

ROBERT GOBER

THE HEART IS NOT A METAPHOR



MoMA

*How in the fuck are you supposed to hit that shit?*

—Mickey Mantle

**ROBERT GOBER**  
**THE HEART IS NOT A METAPHOR**

Edited by Ann Temkin

Essay by Hilton Als

With a Chronology by  
Claudia Carson, Robert Gober,  
and Paulina Pobocho

And an Afterword by  
Christian Scheidemann

The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Published on the occasion of the exhibition *Robert Gober: The Heart Is Not a Metaphor*, at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, October 4, 2014–January 18, 2015, organized by Ann Temkin, The Marie-Josée and Henry Kravis Chief Curator of Painting and Sculpture, and Paulina Pobochoa, Assistant Curator, Department of Painting and Sculpture

#### Hyundai Card

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The exhibition title *Robert Gober: The Heart Is Not a Metaphor* quotes Elizabeth Hardwick's 1979 novel *Sleepless Nights*: "Alas, the heart is not a metaphor—or not only a metaphor."

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Back cover: Robert Gober. *Slides of a Changing Painting*. 1982–83. 3 parts, of 23 slides, 42 slides, and 24 slides respectively. 15 minutes running time. Slide 34 of 42

Pp. 6–7, 16–19, 30–31, 42–43, 54–55, 66–67, 76–77, 86–91, 106–7, 122–23, 140–41, 156–57, 172–73, 186–87, 212–13, 226–27, 240–45, 260–61: *Slides of a Changing Painting*. 1982–83. 3 parts, of 23 slides, 42 slides, and 24 slides respectively. 15 minutes running time. In sequence: slides 3, 21, and 23 of 23; slides 11, 12, 5, 8, 30, 35, 37, and 40 of 42; slides 1–3, 5, 9, 7, 11, 16, 19, 21, and 23 of 24; and slide 20 of 42 (details)

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Hyundai Card is proud to be the lead sponsor of the exhibition *Robert Gober: The Heart Is Not a Metaphor* at The Museum of Modern Art—the first large-scale survey of Robert Gober’s career to take place in the United States. Gober’s sculptures have made him one of the outstanding artists of his generation. From his early sinks and other domestic objects to his recent large-scale installations, Gober’s work is characterized by an extraordinary commitment to precision of both form and content.

As Korea’s foremost issuer of credit cards, Hyundai Card is known for its innovative approach and for its attention to even the smallest and most overlooked details. We believe that our constant effort will ultimately inspire and enrich the lives of our customers. A long-term sponsor of The Museum of Modern Art, Hyundai Card is delighted to make Gober’s remarkable presentation possible.

## FOREWORD

This book accompanies the exhibition *Robert Gober: The Heart Is Not a Metaphor*, presented at The Museum of Modern Art during the autumn of 2014. The narrative of this retrospective survey spans the full breadth of the thirty-five years of Robert Gober’s career to date. Such an overview demonstrates the remarkable development of a highly focused and powerfully uncanny array of themes and forms. Upon their emergence, Gober’s works almost instantly declared themselves an indispensable part of the landscape of late-twentieth-century art; since then they have continued to evolve while remaining tightly bound to the concerns outlined by the artist more than three decades ago. The Museum of Modern Art is honored to provide this deep look into the nature of Gober’s achievement. Since our first acquisition, in 1991—a pencil drawing of a sink—the generosity of many devoted supporters, foremost among them Maja Oeri and Hans Bodenmann and the late Elaine and Werner Dannheiser, has allowed the Museum to become a stronghold of the artist’s work.

This exhibition is the product of a collaboration between Gober; Ann Temkin, The Marie-Josée and Henry Kravis Chief Curator of Painting and Sculpture; and Paulina Pobocho, Assistant Curator. From early on, the role of curator has formed an important part of Gober’s activity; it has engaged the work of friends and peers as well as that of historical figures. On this occasion Gober’s own body of work is the subject, and he has brought to the project his extraordinary ability to tell a story through the images, objects, and spaces that he creates. In tandem, this volume sets aside an art-historical approach in favor of a personal one. Together the book’s texts illuminate the intimate roots of Gober’s work, and its power to provoke intensely individual responses.

We extend our immense gratitude to the dedicated group of sponsors and lenders who have made this ambitious project possible. Most of all, we are profoundly indebted to Robert Gober, whose inspired vision has shaped this exhibition and whose fortitude has enabled its realization.

