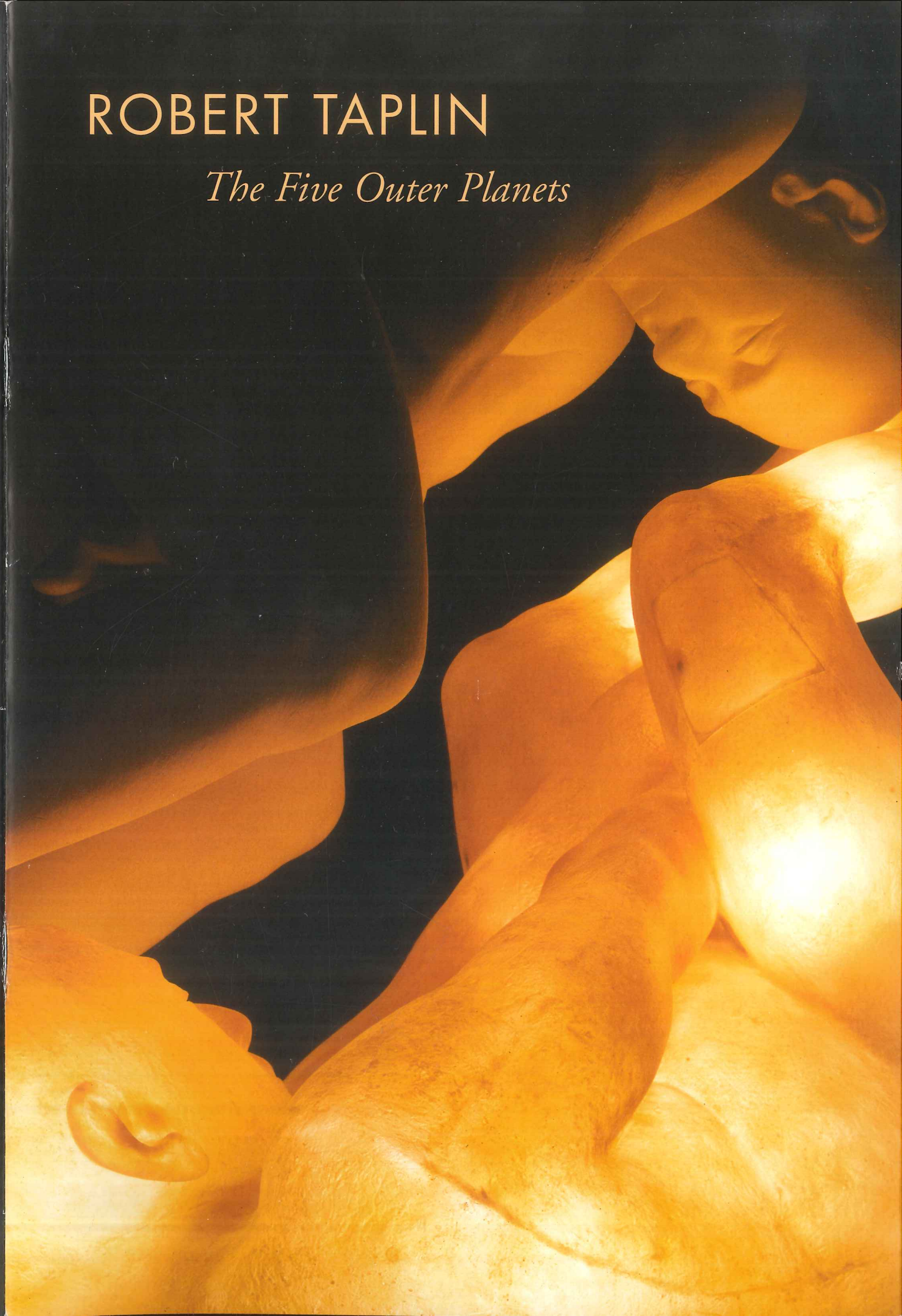


ROBERT TAPLIN

The Five Outer Planets



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The artist also wishes to gratefully acknowledge the support of Edmund and Marie Morgan, the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, his assistants Ezra Parzybok and Mike Ferrara and most of all his wife, Nan Elizabeth Norene.

