



Robert Gober

Born:

Wallingford, Connecticut, 1954

Robert Gober was born on September 12, 1954, in Wallingford, Connecticut. After taking art classes in high school, he attended Middlebury College in Vermont, where he studied literature and fine arts from 1972 to 1976. During his junior year, he spent time abroad, at the Rome campus of the Tyler School of Art, a division of Temple University. Gober settled in New York in 1976 and initially earned his living as a carpenter and handyman, crafting stretchers for artists and renovating lofts. He also worked as an assistant to the painter Elizabeth Murray. In 1984, Paula Cooper Gallery in New York hosted his first solo exhibition, consisting of a single work titled *Slides of a Changing Painting* (1982–83). To make this piece, Gober spent a year painting and repainting a small board, taking hundreds of photographs of the various transformations. The images constituting this "memoir of a painting," as the artist describes *Slides*, are projected onto the gallery wall; as one image dissolves into the next, they offer a deeply personal record, like the pages of a diary. The motifs of the paintings (an armchair, a drainpipe, a human torso, windows) and the themes of the work as a whole (memory and metamorphosis) remain central to Gober's artistic practice.

During the 1980s and early 1990s, Gober turned his attention to three-dimensional creations, fabricating a host of handcrafted everyday objects that in their banality and potent eroticism, as well as their interrogation of the very language of traditional sculpture, call to mind Marcel Duchamp's readymades and Jasper Johns's sculpture. However, in contrast to Duchamp and the appropriationist strategies widely used in the 1980s, Gober's sculptures are meticulously wrought by hand—with such fastidious attention to detail that one may initially mistake them for being manufactured, and with small gestures that transform the once ordinary into something wholly extraordinary. His series of sinks and urinals (both 1984), made of plaster over wire lath and covered with semigloss enamel paint to resemble porcelain, have been deprived of faucets and drains and thus rendered dysfunctional. The sober, clean contours of these common waste receptacles and the artist's often theatrically stark installation of them in the exhibition space echo Minimal and Conceptual art.

Gober's invocation of the human body, principally through its absence, became increasingly apparent beginning in 1986, when he fashioned sculptures of playpens, cribs, beds, and a single slipcovered armchair, all of which intimate the drama, and even the trauma, of childhood and the domestic sphere. These psychologically charged works set the stage for Gober's eerie examination of body parts. *Untitled* (1990) is a beeswax cast of the artist's right leg below the knee, shod, sporting a sock and trousers, with its exposed skin covered in human hair. The evocatively phallic piece lies on the floor, appearing to extend from the wall. *Untitled* (1991) consists of a beeswax cast of a male body from the waist down, with its buttocks in the air. Dressing the trunk in soiled white sneakers, sports socks, and white briefs, Gober also embedded several circular drains in each hirsute leg, to an uncanny effect. These unnatural orifices suggest gay sexuality, a leitmotif for the artist, who is openly gay. In recent years, Gober's sculptures have become progressively more conceptual, photography has come to occupy an increasingly important place in his installations, and his aesthetic vocabulary has continued to expand. Yet his newest work still depends on the delicate balance between formal rigor and carefully choreographed spatial presentations perfected by the artist early in his career, and Gober continues to highlight the arbitrary divisions not only between high art



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and interior design or between sculpture and functional objects, but also far more entrenched cultural binaries like masculinity and femininity, homosexuality and heterosexuality, the erotic and the abject, the horrible and the hilarious.

Comprehensive retrospective exhibitions of Gober's work have been organized by the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam (1990), Galerie Nationale du Jeu de Paume in Paris (1991), Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles (1997), and Walker Art Center in Minneapolis (1999). In 2001, Gober represented the United States at the Venice *Biennale*. He lives and works in New York.