—Glenn D. Lowry  
*Director, The Museum of Modern Art*



*Untitled*. 1994. Paper, string, acrylic paint, and fabric, 3½ x 2½" (8.9 x 6.4 cm)

## ROBERT GOBER: AN INVITATION

*Ann Temkin*

In 1980 Robert Gober made a postcard invitation for the Johanna Boyce dance troupe. He had begun performing with the company two years earlier, not long after arriving in New York. The small card reproduced a pencil drawing he had made for the occasion: a close-up view of a foot in a flip-flop, with a hand reaching down for a Kennedy half-dollar on the ground beside the foot (p. 125). Below the drawing read a handwritten line: "Boyce Dances—Out of the Ordinary." The title of the performance was Boyce's, not Gober's, but in a body of work filled with premonitory incidents and events, this is a notable one: within four years, Gober would be using ordinary materials to make sculptures of ordinary objects, with results that were decidedly out of the ordinary. Through to the present, he is an artist whose images and processes are deeply engaged with the everyday and at the same time profoundly disruptive of it.

Gober's drawing depicts one of the actions in Boyce's piece, a work choreographed for untrained dancers and composed of such unremarkable movements as juggling coins or jumping up and down. The lettering on the invitation, written in the twenty-five-year-old's hand, is equally nondescript: casual and almost childlike, it suggests the announcement for a school play more than any sort of professional performance. In the years to come, Gober's art often would feature handwriting and lettering. There would be

more invitation cards (now to his own shows), sculptures, multiples, prints, and drawings. The phrases on their surfaces imbue these works of art with a vernacular poetry: “Extra Buttons.” Or “Cat Sitter. Quality care for your pets. \$5.00 per visit.” Sometimes the lettering is Gober’s, sometimes that of an assistant or a collaborator. Sometimes it is freely invented, sometimes it imitates a selected source. In all cases, for the careful observer, it bespeaks the engagement of a human hand.

Handwriting offers a useful entry point to a consideration of Gober’s art. It can be understood as the fundamental distillation, or the simplest demonstration, of the handmadeness of all that he creates. It is a signal that he has made what we are looking at, even if this might be far from immediately apparent. In our universe of computer-generated fonts, handwriting is at once mundane and a rarity. Gober’s art similarly exemplifies a paradox: we usually see the handmade as the opposite of the mass-produced, but Gober collapses the two, often choosing to handmake realistic sculptural representations of machine-made items. As a result, he draws attention to the question of making in a way that more obviously handcrafted sculpture does not. In the latter the craft quotient is taken for granted; in Gober’s work, its seeming nonnecessity (why not just buy the box of rat bait?) forces to the surface the question of why the artist has chosen to spend his and his collaborators’ time that way.

The physical materialization of Gober’s work sets it apart from that of both his predecessors and his peers. In the late twentieth century, an artist’s options for making sculpture were more wide open than ever before in history. With that came the challenge of making sculpture matter anew, building on the past and not repeating it. Gober chose to follow a desire to convert specific visions into objects, and to find empirical solutions by which to do this. His art is rooted in a curiosity about how one can make something one wishes to see.

Early on the outcome of this curiosity was a veritable avalanche of sculptures of sinks, which Gober made during 1984 and 1985. As is often the case with an artist’s first great works, it might be said that the sinks happened to him: the impulse to make them, and to keep making them, was almost involuntary. He emerged an artist, ready to go on to create his own versions of other domestic

objects and, soon, to produce sculptures and installations that would transform the familiar into something wholly otherwise.

The narrative imagery of each of Gober’s works springs from an intuitive decision, a concrete conviction. After the suddenness of inspiration—spotting a small package of extra buttons, run over by a car; envisaging an armchair pierced by a culvert pipe—what follows is the polar opposite: the slowness of deliberation and work. The thinking and discussion in the studio circulate chiefly around “how to make this,” not around what to make or its potential interpretations. Materials and processes are where Gober invests his energy, and through them he makes visible the action of his imagination.

Seemingly modest objects and dauntingly complex environments share their origins in a workshoplike atelier in which a goal is identified and the requisite expertise is acquired directly or sought out in a collaborator. The spectrum of necessary activities has ranged from buying a how-to book on weaving wicker to finding a consultant on the circulation of water. Usually the fabrication process is one of trial and error: Gober may invest weeks or months in a certain approach, only to reject its result and begin again.