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ROBERT TAPLIN

The Five Outer Planets



January 22 – February 29, 2004
Ezra and Cecile Zilkha Gallery
Wesleyan University
Middletown, Connecticut

Curated by Nina Felshin

THE FIVE OUTER PLANETS



1. *Jupiter*, 2001
reinforced gypsum, fiberglass and lights on a wood base, 140 x 114 x 96 inches
2. *Saturn*, 2004
reinforced gypsum, fiberglass and lights, 156 x 36 x 54 inches
3. *Uranus*, 2004
reinforced gypsum, fiberglass and lights, 60 x 52 x 42 inches
4. *Neptune*, 2004
reinforced gypsum, fiberglass and lights, 60 x 62 x 70 inches
5. *Pluto*, 2004
reinforced gypsum, fiberglass and lights, 50 x 20 x 20 inches

INTRODUCTION

In times of crisis the theater is inevitably drawn to classical Greek drama. It comes as no surprise perhaps that the fledgling yet tumultuous 21st century has spawned a new crop of revivals on Broadway and elsewhere in this country and abroad. What the directors see in these ancient plays is a metaphor for our own times. It is rare however for a contemporary visual artist to critically mine Greco-Roman mythology for its resonant content. Robert Taplin has done this and much more in his sculptural, site-oriented installation, *The Five Outer Planets*.

The Five Outer Planets was conceived and executed with an eye to presenting it at Zilkha Gallery, a vast 4,000-square-foot space with soaring 28-foot-high ceilings and an abundance of limestone block interior walls — characteristics that lend this monument to High Modernism its majestic power and authority. These formal qualities were not lost on the artist who, in a sense, appropriated their metaphoric content to heighten the impact of the work's narrative and conceptual underpinnings.

In mythological terms the five outer planets form a line of succession with Jupiter as the current head of the family, Saturn as his father, Uranus as his grandfather, and Neptune and Pluto as his brothers. Domination, in all its forms including male domination over the earth (woman), castration, patricide, and cannibalism, haunts this family for generations. These gods are also associated with natural phenomena such as storms, thunder, lightning, and earthquakes — all metaphors for turbulent conditions including violent conflict.

Taplin's planets, which he envisions not as heavenly bodies but as middle-aged mortals, not unlike himself, are cast as doubles, one in plaster, the other in translucent fiberglass resin. The latter, illuminated from within, makes its plaster double visible and provides the dominant source of light in the gallery.

The doubled figures in Taplin's installation are deployed in a manner that approximates the relative positions and proportions of the celestial planets. Upon entering the gallery one is confronted by "Jupiter" and "Saturn" who are close to double life-size. "Uranus" and "Neptune" are approximately life-size and "Pluto" is about two-thirds life-size. The glowing figures appear to spin and tumble through empty space, creating a false perspective.

In his deliberate confusion of size and distance and, consequently, scale, Taplin invites the viewer to contemplate his or her own body and become aware of the uniquely human capacity for self-consciousness. The use of formal strategies to convey content is often overlooked in analyses of contemporary art. *The Five Outer Planets* ambitiously demonstrates that form continues to be a powerful means of communication in the visual arts, one that challenges and rewards the viewer in equal measure.

The use of doubled figures further underscores the sensation of splitting of identity, indeed of self-consciousness. Ironically, an essential trait of Greek tragedy is that self-knowledge changes nothing. While none of these factors dictates a single reading, together they contribute to a situation that is highly evocative and metaphorically redolent of the times in which we live.

Nina Felshin
Curator

ROBERT TAPLIN

Robert Taplin's recent monumental sculpture, *The Five Outer Planets*, is a compelling installation of luminous pairs of sturdy male nudes, some several times life-size, wheeling in darkness. It is a strange and marvelous work that makes explicit narrative themes and formal preoccupations visible in his work for many years—anxiety, the effects of time, and the unease of human relationships: doubling, corporeality, degrees of reference, and shifts of scale. Yet this mysterious gathering of massive bodies is Taplin's most ambiguous, resonant work to date.

