



DRAINMAN

Some artists give everything but. Only Robert Gober is smart enough to give us the kitchen sink.

BY DAVID SALLE

THE ELEGANT AND ELEGIAC SCULPTOR

Robert Gober, whose career retrospective, *“The Heart Is Not a Metaphor,”* opened in October at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, is the poet of drains. Unlike the readymade urinal by a certain R. Mutt (the Dadaist pseudonym that Marcel Duchamp invented to sign his notorious appropriation), Gober’s plumbing fixtures are lovingly—one wants to say achingly—crafted by hand from wood, plaster, and paint. When the first sink sculptures appeared, in 1985, their artisanal restraint felt right for the time but came with a touch of dissonance; they were things that were also images—object and picture as one. Mild as that double nature might seem 30 years later, it took a measure of guts, in that twilight time of abstraction, to side with the imagists. What kind of new animal had suddenly appeared at the watering hole? Like a shy warthog nudging aside the larger and noisier beasts, Gober’s wall-mounted variations on the white porcelain slop sink had a modest yet tenacious presence. They literally hugged the wall, often set near the floor, and dared you to overlook them. And their metaphoric, symbolic content—so available, obvious even—gained gravitas as the AIDS crisis deepened and our need for a useful metaphor (things really did start going down the drain)

FIRE STARTER

Two untitled works. Above: From 1992, with hand-painted wallpaper; right: from 1994-5, with beeswax and cotton socks, among other things.

up in New England, and his work, in its loneliness and stillness, is solidly American, part of a great lineage that runs from Edgar Allan Poe to Robert Frost and Edward Hopper. A painter friend of mine notes a quality of watchfulness in the work; it is the product of his intense and somewhat ruthless brand of looking. His imagery—the sinks, drains, cribs—is almost painfully quotidian, but it reverberates with the strangeness of the everyday as seen through the eyes of a child. Gober also works with overlooked things—a glimpse of a man’s white shin exposed between the cuff and the sock, a bag of kitty litter—that, touched by his gift for verisimilitude, become unsettling, full of anxiety.

Gober’s bold stroke, his innovation, was to combine the handmade factuality of post-minimal sculpture with the transformational syntax of surrealism. It is often said that surrealism mimics the logic of dreams—that

became more urgent. As icons of irretrievable loss, the sinks (a good example in the MoMA show is *Untitled* [1984]) have retained their plainspoken mystery and have, in their fragility and lustrous patina, come to seem piercingly beautiful as well.

I thought then that Gober might be the kind of artist to stay with his embodied image—the white plaster sink—in continual variation, and that would be that. But after the first shows, as his imagistic vocabulary grew more macabre, it was clear that he was aiming for a larger synthesis, and a more audible cultural voice as well. Seldom has a silence spoken so loudly. Gober, 60 years old, grew



SHINE A LIGHT

An eccentric artist gets a biopic of his own.

CONSIDERED A MASTER OF the sublime for his unparalleled accomplishments in landscape painting, J.M.W. Turner was also a secretive and unsociable so-and-so. The juxtaposition of the 19th-century artist’s two sides informs *Mr. Turner*, British filmmaker Mike Leigh’s gloriously elemental biopic (at one point Turner suffers for his art by having himself strapped to a ship’s mast on a stormy sea).

“I make films about people’s private lives,” Leigh says, with a note of pride. “One of the many fascinations with Turner is that you have this complex, and to some extent secret, life.” And in Timothy Spall the director found the ideal actor to recreate the last 25 years of the Cockney artist’s curious existence. “He brings to it not only consummate character acting but the sort of rawness, vulgarity, and sensitivity Turner possessed.”

It’s a potent cocktail, and it earned Spall this year’s best actor prize at the Cannes Film Festival. (The movie opens stateside on December 19.) Leigh’s personal satisfaction was to come away thinking that he had finally gotten to know the elusive “painter of light” a little better. “We got behind the mask a bit,” the 71-year-old director says. “His work is so diverse that it has taken me pretty much my whole life to get my head around it.”