Gober’s sculptures are for the most part either untitled or self-evidently titled (*Bed, Drain*). The surrogate for the missing title is the medium list: “Plaster, wood, steel, wire lath, semi-gloss enamel paint.” “Beeswax, cotton, leather, aluminum pull tabs, human hair.” “Photolithography on archival (Mohawk Superfine) paper, twine.” These words provide the window onto meaning that might otherwise be supplied by a title. They do not explain the work, but the work cannot be understood without them.

Handwriting is not only a metaphor for making; it also invokes the autographic nature of each thing that Gober makes. It indicates that no matter how mute or matter-of-fact something seems to be, it is fundamentally from and of the artist’s self. There is no explicit self-portraiture in Gober’s work, but the artist has occasionally taken care to invest it with his physical presence, or intimations thereof. The first full-size plaster sink took its dimensions from the one in his family’s basement. The first wax leg was cast from his own. The bride in the Saks Fifth Avenue advertisement is Gober himself, complete with 48DDD bust. The lithographed *New York*

*Times* pages describing the tragedy of 9/11 date from September 12, which is Gober's birthday.

John Russell's *New York Times* review of Gober's first exhibition at the Paula Cooper Gallery, in autumn 1985, praised the work as "minimal forms with maximum content." Gober emerged as an artist during an era of intense sociocultural upheaval; for him, that happenstance of timing meant that his art would always be a place in which to situate issues he considered vital to his historical moment. It would not be political art per se; Gober works within a modernist tradition that aspires to a timelessness in which topical subject matter is rarely more than implicit, and ideally is made universal. Yet his art addresses large themes of politics, religion, gender, and race, and tightly binds them to his own life story and personal convictions. He is an American artist in the tradition of Walt Whitman, whose 1855 preface to *Leaves of Grass* instructs the reader to "re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book," and to "dismiss whatever insults your own soul." Gober goes on from there to construct what *does* make sense to his soul. If to some that looks aberrant or disturbing, it is worth remembering that what mainstream society presents as normal seems to many equally foreign or strange.

A sink that splays out in two halves. A playpen at a vertiginous pitch. A wax torso, half male and half female. A man's leg emerging from a woman's groin. A bag of diapers atop a bronze "Styrofoam" block. No matter how startling the imagery, Gober's universe is always clearly legible and makes itself readily available to understanding. This is especially true of the hand-holdable works that he produces alongside his large-scale sculptures. Intimate in mood as well as scale, these are produced in small editions of unique objects, a seeming paradox that means that the items are individually handmade yet nearly identical. Unlike the larger works but like most of Gober's prints, these multiples are always direct replicas of their sources. They indulge the artist's predilection for the lost or discarded, and elevate to art things discovered on the street: an empty Seagram's Gin bottle, a Table Talk pie box, a urology-appointment reminder. For Gober these are significant rescue operations, not unlike the adoption of a dog from a shelter. Humble origins are ennobled and abandonment is transformed into the possibility of love.

The phrase "out of the ordinary" represents a deep commitment to an ethos in which art is not removed from life, but intersects with it. For Gober, what goes on in the studio germinates from and pertains to what he finds important beyond it. At the same time, the level of thought and attention within the studio points back outward to daily life. Human care given to making can imply a care given to emotional and moral decisions; it can speak to a care for the way in which one chooses to inhabit this world. One need not draw a connection between such things, of course, but Gober's art invites us to do so.





Untitled (detail). 2003–5. Water and excavated hole, dimensions variable. Shown installed at the Matthew Marks Gallery, New York, 2005

## CHRONOLOGY

Claudia Carson and Paulina Pobocho  
with Robert Gober

### 1954

**April 15 (Holy Thursday):** Leah Gober, four months pregnant, is admitted to Meriden Hospital in Meriden, Connecticut, with severe abdominal pain. A knotted intestine requires emergency surgery. Leah begs the doctors to save the pregnancy. The surgery is successful.

**September 12:** Robert John Gober is born at Meriden Hospital. He is two weeks past due. Gober is the second child of Leah and Gideon Gober. They also have a daughter, Christine.

Leah Mary Gober, née Salvadori (b. August 14, 1924), and Gideon “Gus” Gober (b. January 20, 1924) have spent all their lives in Wallingford, not far from Meriden in northern New Haven County. Established in 1667, Wallingford was largely rural for much of its history, but pewter and silver industries emerged there at the end of the nineteenth century and by the time Gober is a child, International Silver, American Cyanamid, Pratt and Whitney Aircraft, and the Wallingford Steel Company are the largest employers in a town whose population has grown to almost 17,000.