Some years ago, I also used "strange and rather marvelous" in writing about a Taplin exhibition that included an earlier, intimately scaled version of *The Five Outer Planets*: pairs of small, portly male nudes, some lit from within, suspended from the ceiling of a darkened room. The tension between ordinary physiques, unlikely placement, and miniature scale, along with the title's reference to "the five outer planets," with its connotations of Saturn devouring his children, made the deceptively straightforward little figures seem faintly sinister and disquieting.

My original use of the phrase was prompted not only by the intensity of the precursors of the recent *Five Outer Planets*, but also by the seeming disparity between Taplin's hanging sculptures and a group of slightly otherworldly steel figures, made in the 1980s, also on view in that earlier show. The steel figures were life-size, somewhat generalized, and engaged in not-quite comprehensible tasks; the little nudes were more anatomically specific, a little older, and removed from ordinary activity. Despite these differences, however, the two series were clearly linked. Both elicited multiple, contradictory associations ranging from dream visions to modern images of torture to the labors of the months carved on the façades of Romanesque cathedrals. In both series, identifiable sexes, ages, and physiques implied the presence of a driving narrative, a suggestion both reinforced and challenged by unignorable formal and material imperatives. In the suspended sculptures, unexpected placement and contrasts of opacity and translucency subverted the familiarity of chubby bodies, while the toy-like scale played havoc with our sense of distance from the object. In the steel figures, exaggerated gestures and wrenched postures created profiles that clarified action. Meaning, however, remained multivalent and elusive.

Taplin sees the angular poses and theatrical gestures of his figures as related to the eloquent stylizations of Romanesque sculpture, by way of modernist construction. (He was trained as a medievalist.) His steel

figures, in fact, evolved from geometric, constructed abstractions, through a process that he describes as "crawling back through David Smith." "You fetch up on representation," Taplin says. "Smith takes you to Surrealism. Then you find yourself going back to the Symbolists and Rodin. I always thought of my constructed sculptures as stick figures and I wanted to put the flesh back on them."

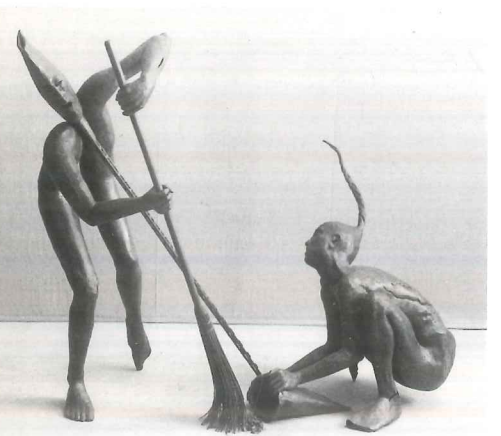
If the suspended figures seemed weightless, the steel figures' poses suggested that they, too, defied the law of gravity. Their precarious stances made us aware that they were hollow, constructed with sheets pounded into three dimensions. "I was very interested, then—I still am—in the idea of starting out with the skin, not the bone," Taplin says. "I've never done an *écorché*. I don't build up figures anatomically. In the steel pieces, I was stretching the skin to make the volume. And because it was steel, that volume was self-supporting—no armature. The whole process was open to 'enormous changes at the last minute'." In some figures, Taplin "confessed" (his word) his process by leaving the edges of sheets unjoined, in others, the eyes, left empty like the eye sockets of classical bronzes, hinted at that void.

Such contradictions are constants in Taplin's work, indicators, perhaps, of a deep-rooted sense of opposition (and a keen appreciation of the absurd) and testimony to his sensitivity to the nuances of difference that color our perceptions. This awareness underlies a series of "doubled" sculptures, cast in fine-grained concrete in the early 1990s, that explored the permutations of like and unlike. Oppositions of nude versus clothed, fragment versus whole, frontality versus withdrawal embody what Taplin calls "the difference between empty and full, light and heavy, sick and healthy, and possibly, dead and alive." Mounted on sturdy tables, to address the viewer directly, the intimately scaled pairs are at once earth-bound and uncanny. In a polychromed duo, a clothed woman confronts us but retreats behind closed lids, while her nude alter ego averts her head and stares. A vulnerable, thin female nude, legs drawn up and splayed, hides behind a blindfold; her more robust male companion sits heavily. Nothing is spelled out, but much is suggested.

