

Projects 7 : Tom Otterness : The Museum of Modern Art, New York, July 23-October 13, 1987

Author

Otterness, Tom, 1952-

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The Museum of Modern Art
New York
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Detail of *The Tables*. 1986–87. Bronze.
Courtesy Brooke Alexander. Photo,
Scott Hyde

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projects

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Detail of *The Tables* (Working Drawing).
1986–87. Pencil and pen-and-ink on paper. Courtesy Brooke Alexander. Photo, Ivan Dalla Tana

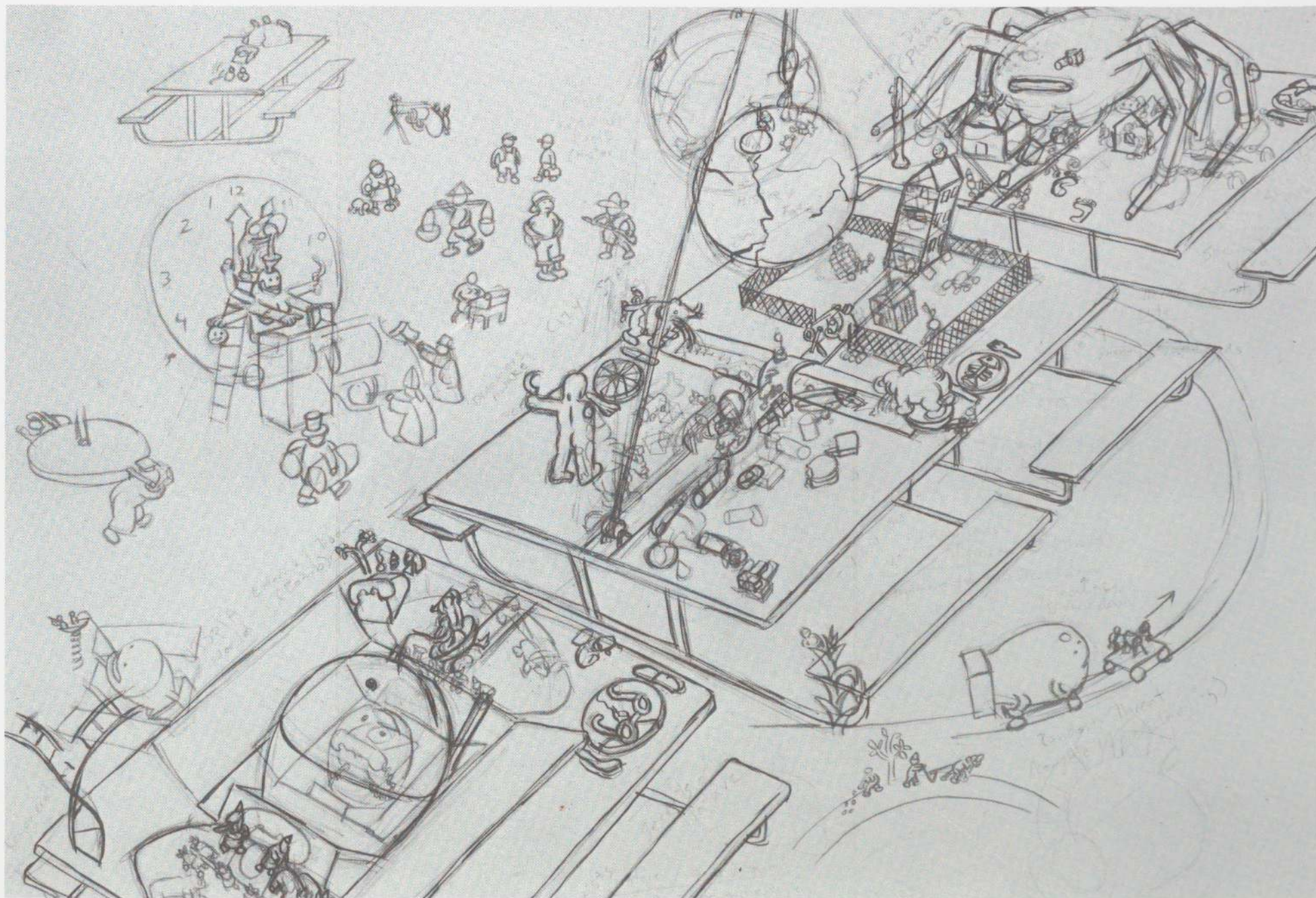
tom otterness

Tom Otterness's work first began to receive public recognition in 1983, when he adorned the walls and doorways of the Brooke Alexander gallery with a white plaster frieze depicting intricate scenes of love and war between the sexes. His earlier, pedestal-mounted figures from the late 1970s had become standardized into uniformly neutral yet comical beings. Dubbed "doughboys" by numerous critics, these plump, innocuous nudes acted out the sociopolitical turmoil of a fictional society. By 1985 Otterness had added toylike figures, both humanoid and animal, to the growing population of his Manichaean world.

In 1986 he began to work on *The Tables*, his most ambitious undertaking to date. What had more modestly begun as groups of city park benches evolved into three oversize picnic tables, made of bronze and Cor-Ten steel. More than 100 bronze objects ranging in height from three inches to three feet are arranged in various tableaux across the tops of each table. Altogether thirty-eight feet long, this tripartite piece is by all standards unusually monumental and potentially

inaccessible. And yet the accommodating nature of picnic tables and benches mitigates their oversize scale and invites familiarity. Informally seated on a bench, the viewer is encouraged to enter a new reality, as, through a child's perspective, the mind projects itself into the miniature scenes of sculptural drama taking place on the tabletops. Through an interplay of physical disorientation and distortion of narrative convention, the viewer is drawn further and further into the antic, Alice in Wonderland world of a quirky, animated parable.