Leah and Gus attended Lyman Hall High School in Wallingford. They first met at the Sugar Bowl Luncheonette, where local teenagers would hang out after class. After graduating from high school, Leah studied at Meriden Hospital’s School of Nursing, then joined the hospital as a surgical nurse. To get to work from her home in Wallingford, she would walk to the center of town and take a bus. If Gus were driving through town, he would pick her up and give her a lift to work. Their relationship developed during these rides, and they married on September 15, 1951.

At the hospital, Leah did everything from assisting in surgery to mopping the floor. Working for the first time on an amputation, she would recall, the sound of the

Births	
The following births were recorded during the weekend at the two local hospitals:	
<b>MERIDEN HOSPITAL</b>	
Yesterday, a daughter to Mr. and Mrs. Robert Anderson, of 19 North Avenue.	
Yesterday, a daughter to Mr. E. and Mrs. Joseph Vumbacco of 54 Parkview Avenue.	
Yesterday, a son to Mr. and Mrs. Gideon Gober, of Hope Hill Road, Yalesville.	
Yesterday, a son to Mr. and Mrs. Frederick Carter of 48 Aldins Street.	
Yesterday, a son to Mr. and Mrs. Henry Pett, of 18 Sunbright Drive South.	
Saturday, a daughter to Mr. and Mrs. Brawlio Santiago, of 85 East Main Street.	
Saturday, a son to Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Bullock, of Hart Acre Road, Southington.	
Saturday, a son to Mr. and Mrs. Alexander Savchik, of 3 Washington Heights.	
Saturday, a son to Mr. and Mrs. Frank Vouras, of 1064 East Main Street.	
<b>MEMORIAL HOSPITAL</b>	

Gober’s birth announcement, published in the *Meriden Record*, September 13, 1954



Gober's mother, Leah Gober, while at nursing school in Meriden, Conn., c. 1945



Gideon "Gus" Gober with his muskrat pelts, c. 1940

while he was recovering, his liver hemorrhaged. "I can't die because I'm so young. I have so many things to do. Leah, don't let me die," were his last words. He died on February 27, 1947. It is the most devastating incident in Leah's life. Her parents are inconsolable and her mother, who will live to be ninety-six, never says John's name again, referring to him only as "my son."

During Gus and Leah's engagement, Gus has begun to build a house for them on Hope Hill Road in Yalesville, a small community in the township of Wallingford. When they return from their honeymoon and move into the house, construction is not complete and will not be for several more years. At the time there are only two other houses on the street, which is surrounded by fields. Next door live the Gopians. Mrs. Gopian cures pastrami outdoors on the clothesline and the Gober family's dog, Suzie, likes to lick it. Without a car and with few

saw brought with it a wave of nausea, exacerbated by one doctor telling the other, "Give the leg to Leah." But she worked as a nurse until her children were born, and would later entertain them with stories from the operating room.

Gus works as a draftsman at Pratt and Whitney in North Haven. The company manufactures engines for civil and military aviation. The federal Environmental Protection Agency will later designate the location a Superfund clean-up site.

Both of Gober's maternal grandparents are from Italy, John Salvadori (1893–1985) being born in Cascina, his wife, Eva, or "Siva" (1901–1997), in Genoa. They emigrated to the United States around 1921, and John works for International Silver. Gober's paternal grandparents, Victor Gober (1891–1959) and his wife, Mary (1897–1985), are from Lithuania. Victor emigrated to Wallingford in 1912, Mary in 1922, and Victor works for the Wallingford Steel Company. Both the Salvadoris and the Gobers own two-family homes in Wallingford and rent to tenants.

As Gober is growing up, both Leah and Gus are fluent in their parents' native languages. As a child, Gober has a Lithuanian nickname, "Stasiu."