That open-endedness seems markedly different from the anecdotal quality of a series of sculptural "tableaux," based on newspaper photos, that preceded the pairs. In these, narrative dominates, despite evident artifices of composition—figures are sliced where the generating photos



The Five Outer Planets (model), 2000
plaster, rice paper, lights
nearest figure 24 inches high,
overall 72 x 96 x 144 inches



The Coals, 1985
forged steel, coal
60 x 72 x 36 inches



Child is Father (Tereseis), 1986
forged steel
68 x 82 x 58 inches



Heide Twice, 1999
polychromed concrete on wood base
60 x 40 x 28 inches



The Body is a Frail Leaf, the Mind is a Fortress, 1993
polychromed concrete and brass
on wood base
26 x 31 x 30 inches



Don't Look Away (Alex), 1997
polychromed concrete and steel
65 x 40 x 24 inches

ended. By contrast, the pairs offer themselves simply to be regarded. Yet the disparate couples imply multiple readings at odds with their apparent neutrality, while Taplin's eloquent simplifications alert us to the geometry underlying even the most ordinary of bodies. As a result, a cool, cerebral investigation of similarities and dissimilarities becomes (among other things) an updating of the classical tradition and, more importantly, an unsentimental celebration of what it means to inhabit a body—in Auden's celebrated lines: "Mortal, guilty, but to me/the entirely beautiful."

Taplin's pairs of eminently human, utterly contemporary figures are the ancestors of *The Five Outer Planets*—paradoxically, because the installation is a meditation on the origin myths surrounding the Olympian gods of classical antiquity. It's as if Taplin had decided to address the entire academic tradition, idealized figures, high-minded classical subject matter, and all, freighting it with his own, modern-day emotional baggage. His nominal subjects, the "five outer planets," Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto (in order of distance from the sun), are named, respectively, for the chief god of the Roman pantheon; his infanticidal—and eventually deposed—father; his bloody-minded grandfather—who came to an even worse end; and his brothers, the gods of the sea and the underworld. Their brutal family feud, which informs Taplin's installation, stands for the displacement of the ancient chthonic deities—Saturn, Uranus, and their consorts—by the more sophisticated Olympians.

The Olympians, however, were notorious for their human foibles; Graeco-Roman myths are rife with tales of lust, jealousy, vindictiveness, and deceit. Taplin underscores this by embodying the five outer planets not as classical heroes, but as doubled sets of all-too human men, some older than others, all mature and beefy. Their plaster incarnations are opaque and a little forbidding; their translucent fiberglass partners, lit from within, reveal scars and patching. All are "mortal, guilty" embodiments of male rivalry, father-son struggles, and almost certainly, private, internal anxieties, as well. Each pair, the plaster illuminated only by its glowing "twin," is composed differently: head to head, head to toe, back to front, and so on. Only Jupiter stands erect—revolving, arms outstretched, powerful torso thrust at us. The rest are suspended. Thuggish, powerful Saturn, bound and banished to Tartarus for having swallowed his children, hangs as if being tortured. Uranus folds inward, hiding the mutilation assigned to him by myth. The two Neptunes float effortlessly, one above the other; the two Plutos crouch, toe to toe.

The Five Outer Planets sums up and expands many of Taplin's continuing preoccupations. Doubling, along with the contrast between translucency and opacity, enlarges ideas about otherness and difference announced by the paired figures of the 1990s. The illuminated figures make literal the "skin" of the forged steel figures of the 1980s, heightening the corporeality of the fleshy "outer planets." They also remind us that they are abstract, made objects, despite their wealth of anatomical detail, because the translucent fiberglass reveals traces of the facture of each sculpture. That abstractness is underlined by gestures, postures, and profiles that, like Taplin's earlier steel figures, hint at his admiration for the telling economies of medieval sculpture.

