

GAGOSIAN

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Robert Therrien molds memories with his artwork at Gagosian

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Robert Therrien's "No title (stacked plates, blue)" (2018) typifies his tendency to forgo titles but to add a descriptive comment. Photo: Josh White.

Robert Therrien's child's-eye perspective on the world has charmed viewers for decades.

The artist is best known for replicas of tables and chairs the size of small cottages surrounded by multiple outbuildings. These and his teetering, 8-foot-high stacks of dishes create the extraordinary childlike experience of smallness, reminding us of that world made for others to which we were merely uninvited visitors.

Though two works from the 1980s, "No title (snowman)" and "No title (bent cone)," are currently on view as part of the Fisher Collection at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Therrien has not mounted a solo show in the Bay Area in 20 years. So, it was of great interest when the San Francisco outpost of the New York gallery Gagosian promised an exhibition of new work, now on view through May 11.

As it turned out, the Gagosian show of 33 sculptures and works on paper includes only seven pieces made in the past three years.



Robert Therrien's "No title (white smoke signal)" (2019) exemplifies his child's-eye representations. Photo: Josh White

No matter. A 71-year-old little boy, with a practiced hand and a sly knack for visual mischief, Therrien has always repeated himself. He is no mere class notebook doodler, but the analogy is apt. Simple images often get lodged in our heads, unreeling in moments of half-attention. One person draws whirlpool and cyclone spirals; another has a physical reaction to the taste of a madeleine cookie dipped in tea.

For many of us, those images float through our consciousness barely noticed. But where we might leave our marginal scribbles behind, unanalyzed, Therrien has made an art of digging deep and latching on.

The elemental forms he conjures are personal, one assumes, but they are unspecific. Like dreams that lack detail, they suggest much more than they could ever describe.



Robert Therrien's "No title (group cutout, ranch house, chapel, pitcher and barn)" (2019) can be seen as a California-inspired impression of these shapes. Photo: Greg Cheriton, Gagolian.

An interview I scheduled with the artist had to be cancelled. I would have asked him basic questions, in the spirit of his stripped-down objects. Like about the about the naming of his works: It seems that all are labeled “No title,” but in recent years he seems to have added short parenthetical descriptors. “No title (pitcher)” directs our reading of a shape that might otherwise be a formal exercise, a tall triangle with its apex quirkily relocated to one side. “No title (white smoke signal)” says rather more than the image alone about communication or, perhaps, boyhood curiosity about alternate languages and culture, or fantasies of the American West.

Even without such verbal aids, repeated appearances over many years of the forms recapitulated in “No title (group cutout, ranch house, chapel, pitcher and barn)” (2019) are like archetype flashcards, reminders of a past none of us share, but all remember. All Californians, at least.

Born in Chicago, Therrien moved with his family to Palo Alto as a young child. He attended art school in the Bay Area, off and on, and eventually moved to Los Angeles, where he finished school.



Artist Robert Therrien's "No title (witch hat)" (2018). Photo: Josh White.

One is tempted to ascribe to the 4-year-old mind the indelibility of images like a California-style barn and a ranch house (in the East, our barns were more stout, and our homes were meant to stand high from the ground). I don't know if the artist ever set foot on a Western ranch, but it hardly matters; his are places experienced in fleeting glimpses as if from the freeway, caught in the corner of the mind's eye.

Not all of Therrien's work is so schematic as the cutouts, which also include such allusive forms as a keyhole shape or a conical witch hat. Or those giant tables and stacks of dinner plates.



Robert Therrien's "No title (hanging pans)" (2019) is one of the artist's more recent works. Photo: Greg Cheriton , Gagosian

One remarkable work, now unfortunately hung to its disadvantage in a salon-hung grouping with 20 other objects, struck me as related to those household facsimiles when I saw it in isolation earlier. "No title (hanging pans)" was made this year, a pair of stylized frying pans cast in bronze and hung from nails on a painted shelf.

How silly, one might think, to lavish the care required to remake iron kitchenware as a slightly sleeker version of itself. Unless, of course, what is molded is not metal but memory.

Robert Therrien: 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Monday-Saturday. Through May 11. Free. Gagosian, 657 Howard St., S.F. 415-546-3990. <https://gagosian.com>



"No title (hands and tambourines)" (2018) shows artist Robert Therrien's style of capturing impressions from past memories. Photo: Josh White