Leah gives Gober the middle name "John" after her late brother, John Salvadori, Jr. After studying at the Porter School of Engineering Design, John had joined the armed forces in 1944 but was soon discharged because of chronic stomachaches. Leah, then in her final year of nursing school and working nights at Meriden Hospital, had taken him to see a Dr. Smith, who had discovered a tubercular mass in his bowel. He underwent surgery but



John Salvadori, Jr., Gober's uncle and Leah's brother, c. 1944



Untitled. 1994–95. Wood, beeswax, brick, plaster, plastic, leather, iron, charcoal, cotton socks, electric light, and motor, 47 7/8 x 47 x 34" (120.3 x 119.4 x 86.4 cm), opening: 31 x 31 x 30 1/2" (78.7 x 78.7 x 77.5 cm)

neighbors, Leah finds the new environment isolating. As a child, Gober spends a lot of time outdoors, exploring the woods in the warm months, sledding down hills and ice-skating on Brown's Pond in the winters.

#### 1955

**June 12:** Our Lady of Fatima Church breaks ground on Hope Hill Road, across the street from the Gobers' home. A deeply religious farming family has given ten acres of their land to the Roman Catholic Church for this purpose.

Construction continues on the family house, and will until 1959. Gober will sleep in a crib in the corner of his parents' bedroom until he is five years old, when the second story is completed and rooms are added upstairs.

#### 1957

**January 21:** Dwight D. Eisenhower is sworn in for his second term as thirty-fourth President of the United States.

#### 1958

Victor Gober suffers a cerebral hemorrhage. Today Gober has few memories of Victor, but remembers him lying in a hospital bed in the living room of his home. He will die in March of the following year.



*Untitled*. 1975. Oil on board, 16 x 18<sup>3/4</sup>" (40.6 x 47.6 cm)



*X Playpen*. 1987. Wood and enamel paint, 27 x 37 x 37" (68.6 x 94 x 94 cm)

#### 1959

Gober starts to attend kindergarten at Yalesville Elementary School. He will stay here through fifth grade. To get to school, he passes through his own and a neighbor's backyard to reach Haller Avenue, which connects to a baseball field at the end of the school property. One year, Gober wins the school prize for best Halloween costume: he has made a life-size, realistic trash can from silver-painted cardboard and has hung from it a sign reading "Don't be a litter bug." Gober exhibits a talent for drawing but none of his childhood art projects from elementary school is saved, although a few works that he will make later, in high school, still hang framed on his mother's walls. "And I do have my baby teeth that were saved in a tiny cough-syrup bottle and a bottle of wine that my grandfather made in his cellar. I keep them on my desk."

**Leah Gober:** *Bob was a skinny little kid, you could count his ribs. At low tide on our beach holidays, he would make sculptures of dogs and houses in the sand. People would stomp them down and he would just build them again.*

Pets are not allowed in the Gober house. Suzie the dog sleeps in the garage, where Gus has made a dog door for her and has set her bed near a wood stove to keep her warm during the winter months.



Gober and his sister, Christine, with Suzie, the family dog, near Brown's Pond, Yalesville, Conn., c. 1958

When Suzie dies, the Gobers bury her in the yard near a grove of trees and a creek at the back of their property. The Gobers also have a kitten. During a cold Connecticut winter, Gober goes out the back door and finds the kitten frozen to death in the snow. Leah brings it indoors, places it on the radiator, and tells her son that everything will be fine before sending him off to school.

Every Sunday the Gobers eat a long Italian lunch at the home of the Salvadoris. On Saturdays Gus has a Lithuanian lunch at the home of his mother; Gober sometimes joins him and afterward they hunt for arrowheads in the Wallingford woods. These are some of Gober's favorite times with his dad.

**1960**

The Gobers' neighbors the Gopians move from Hope Hill Road to the Gopian Trailer Park in Yalesville and rent their house to the Catholic Church. In September, the Reverend Edwin O'Brien becomes the pastor of Our Lady of Fatima Church and moves into the Gopians' house until a new rectory is built. Gus, a draftsman, helps to design the rectory. "It was weird enough having a priest living next door," Gober will remember, "but then I was really taken aback when I saw his underwear, white boxer shorts, hanging on the clothesline."