The tensions that animate *The Five Outer Planets*—between pairs, between rich anatomical details and the generalizations of larger-than-life and near-life-size figures—seem even more intense than in Taplin's preceding work. This may be a function both of the installation's monumental size and its expressive distortions of scale. The five pairs of figures vary in size, proportionate to the differing dimensions of the planets themselves, from enormous, out-flung Jupiter to small, clenched Pluto. The largest figures are ferociously present, a little threatening. In the darkened space, the distances between the doubled figures collapse; a forced perspective created by the relative sizes of the planets exaggerates the real differences in scale. From the reverse view, we sense these disparities, but they are no less dramatic for being revealed. Most insistent, however, is the brute physicality of Taplin's hefty protagonists, locked in mortal combat with the ghost of the classical ideal. Yet even this battle is not as unequivocal as it first appears. Both the suggestion of Platonic archetypes and the seeming realism of Taplin's figures are deceptive. The smaller "planets," especially, are built of simplified forms, with less subtly detailed surfaces. Taplin rings changes on both classicism and realism, disrupting our most carefully formulated ideas about the ideal and the particular, sameness and difference, naturalism and abstraction—and more. *The Five Outer Planets* is discomfiting and seductive, alluring and disturbing—like our own troubled sphere.

Karen Wilkin

New York, March 2004



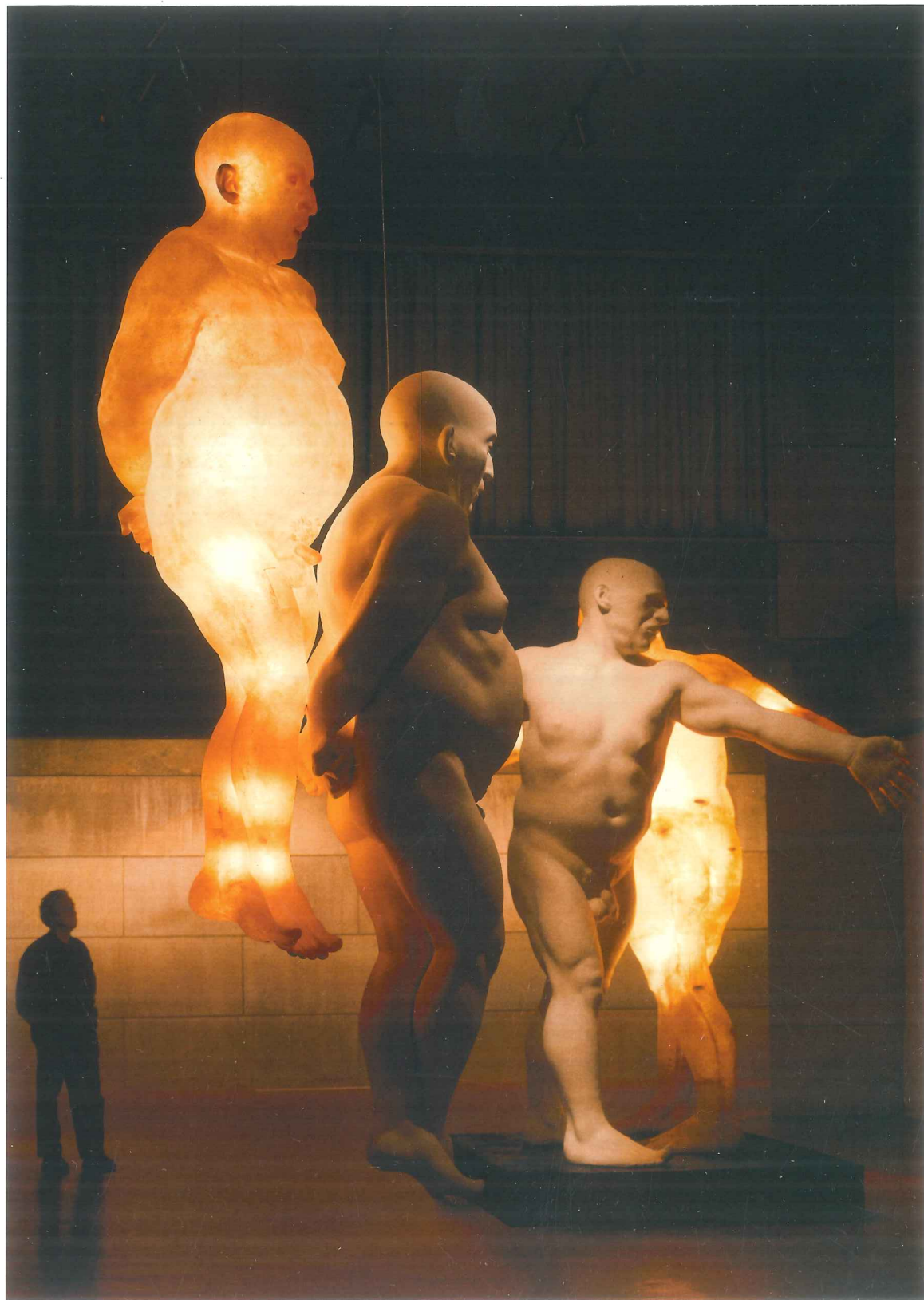
Walk Like a Man (Heavy Sledding), 1989
forged steel
84 x 96 x 36 inches