Although Otterness's work may well be characterized as "narrative," a more apt term for *The Tables* is "cinematic." The progression here, unlike that of the friezes, is clearly nonlinear; the work's storybook cosmogony offers itself in a three-ring circus of allusion, association, and allegory. There is no single path or logical interpretation of the images from one table to the next. Instead, the many different scenes seem to lead in countless directions, with the focus shifting back and forth from either end toward the center. As the eye moves from one group of objects, or scene, to another, it becomes engaged in an editing process. The entire



setting cannot be taken in at once; it is only possible to grasp this sculptural *Fantasia* in fragments. Indeed, the vitality of *The Tables* is closely connected to the look and spirit of cartoon animation. (Even the jumps in scale relate to this: Otterness remembers reading that the buildings in Disneyland were built on a scale seven-eighths of actual size.) The only unifying feature is the "road" that runs down the center of the middle table and partway into the other two. This particular device comes from Otterness's fascination with Krazy Kat comics, in which the image of an endless road cutting through a broad landscape figures prominently.

Otterness has never worked in movie animation, but he was active as an experimental filmmaker in the mid- and late 1970s. This period coincides with his participation in Collaborative Projects, Inc. (Colab), an artist's organization committed to social change and political involvement. The artists in this group, including John Ahearn, Rebecca Howland, Christof Kohlhofer, Cara Perlman, and Kiki Smith, assumed anarchic stances in both the content and formal look of their paintings, sculptures, films, and performances. As artists coming of age at the end of the politically apathetic 1970s, they were determined that their work would have a sociopolitical impact. Howland, for example, has recently produced tablelike sculptures involving symbols of corporate and consumer greed, and this work holds special meaning for Otterness. While the messages of both Howland and Otterness are invariably bleak, both artists express themselves with a broad satiric irreverence.

Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, with its off-scale worlds in the service of political satire, might therefore seem a likely source for *The Tables*. In fact, Otterness did begin to read Swift at the time he was making the piece, but more directly influential were the Disney and Fleischer Brothers cartoon versions of *Gulliver's Travels* that he had seen on occasion over the years. Like Swift and in similar symbolic language, Otterness gives us a fairy-tale model of a civilization in devolution.

While too strict an adherence to the artist's own interpretation would limit the broadest possible reading of *The Tables*, Otterness's notations on the working drawing reproduced here provide valuable clues. According to this three-part scheme, the opposing worlds of "Nature" and "Industry" flank the central scene of "Urban Reality." At the extremities of this dreamlike landscape, the figures of what the artist calls the "whale/bomb" and a spider seem to be the culmination of a nightmarish societal mutation. From the vantage point of the seated viewer, a dessicated "Earth after Bomb" looms ominously, hoisted as it is into the celestial void. If dark forces seem too pervasive at these unlikely picnic tables, their effect is mitigated by the initial impact of the monumental figure dominating the middle. She strides with a ponderous nobility, raising her single arm against the spidery industrial organism. Additional hope, however fragile, is provided by the artist's "creation scene," a pastoral fantasy in which cow-headed creatures sow and perhaps harvest the genetic tree of life.

The struggle between good and evil and, more importantly, the ambiguity with which it resounds lie at the core of Otterness's work. As we sit down at these bedeviled picnic tables, the feast before us reminds us of the follies and absurdities that have blighted all civilizations, past and present.

Linda Shearer, Curator
Department of Painting and Sculpture

biography

Born Wichita, Kansas,
June 21, 1952

education

Whitney Museum of American Art,
New York. Independent Study
Program, 1973

Art Students League, New York, 1970

selected individual exhibitions

**1987, 1985,
1983**

Brooke Alexander, New York

1984

Galerie Rudolf Zwirner, Cologne

1987

selected group exhibitions

Storm King Art Center,
Mountainville, New York
*The Reemergent Figure: Seven
Sculptors at Storm King Art Center*

1986

Arnhem, The Netherlands
Sonsbeek 86

The Corcoran Gallery of Art,
Washington, D.C.
Spectrum: The Generic Figure

1985-86

The Brooklyn Museum, New York
Working in Brooklyn

1985

Whitney Museum of American Art,
New York
1985 Biennial Exhibition

1984

The Museum of Modern Art, New York
*An International Survey of Contem-
porary Painting and Sculpture*

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
The Human Condition: Biennial III

1983

The Tate Gallery, London
New Art at The Tate Gallery 1983

Young Hoffman Gallery, Chicago
*John Ahearn, Mike Glier, Jenny Holzer
and Tom Otterness*

1981

Institute for Art and Urban Resources
at P.S. 1, Long Island City, New York
Figurative Sculpture Now

1980

Times Square, New York
The Times Square Show

selected bibliography

Kirshner, Judith Russi. "Tom Otterness'
Frieze," *Artforum International* (New
York), vol. 22, no. 2 (October 1983),
pp. 57-60

Kuspit, Donald. "Tom Otterness,"
Artforum International (New York),
vol. 25, no. 10 (summer 1987), p. 115