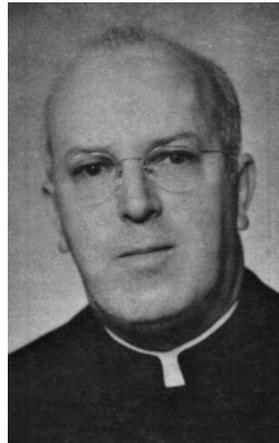
**December:** when doctors suspect that Leah may have tuberculosis, she is admitted to the Gaylord Rehabilitative Center in Wallingford. In her absence, her mother, Eva, lives with the Gober family. Returning home in March of 1961, Leah hires different people to help her clean the house for half a day every Friday. She thinks they never leave it clean enough. One is a developmentally challenged woman named Jenny who has an obsessive-compulsive need to wash her hands and the rags she uses. "If my mother couldn't find her, that meant Jenny was in the cellar at the work sink, washing her hands over and over." Another woman, Margaret, laughs continuously and for no apparent reason as she works. Margaret's family is on public assistance and lives in a house next to a junk-car yard that the kids call "The Lady's Parking Lot." Her husband will be one of the first people in Connecticut to have his life prolonged by kidney dialysis.



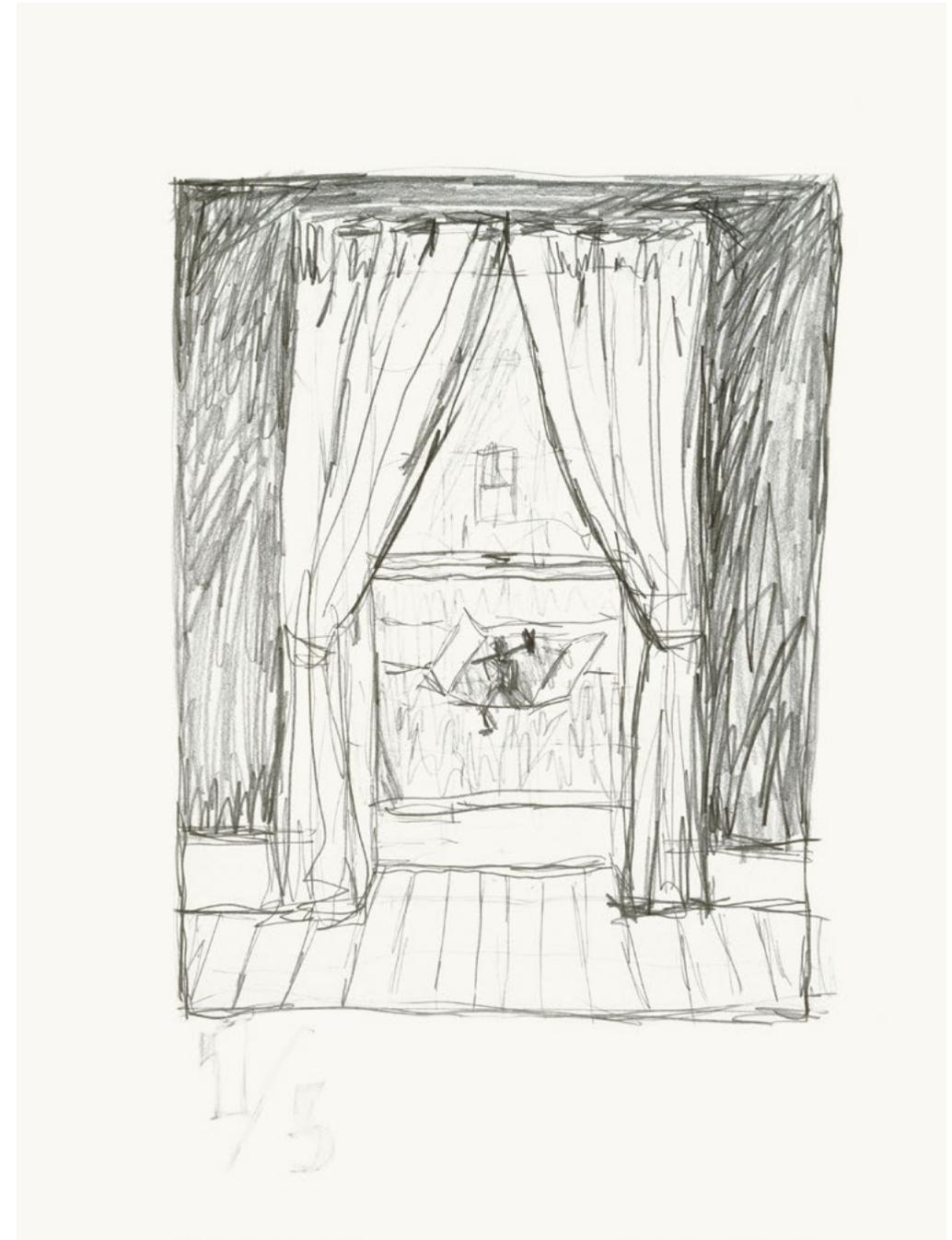
The "farm sink" in the basement of the Gobers' house on Hope Hill Road, Yalesville

The work sink where Jenny washes her hands is a large enameled-cast-iron "farm sink," its back attached to the wall, its front supported by two legs. Having bought it secondhand, Gus has installed it in the basement next to a work area where he spends a great deal of time on his many hobbies. There he has a drafting table; a large and varied collection of Native American artifacts, including arrowheads, pottery, and firestones; and an assortment of antiques and secondhand junk. Immediately on getting home from work, Gus will go to the basement, where he changes into dirtier everyday clothes.