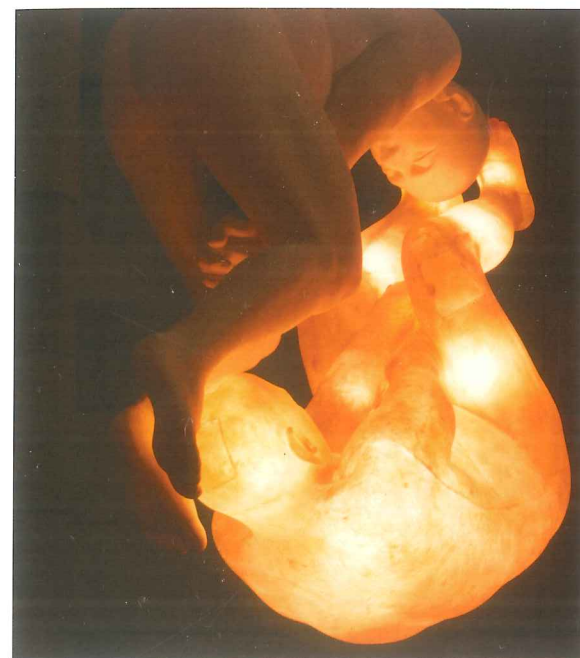
LEFT TO RIGHT: *Uranus, Neptune, Pluto, Jupiter*

