

The Body Manifest



Installation view of Robert Gober: *The Heart Is Not a Metaphor*, The Museum of Modern Art, October 4, 2014–January 18, 2015. © 2014 The Museum of Modern Art. Photo: Jonathan Muzikar. All works by Robert Gober © 2014 Robert Gober.

I loved the MoMA show and I had a deep and visceral reaction to it. I actually began to cry in the galleries. This surprised me a great deal, mostly because I know the work and I sort of knew what to expect. It is overwhelming for me to think about the ideas and reactions I have to the work and to the entire show, which I think is beautifully installed.

The first time I saw a Gober installation was the work he had at Dia in 1993 and I confess, I actually had no idea that it was fabricated artwork. As I walked through the same piece at MoMA, I became acutely aware of all of the things that I missed when I saw the piece all those years ago.

It's impossible for me to separate the imagery in Gober's work from the massive loss of life



Robert Gober, *The Ascending Sink*, 1985. Plaster, wood, steel, wire lath, and semi-gloss enamel paint, two components, each: 30 x 33 x 27 inches; floor to top: 92 inches. Installed in the artist's studio on Mulberry Street in Little Italy, Manhattan. Image Credit: John Kramer, courtesy the artist. © 2014 Robert Gober.

to AIDS and how that is manifested on the body. When I walked into the recreations of the installations from *Dia* and also the installation from the *Jeu de Paume*, this was manifestly present. The landscape as a prison, the promise of healing waters, the denial of the intact body, and poisons for the elimination of pests all brought this into overwhelming focus for me.

I am someone who is deeply and equally in love with Formalism and with Duchamp, but it's important for me to foreground the significance of the

meanings that can be derived from forms. Gober isn't using readymades – he is making sculptures. When I first saw one of those sinks I immediately understood it as one of the weirdest still-life subjects I'd ever seen. I asked myself, "Why would someone make a sculpture of a sink?" Particularly in that moment where people were terrified of infection, immigrants, and diversity, it seemed like a vision yanked out of the nation's unconscious.

I think readings of the sinks as the body are apt. To push it forward, the sculptures at MoMA have an agency. They move, they are buried (like headstones, in one of the most amazing parts of the show), they are obdurate, and they float, they expand, they contract. They spew. They develop growths. In these ways they are subjects, not bodies. That is part of their thrill for me. They are related to Duchamp in form, certainly, but they have none of his dandiness or humor. They are accusations. They bear a kind of witness.

I don't think that AIDS is the only lens through which the work can be understood, not by a longshot. (And it must be said that while everyone now laments the tragedy of the epidemic, at the time very few people gave very much of a damn that certain undesirables

were dying at an alarming rate.) I saw the Dia show and the images of the Jeu de Paume show at a particular time. You can look at Picasso's Guernica as an example of a moment where an artist's work transformed our understanding of war. The shattered warrior monument at the bottom of that painting was an indication that mechanized violence and aerial bombardment marked the end of the image of noble soldier. I think of Gober as the artist who transformed our understanding of mourning. He takes this on with the work that deals with September 11th as well. So his work is about witnessing and marking history writ large and small.

Also, I will say that there are tropes and imagery in the work (closets for example) that speak to a particular queer experience and these coded images can become sites for queer people to find themselves in the work. AIDS was acted out (in this country) on queer male bodies that were disappearing at an alarming rate. The notion of elimination is born out in the sinks and drains and even the donuts. The body returns to art in this work as a site of contention – and also of political action. It's not just as a re-presentation, it's now under duress, attack and penetration. I would never say that the work is about being gay, but I will say that only the aware, engaged, political sensibility of a gay person could have made the connections and leaps that Gober makes. I would also say that the missed opportunities to see things (if you don't look at the right side of the suitcase sculpture, you don't see the legs, for example) also relate to whether or not you want to pay attention. The opportunity to overlook and dismiss or treat as garbage (the newspapers) is a privilege. Closer investigation rewards the viewer. Care and concern are foregrounded as a viewing strategy parallel to the care in fabrication.

There is something very direct about Gober's paintings and it is significant that he has paintings open and close the show. The painting at the beginning is about looking at a place that is pregnant with meaning for him – the house that his father built, that his mother still lives in, and where he grew up. It is coupled with his most recent sculpture, and this got me thinking about the connection between his paintings and the activation of surfaces (and thus content) throughout the show with its various materials. I find myself getting really attached and interested in the way he uses paint to reveal histories. The layers of paint on the doors, the cribs and all of the sinks, which at once make them succeed as illusions and at the same time assert themselves as painted objects, stuns me. He uses paint to reveal things more than cover them, even though the act of painting is to cover. I think about this especially in the door jambs and cribs which are not so much painted as coated with the material.

The painting that closes the show is a painting within a painting of an observed motif. It owes more to R.B. Kitaj than anyone else. For me it is the immediacy of Gober's graphic and painted work that resonates because they seem objective and at the same time deeply interior. All of the wallpaper that has its origins in paintings (and motifs that are

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born in Scenes of a Changing Painting, which is a masterwork) has the effect of making the galleries feel like you are inside of a separate consciousness. They are drawings that one senses you would never show anyone. I feel that they are private and somewhat shameful. Seeing that hanged man/sleeping man image as an environment was jarring. It's no longer an image: it's turned, through decoration, into the situation for the rest of the objects, and the viewer, in the room.

- See more at: <http://www.artcritical.com/2014/11/12/steve-locke-on-robert-gober/#sthash.IZMLwaCV.dpuf>