When construction on the rectory is complete, and Father O'Brien moves into it, the Gopians rent their house to the Pfefferkorn family. Flora "Flo" Pfefferkorn is the daughter of Emanuel Zacchini,



Reverend Edwin O'Brien, pastor of Our Lady of Fatima Church, Yalesville, from 1960 to 1974



Untitled. 1993. Graphite on paper, 12 x 9" (30.5 x 22.9 cm)



The Zacchini Brothers, Edmondo and Hugo, c. 1935

Sr., an originator of the famous circus act the “human cannonball.” The Zacchinis make this act their family business and have raised their children to be projectiles in their cannons. This entertaining but perilous occupation sometimes results in accidents, including one in which two human cannonballs collide in midair, having been shot at the same time from opposing cannons. Having trained in the family profession, Flo has broken an arm so many times that she has been forced to retire.

The Pfefferkorns have two sons and a daughter. Though the boys have Christian names, they go by their circus names, Zee-zee and Boo-ba, and Flo, following circus tradition, does not cut their hair until each is two years old. “She was exotic,” Gober will remember, “and brought glimpses of a different culture to our rural neighborhood. She had grown up performing in the circus, traveling back and forth

across the country, and was comfortable with diversity, to put it mildly.”

When Gober is still a boy, Flo tells him that it is okay for him to like other boys. Her discovery of a secret so deep that he barely knows it himself, and her discussion of this secret in daylight and in front of his mother, freaks him out.

In 1972, one of Flo’s relatives, Hugo Zacchini, will perform the human-cannonball act in Ohio. The entire show will be filmed by a local TV station and broadcast without Hugo’s approval. He will sue the station, and in 1977, the U.S. Supreme Court will rule in his favor. This decision—*Zacchini v. Scripps-Howard Broadcasting Co.*—remains controlling today in certain issues of publicity and the recording and broadcasting of portions of a performance.

#### 1961

**January 20:** John F. Kennedy is sworn in as the thirty-fifth President of the United States.

#### 1963

The Zacchinis develop the X-15 cannon, shaped and painted to look like a missile. The cannon is mounted on a truck that doubles as the family car. When the Zacchinis are in town visiting the Pfefferkorns, they park the X-15 on Hope Hill Road near the Gober house, alarming the neighbors.

When the church secretary becomes ill, Father O’Brien offers Leah the job. In earlier years Leah loved being a nurse, but Gus did not share her enthusiasm, calling the job “stupid” and complaining about early-morning emergency calls that sent her in to work. For his and her children’s sake she gave up nursing. Now that the children are older, though, the



Robert and Leah Gober, Connecticut shoreline, c. summer 1959



Untitled, c. 1975. Oil on Masonite, 28 1/2 x 35 1/2" (72.4 x 90.2 cm)

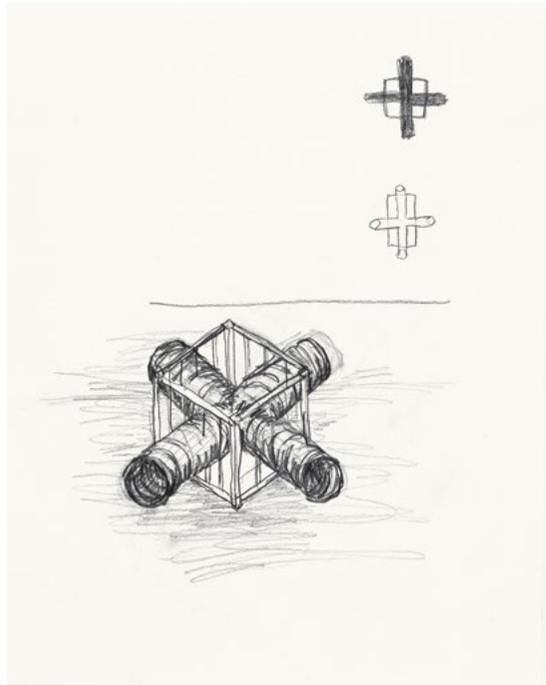
church-secretary position will give her some independence. Gus concedes on the condition that it doesn’t interfere with raising the kids or having dinner on the table at 5 P.M.