FRONT TO BACK: *Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, Pluto*





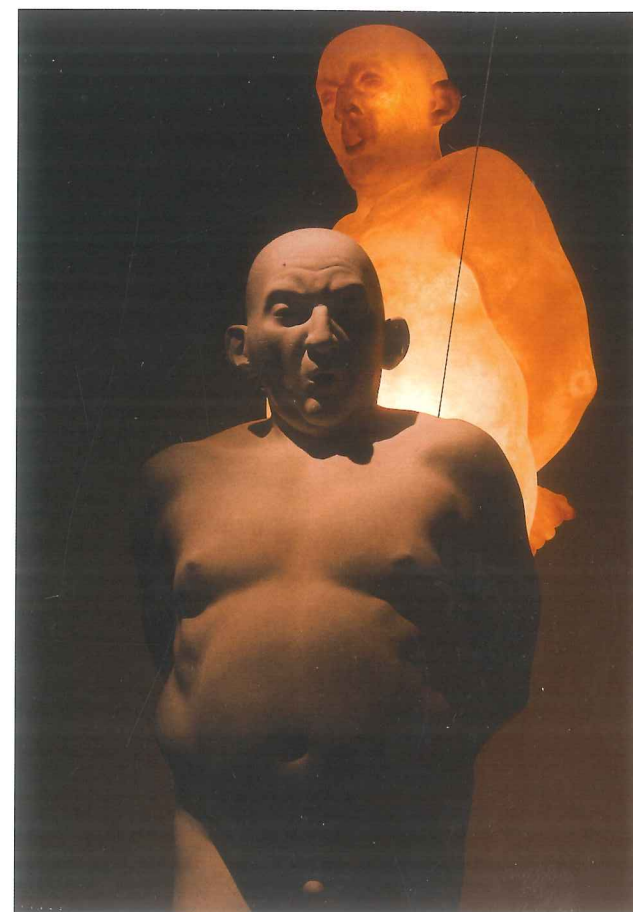
LEFT TO RIGHT: *Saturn, Jupiter*



Uranus



Neptune



Saturn



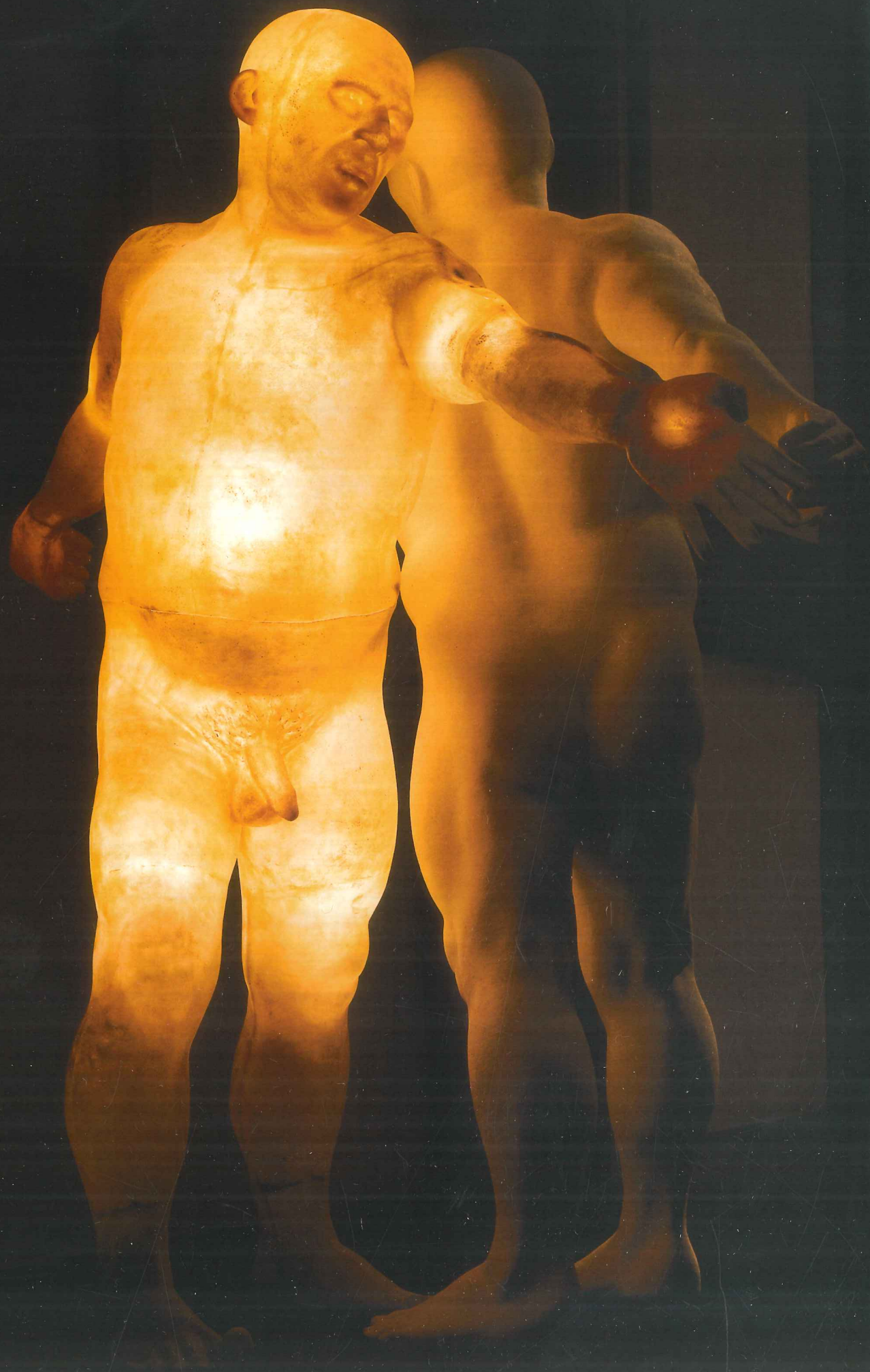
LEFT TO RIGHT: *Uranus, Saturn, Jupiter*



