

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

The New York Times

If Gulliver Were a Conceptualist ... Robert Therrien Gets a Solo Show at the Albright-Knox

Blake Gopnik



Robert Therrien with two of his outsize creations in his studio in Los Angeles. Monica Almeida/The New York Times

Buffalo — On a recent afternoon at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery here, workers were struggling to mount a huge metal sculpture high on a wall. The piece looked like a Looney Tunes black cloud, with oversize spigots poking out of its sides. You'd imagine it raining bad luck on Porky Pig. It seemed to be jinxing its installers as well, as time and again their forklift refused to heave it to the right spot.

In the background, a tall, graying man looked on impassively, stooping the way big people do when their egos don't match their height. Dressed in baggy cotton pants and a khaki work shirt, with Clark Kent horn rims below a scruffy comb-over, he looked like a museum janitor on coffee break, quietly considering the mad messes that artists get up to. Except in this case that onlooker was the artist and the strange art was his, part of a new solo exhibition whose title is simply his name: "Robert Therrien."

"You seem very relaxed about all this," a visitor said as Mr. Therrien, 65, observed his harried installers. "Actually, I'm really, really tense," he replied, though without losing the remote air that he had maintained throughout the afternoon's labors. "Quiet," "subtle" and "mysterious" are all

words that get attached to Mr. Therrien's works, which include a coffin the length of his arm, a card table taller than he is and cryptic drawings that mash up the shapes of a roadside chapel, a pointing finger and a wheelbarrow. Those words apply to him as well.

"He's a very unusual person, and he's a sweetie, too," said Lynn Zelevansky, the director of the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh, in the nurturing tone that seems standard among Therrien supporters. "It's just so harmonious and so beautiful," said Ms. Zelevansky, who devoted a major show to his work in 2000 when she was a curator at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. "It's about experience, and this amazing capacity for invention."

For years Mr. Therrien has been represented by the all-powerful Gagosian Gallery, and his pieces have entered the collections of major museums and big shots like Count Giuseppe Panza and the Los Angeles billionaire Eli Broad. Yet he's hardly a household name, and even some insiders barely know who he is. "Somehow, he's still under the radar," said Heather Pesanti, who became a curator at the Albright-Knox in 2008 and, seeing the major Therriens it owned, went on to organize the current survey, which opened on July 3. (She has since moved on to AMOA-Arthouse in Austin, Tex.)

Mr. Therrien's low-key persona may have helped to keep his name off people's lips, but his art also played a part. His giant sculptures can come off as one-liners until you dig deeper and realize that they're less about bigness than close observation, and his smaller works can be slow to unfold.

He's also never been one to surf art-world trends; Ms. Pesanti said that he has pulled together some of the most important currents of the last 50 years — she mentions Minimalism, Conceptualism, colorism — without getting boxed into a movement. For her, she said, his idiosyncrasy is part of the draw, as well as the fact that he is often overlooked.

Mr. Therrien was born into a middle-class household in Chicago. The family moved to the San Francisco Bay Area when he was 5, partly to seek treatment for his asthma. Holed up sick, he honed a talent for drawing. After high school, he did a stint in Oakland at the California College of Arts and Crafts (now the California College of the Arts) but a missed date in traffic court and a pile of neglected warrants led him to flee to Southern California. ("It just became a nightmare," he said).

In 1970 he enrolled in photography studies at the Brooks Institute in Santa Barbara while also studying painting at the affiliated Santa Barbara Art Institute. "I think things really changed," he said, "when I met this one teacher" — the painter James Jarvaise, whose work had been shown at the Museum of Modern Art. Mr. Jarvaise, now 89, remembers him clearly: "He was a very quiet fellow, and his paintings followed the same suit." Mr. Jarvaise describes them as elegant abstractions in the lyrical style then known as Abstract Impressionism. He encouraged Mr. Therrien to pursue a master of fine arts degree at the University of Southern California.

After earning the degree, Mr. Therrien found himself a loft in Los Angeles and gained a small following in the 1980s for a body of understated, vaguely surreal pieces like the silver-plated

snowman and bronzed boater hat that are in his current show. The work struck a chord with Vija Celmins, an older colleague known for her obsessive Photo Realist drawings. “In L.A., he may be one of the best artists I’ve ever met,” she said by phone recently.

The first time she visited his home and workshop, “it was like being in some magician’s studio,” she said. The space is known for its mix of domestic objects (“the scrub-brush collection got sort of out of hand at one point,” Mr. Therrien said) and the cryptic art he derives from them. “I knew immediately that he was extraordinary,” Ms. Celmins said. “And of course he’s such a quiet, gentlemanly, courtly man — very unusual for L.A.”

Mr. Therrien’s breakthrough came in 1992, when he returned to photography and began shooting the spaces under an old wooden table. He was fascinated by the object’s underside and by the hidden engineering made visible in the photos. “It would be perfect just to have that as a sculpture,” he recalls thinking. He set out to make a table that was so big that viewers could get a good look at its details, as they would in one of his photographs. The Brobdingnag object he ended up fabricating, which was 10 feet tall, became the first in a series of household goods that he has scaled up to three and a half times their normal size.

His enlargements have included riffs on that first table and the oak seats that went with it and precarious stacks of vintage restaurant plates and classic Revere Ware pots. “Often in his work you feel like a child,” Ms. Celmins suggested — like a toddler staring up at a table or dangling legs from a chair. She quoted lyrics from the Jefferson Airplane song “White Rabbit”: “One pill makes you larger/And one pill makes you small/And the ones that mother gives you don’t do anything at all.”

That channels the standard surrealist take on Mr. Therrien’s oversize works. But his goal may not be to return his audience to childhood or to provide a “Land of the Giants” spectacle or to vie with the far more stylized Pop enlargements of Claes Oldenburg. (Mr. Therrien doesn’t see much connection.) The aim may be almost documentary — a kind of macrophotography, but realized in three dimensions.

“The projects that are blown up in scale are about things that are thought of two dimensionally, and then inserting yourself into it, rather than having an interest in just blowing things up,” he said. “The reason the table became big was because I asked, ‘What if people could walk into an environment like that?’ “

The cartoon cloud might have similar roots. What if you didn’t laugh at a Looney Tunes image but conceived a genuine 3-D world that obeyed cartoon rules? Maybe a world where a goofy black cloud with spigots cast a jinx on a bunch of installers.