TOBIAS GREY

ART AND CRAFT

Above: To replicate the technique of J.M.W. Turner (*inset*), Timothy Spall took two years of lessons with painter Tim Wright.





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Drain Man

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 102] is, they have none; things turn into other things at will, and in the artist's hands, the familiar becomes strange, an emblem of alienation. His more elaborate works combine images in ways that recall day-dreams or adolescent doodles: sinks that sprout drooping limbs; a fireplace filled with men's legs, complete with well-worn shoes, in place of logs; still more legs that sprout candles or drains; a wax replica of a man's chest endowed with one breast; a white painted crib with sides slanted into a parallelogram, to name a few. Gober's material palette also expanded considerably. To the wood and plaster was added wax, human hair, lightbulbs, leather, running water. There is a whiff of the hospital, the wax museum, the fun house, the morgue. These works are creepy, liturgical, a little alarming, with something bristling, almost accusatory, just below the surface. They also have a mordant humor, the vocabulary of the melted world. The shadow of Magritte falls over them.

In addition to his formidable talent and tough-mindedness, Gober's ascent had

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something to do with timing. Surrealism was being let back in, after decades of banishment to high school art class. The same combination—linking images, sometimes bizarre ones, with a post-minimal procedural approach—would later form the foundation of Matthew Barney's work, along with that of dozens of other younger artists. What differentiates Gober from the rest is his attitude toward media. Where Barney, to name one example, has transitioned to full-on showman, a maker of elaborate productions on an immense scale, it's easy to imagine Gober still living with a black-and-white TV, if he has one at all. That is to say, he adheres to the more intimate, traditional means of art's transmission; he makes environments, not spectacles.

At the beginning of the '90s, as the art world and art market froze into a kind of paralysis, Gober made an admirable leap into large-scale installations. MoMA has restaged several of these pieces, and they are stunning; they seem today like fully arrived classical art, albeit of a particularly melancholy flavor. One in particular, *Untitled* (1992), first seen at DIA's old Chelsea space, locates several of

Gober's concerns: cleanliness, servitude, abjection—as well as romantic love. A wall-size hand-painted mural of a forest scene serves as the backdrop for six mounted sinks, this time with functioning taps and drains. The sound the water makes as it falls and empties, the rushing and gurgling of it, has been amplified—it takes over your mind. There are, in addition, barred windows, boxes of rat poison, and stacks of what look to be old copies of the *New York Times* but are in fact screen-printed facsimiles with made-up photographs and headlines. This carnival of despair and control left me feeling utterly hollowed out, yet also elated by its existence. That Gober could externalize and make concrete such complexity of feeling—it lifts one up. It's a richly theatrical work. It could be a set for a play by Pinter or Genet. By forcefully bringing to mind a cultural moment mired in feelings of failure, enervation, and entrapment, Gober creates something that makes you hold your breath.

One of Gober's themes is the terror and feeling of marginality that go with being a man. His work is like a catalog of male torments, desires, and failings, which are sometimes ameliorated by a maternal or

religious female image. Of course, it's bigger than this and can't be reduced to any one effect. But at least in part his work points to a vanquished or otherwise missing father, the remains of whom are seen mainly from the waist down, often accompanied by lighted candles, in memoriam. But, at least for a male viewer, there's a feeling of confronting the father but also becoming him. In the sculpture *Untitled Leg* (1989–90) and its many variations, I feel as though I'm coming face to face with a combination doppelgänger and shroud. These body cast sculptures have the vibration of a grave site; they are either dead serious or very funny, depending on your mood. The space between the top of the sock and the pants cuff, in its vulnerable, horizontal whiteness, is, to me, as chilling a glimpse of the fallen father as we are likely to get.

Gober's work is important because it plants these images somehow within us, setting off a cathartic chain reaction. He would no doubt have made a probing psychoanalyst, adept at holding the broken idealization. I'm not sure he isn't a new type of analyst in artist's clothing. •