DETAIL: *Jupiter*



Pluto



Born: 1950
Education: Pomona College, BA, 1973
Lives and works in New Haven, CT

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2004 *The Five Outer Planets*, Smack Mellon Gallery, Brooklyn, NY
The Five Outer Planets, Ezra and Cecile Zilkha Gallery, Wesleyan University, Middletown, CT
- 2001 *Jupiter*, Hampden Gallery, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA
The Five Outer Planets (model), Arthur Roger Gallery, New Orleans, LA
- 2000 *The Five Outer Planets* (model), TransHudson Gallery, New York, NY
- 1997 TransHudson Gallery, New York, NY
Arthur Roger Gallery, New Orleans, LA
- 1994 *Narratives*, Gallery Joe, Philadelphia, PA
- 1992 Sculpture Center, Gallery II, New York, NY
Urban Offerings, Hudson River Museum, Yonkers, NY
- 1989 *Sculpture - Five Years*, Artspace, New Haven, CT
- 1987 *Statues*, La Mama's Galleria, New York, NY
- 1978 *Welcome to New Haven*, Public Art Fund, New York, NY
- 1977 *Nine Views of New Haven*, Mayor's Council on the Arts, New Haven, CT

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2004 *179th Annual Exhibition of Contemporary American Art*, National Academy of Design, New York, NY
The Body Project, Winston Wachter Gallery, New York, NY
- 2003 *Re-presenting Representation*, Arnot Art Museum, Elmira, NY
- 2001 *Sculpture Now*, Palm Beach Institute for Contemporary Art, Lake Worth, FL
- 2000 *Maquettes, Models & Muses*, Winston Wachter Mayer, New York, NY
- 1999 *The Nude in Contemporary Art*, Aldrich Museum, Ridgefield, CT
Portraits, TransHudson Gallery, New York, NY
- 1998 *Intimate Objects*, Gallery Joe, Philadelphia, PA
- 1996 *Politics - American Style*, Beacon Hill Fine Arts, New York, NY
- 1995 *Bodies/Transformations*, TZ' Art & Co., New York, NY
- 1994 *Embody*, Proctor Art Center, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY
Reflections of an Inner Light, Lyman Allyn Museum, New London, CT

- 1993 *Figurines!*, Luise Ross Gallery, New York, NY
- 1992 *Family Matters*, Tarrt Gallery, Washington, DC
- 1991 *Chords and Discords*, Hudson River Museum, Yonkers, NY
- 1987 *Drawings*, Luise Ross Gallery, New York, NY
- 1983 *Bridges*, Pratt Institute Gallery, Brooklyn, NY
- 1982 *Ten Years of Public Art*, Doris C. Freedman Gallery, New York, NY
- 1981 Artpark, Lewiston, NY

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- Perl, Jed, "Death and Realism," *The New Republic*, April 20, 1998
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- Von Ranson, Brooks, "Peep Shows are Back," *Connecticut Magazine*, September, 1977
- Dunning, Jennifer, "In New Haven Art's Just Around the Corner," *New York Times*, September 23, 1977

GRANTS AND COMMISSIONS

- 2003 John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship
- 1998 State of Connecticut Percent for Art commission, Tolland, CT
- 1996 MTA/NYC Arts for Transit commission
- 1988 National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship
- 1982 State of Connecticut Percent for Art commission, Meriden, CT
- 1977 Connecticut Commission on the Arts Fellowship

Commissioned by Robert Taplin, internationally acclaimed jazz composer/musician Mark Dresser played these five short pieces, one for each planet, at the opening reception of *The Five Outer Planets*. Played on an altered acoustic bass with two sets of electric pickups, the pieces were recorded in Zilkha Gallery on February 10, 2004.