

Walter Robinson



ART PRACTICAL

Home Grown
By Maria Porges
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Palo Alto Art Center
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Solo Show

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Something about the cheery, bright colors in Walter Robinson's work evokes the dreamy pleasures of childhood at the same time that it plunges us into adult-size recognition of the eternal recurrence of human fallibility. Some of the most provocative and moving art of our time calls up such a mix of emotions by drawing on the deep—some would say scarring—imprint of early memory. As Claes Oldenburg put it when asked about the source of his inspiration, "I made it up when I was a little kid."

Robinson's artistic forebears are an interesting group. His strategies often include the manipulation of scale, which can be traced to René Magritte, Oldenburg, and Robert Gober, and a Pop-inflected appropriation of bits of consumer culture, invoking the (sometimes) ambivalent relationship to the religion of capitalism/consumption that lies at the heart of American life and art. The importance of facture in Robinson's work—of the manner in which it is made, with consummate skill and careful consideration of material and method to convey the intended ideas—demonstrates the artist's relationship to "maker-uncles" such as Richard Artschwager and Allan McCollum. Additionally, Robinson's affinity for words suggests alliances with text/image "cousins" Jenny Holzer and Barbara Bloom, or the Bay Area conceptualist branch of the family: William T. Wiley, Richard Shaw, Bruce Conner.



Walter Robinson. *Spin*, 2008; wood, epoxy, steel, and metal flake; 52 x 26 x 22 in. Collection of Donald Kushner. Courtesy of the Palo Alto Art Center.

All of this comes to mind when viewing *Home Grown*, Robinson's mid-career solo exhibition (as distinct from a retrospective, which would cover more than the single decade of work presented here; the artist is now in his sixties) at the Palo Alto Art Center. Here, the opportunity to see pieces from several different bodies of work reveals the unified nature of his vision, despite the broad range of ideas being addressed. These include, but are not limited to, species extinction, modern animal husbandry, fossil-fuel dependence, electoral malfeasance, junk food, propaganda, climate change, and the military-industrial complex. In other words, it is easy to imagine encountering something made by Robinson in a public or private collection and immediately recognizing it, even if seeing it for the first time, not only because it looks a certain way but because it deals with a certain kind of subject. In addition, the twenty-four featured works reveal a consistency of palette; Robinson is an original and sophisticated colorist—an unusual attribute for someone primarily identified as a sculptor. Like Wiley or Artschwager, though, Robinson is also a painter, an aspect of his work represented in this show by one of his mesmerizing clown pictures and two text pieces.

The world to which Robinson's compelling objects and images allude is utterly current in its sociopolitical concerns. In some ways, however, it is one that only the generation who grew to adulthood in the post-World War II era can fully comprehend. The baby boomers' relationship to things—material objects, rather than representations of them—is distinct from that of any post-internet generation. Those now older than 55 don't have the anxiety that drives Brooklyn hipsters to want Actual Stuff, Slow Food, Seasonal Produce; boomers know those experiences firsthand,

having lived them. Boomers are part of the world that was, as well as the world that is. In a sense, they (or, to be honest and include myself, we) can only imagine the world that will be.



Walter Robinson. *Binky*, 2012; wood and polyurethane; 53 x 30 x 13 in.; and *Crusade*, 2009; walnut, gas nozzle, and cotton; 60 x 33 x 2 in. Photo: Maria Porges.

Many of the icons alluded to here reflect that particular set of experiences. These include a recumbent Mickey Mouse in *Fallen Mickey* (2006), face down on the floor like a fallen soldier or skid-row sleeper, and a set of three giant pencils, each topped with an eraser in the shape of JFK's head, in *Civics Lesson* (2008). Pinocchio, his elongated nose supporting a military attack helicopter in *Spin* (2008), is the Disney version of the fairytale figure. Most poignantly, perhaps, the map in *Red Ink* (2007) recalls the pull-down world maps formerly found in all American elementary schools that distort the scale of the world's landmasses, making North America seem much bigger than it actually is.

The cumulative effect here is one of nostalgia—sometimes for things that never really existed—mixed with a strange kind of *déjà vu*. Not only have we been here before, but we will be here again, over and over, as we (collectively, as a species) continue to make the same mistakes. *Fruits de Mer* (2013) makes that suggestion wryly by conflating a container ship with an Egyptian funerary boat, reminding us that not only can we not take it with us—as the ancient Egyptians believed—but that we really, really don't want to. After all, those stacked shipping containers are full of the consumer doodads that drive our economy yet in the end mean nothing. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

Sometimes Robinson makes his point poetically, as in *Melt* (2008). This grouping of giant, frosted, sprinkle-bedecked animal cookies gathers around a “pool” of goo, the surface of which is pocked with the same sprinkles. Though this pool might, to some viewers, invoke a watering hole—say,

the one in the famous African diorama at the Field Museum in Chicago—the piece’s title implies that it is just as likely to be the remains of one of the family, mysteriously dissolved by some modern malady, about to be cannibalized by its own kind. Other works have the deadpan-hilarious obviousness of the anvil dropped over and over on Wile E. Coyote’s head by the Road Runner. *Binky* (2012), a gas can topped by a giant pink pacifier, falls in this latter category. No prompting or second thoughts are necessary to understand what is being said.



Walter Robinson. *Melt*, 2008; Styrofoam, wood, epoxy, and metal flake; 32 x 96 x 48 in. Collection of the San Jose Museum of Art. Photo: Maria Porges.

Things speak to us, as the painter Peter Paul Rubens once wrote. The works in Robinson’s exhibition function collectively as a memento mori, not only reminding us that we too will be dust someday, but recalling a lost world in which the number of objects was still seemingly finite, and reading was something associated with books, or possibly images, but not screens, which only served up television shows and movies. Things speak to us, and if we know what’s good for us, we will at least try to listen to what they have to say before it is too late.

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Home Grown is on view at Palo Alto Art Center, in Palo Alto, through August 30, 2015.