**Friday, November 22:** President Kennedy is assassinated. Leah is at work; Gober is sick and home from school, and a delivery man bringing baked goods from the Viking Baker tells him the news. Lyndon B. Johnson is sworn in as the thirty-sixth U.S. President.

Beginning around this year, half a dozen new houses are built on Hope Hill Road: “Two small subdivisions took over the farmland and I loved watching these houses grow from the foundations up, walking through them with my imagination when the workers had left and before there were doors that locked.” New families move into the neighborhood, including one “strange household, with bathing suits on the clothesline year round” and tension between the husband and the wife. Father O’Brien, who offers confidential lay counseling to parishioners, tells Leah that this marriage has never been consummated, and she shares this information with her kids over dinner. For Gober, Father O’Brien’s passing on of confidences to his mother “made going to confession, with its promise of anonymity, its acknowledgment of sin, and its promise of absolution, confusing to say the least and fairly polluted.”

In this period Father O’Brien gives the Gobers a beagle that had been given to him as a gift. They name her Mitzi and she accompanies Leah to work at the rectory every day.

In the summers of these years, the family takes vacations on the Connecticut shoreline, paid for by earnings from Leah’s job at the rectory. The first summer vacation is spent in Branford. They later rent a cottage, for two and then three weeks at a time, on a lovely, family-dense stretch of beach in Clinton. To save money the Gobers often share their rental with another family. During their last years of renting, Leah and the kids stay in the beach house the whole three weeks. Then Gus joins the family for the first week, Leah’s parents for the second, and Father O’Brien for the last.



Untitled. 1995–96. Graphite on paper, 14 x 11" (35.6 x 27.9 cm)

When Leah is working for Father O'Brien, he often takes her and her children to lunch, and for long drives to see a town or a landscape that they have never seen. "During these trips, he would disengage his clerical collar, put it away, but we would of course refer to him as 'Father.' Our family seemed to serve, in a good way, as a surrogate family for him. But there were definitely inappropriate moments."

Gober serves as an altar boy at Our Lady of Fatima Church. "I was an altar boy when I was a kid, an extension of the theater. The costumes, the audience, the higher purpose." He learns the Latin mass and particularly enjoys weddings, the only occasions on which an altar boy faces the congregation (a practice later

changed by the Second Vatican Council). He stares at and studies the spectacle, the bride, the groom, and "all of the nervous craziness that went on." It is also the only time he gets tips.

### 1965

Gober starts to attend the James H. Moran Junior High School on Hope Hill Road, across from a farm and a short walk from his home. He will stay here until 1969. Junior high school is difficult for Gober, as puberty forces children into societal roles, willingly or not. He is often teased by his classmates and by one teacher, who imitates the way he walks and talks, effectively giving students permission to follow suit. They ostracize him and call him names, most frequently "Gober Girl."

There is no protection or solace from this treatment at home: "One day my mother was driving me to get braces on my teeth and I couldn't bear it any longer and began to cry. I told her that I just couldn't have one more thing that kids could tease me about. She asked what they teased me about and I told her. I had been way too humiliated to say anything before. My mother stopped the car and violently shook me, yelling in my face, 'Is it true?! Is it true?!' about me possibly being gay."

In school, Gober is a member of the Drama Club. He acts in plays and musicals and builds sets: "I gravitated to the theater people, lovely misfits. And looking back, it makes sense that I would be drawn to acting and making sets, as I was acting already all day long, more or less, pretending to be normal in an effort to not be beaten up. And although I was subjected to some verbal abuse, I was always aware of those who had it worse, partly from sympathy and partly from self-preservation. I remember riding the school bus and one innocent boy—the object of the most severe derision—was spat on, big hawkers on the back of his coat, as he made his quiet way off of the bus."



Robert Gober and Sherrie Levine. *Untitled, Lightbulb*. 1990. Enamel paint, beeswax, and rope, 8 x 3 x 3" (20.3 x 7.6 x 7.6 cm)

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