinning slowly through the heavens, forever: the transcendent, striving *Jupiter* is also a rueful mortal, the towering figure of spiritual example merely, and irresistibly, a clay-footed man.

- Nancy Princenthal
- <sup>1</sup> Susan Stewart, On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection (Durham and London, Duke University Press, 1993), pp. 71–74.











### **Robert Taplin**

Born: 1950

Education: Pomona College, BA, 1973 Lives and works in New Haven, Connecticut

#### Selected Solo Exhibitions

#### 2001

Hampden Gallery, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA, *Jupiter* 

Arthur Roger Gallery, New Orleans, LA, The Five Outer Planets

#### 2000

TransHudson Gallery, New York, NY, The Five Outer Planets

# 1997

TransHudson Gallery, New York, NY

Arthur Roger Gallery, New Orleans, LA

#### 1994

Gallery Joe, Philadelphia, PA

#### 1992

Sculpture Center, New York, NY

Hudson River Museum, Yonkers, NY

#### 1989

Artspace, New Haven, CT, Sculpture - Five Years

#### 1987

La Mama's Galleria, New York, NY, Statues

#### 1978

Public Art Fund, New York, NY, Welcome to New Haven

#### 1977

New Haven, CT, Nine Views of New Haver

# **Selected Group Exhibitions**

#### 2000

Winston Wachter Mayer, New York, NY, Maquettes, Models & Muses

#### 1999

Aldrich Museum, Ridgefield, CT, The Nude in Contemporary Art

TransHudson Gallery, New York, NY, Portraits

#### 1996

Beacon Hill Fine Arts, New York, NY, Politics— American Style

#### 1995

TZ' Art & Co., New York, NY, Bodies/Transformations

#### 1994

Proctor Art Center, Bard College, Annandale on Hudson, NY. Embody

Lyman Allyn Museum, New London, CT, Reflections of an Inner Light

#### 1993

Luise Ross Gallery, New York, NY, Figurines!

#### 1982

Doris C. Freedman Gallery, New York, NY, Ten Years of Public Art

# Selected Bibliography

Csaszar, Tom, "Robert Taplin at TransHudson,' Sculpture Magazine, March, 2001

Princenthal, Nancy, "Robert Taplin," Art in America, September, 2000

"Robert Taplin," New Yorker, May 8, 2000

Csaszar, Tom, "Varieties of Naked Experience," New Art Examiner, October,1999

Princenthal, Nancy, "Robert Taplin," Art in America, March, 1998

Perl, Jed, "Death and Realism," *The New Republic*, April 20, 1998

Melrod, George, "You Are Here," Art & Antiques, October, 1997

Seidel, Miriam, "Robert Taplin," Art in America, Ianuary, 1995

Lifson, Ben, "Voice Choices," Village Voice,

Von Ranson, Brooks, "Peep Shows are Back," Connecticut Magazine, September, 1977

Dunning, Jennifer, "In New Haven Art's Just Around the Corner," *New York Time*s, September 23, 1977





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