

Projects 4 : Joel Otterson : The Museum of Modern Art, New York, January 17-March 3, 1987

Author

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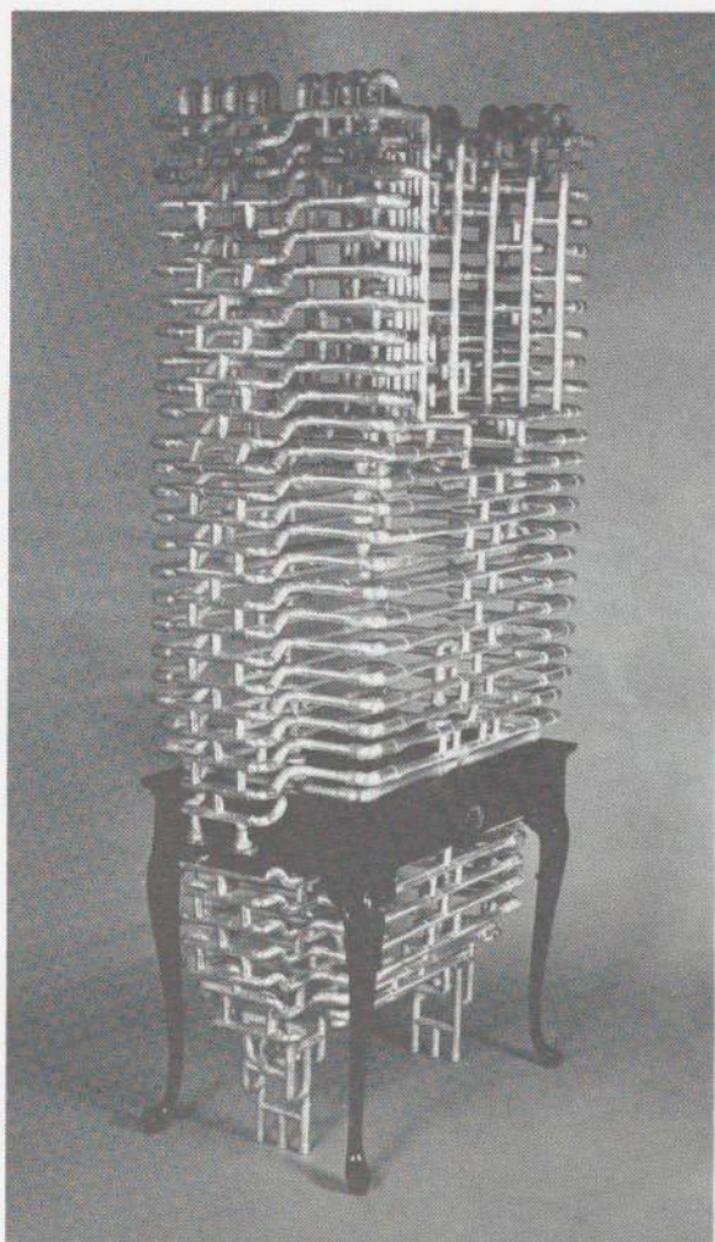
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The Museum of Modern Art
New York
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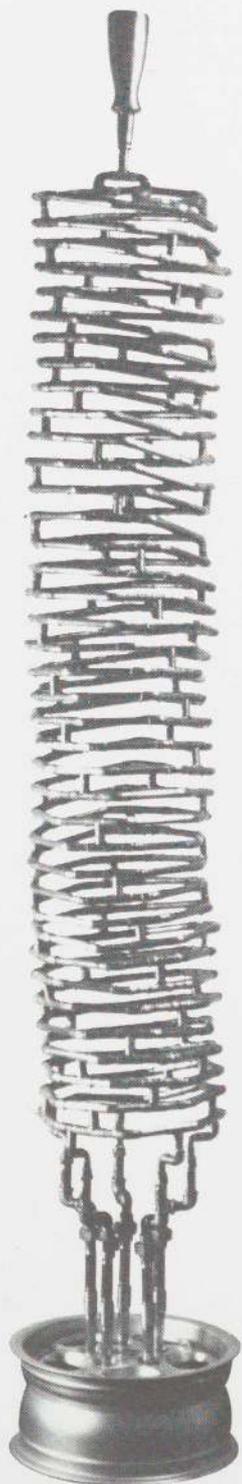
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Devil/Jesus. 1986
Courtesy Gallery Nature Morte, New York

projects

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Designer Nucleic Acid. 1986
Collection Emily and Jerry Spiegel

joel otterson

Contrasts and negation are the main concerns in Joel Otterson's sculpture. Juxtaposing cement and semiprecious stones or copper pipe and a reproduction Queen Anne table, Otterson sets up contrasts that destroy the original functions of the objects that make up his sculptures. Even his earliest works, in cement, which hang from the ceiling or stand on the floor and are embedded with wood, semiprecious stones, glass, and metal, show the beginnings of these concerns. In these pieces, cement, a material that we normally confront in architectural construction, loses its familiar function and becomes ornamental. Its weight is negated by its hanging in midair, its commonness denied by its association with semiprecious stones, its roughness contradicted by its form, which is sometimes heart-shaped or shell-like, and its utilitarian role subverted by such titles as *Male Venus* and *Decoration of Nature #1*. These kinds of contrasts play a major role in all of Otterson's work.

When Otterson incorporates plumber's pipe it is soldered in a way that renders it useless outside the realm of the sculpture. The iron or copper pipe turns in upon itself, making connections that are only self-referential. No longer a conduit, it becomes a hermetic unit; no longer functional, it becomes fetishized. Otterson refers to this transformation in one of his titles, *Fetish Perfect*. Made of two wood baseball bats topped with a Bowie knife as a finial, this work transforms icons of American culture that have tremendous potential for force, power, and violence—and denudes them of that potential.

Many younger artists working today are intrigued by objects of mass consumption. The objects that seduce us and the ways in which they are presented to us in advertisements and in stores are frequently the focus of the artists' work. Some of these artists deal with this subject in very direct ways. Haim Steinbach, for example, displays mass-produced items on shelves; Jeff Koons exhibits the posters used by companies to advertise their products. Otterson, however, manipulates objects. As he notes:

I insistently go through grand maneuvers to give these things a new identity and change their context to hopefully reveal hidden meanings. I'm trying to make sense out of this complicated consumer-object-oriented world that we're in. I think that there's a lot of confusion. Hybridization has become the basis for our existence. . . . And we're at a point where things have completely blended together, and you can't distinguish anymore. We wear wrist watches, but they're TVs.

The functions of objects have changed. What appears as a simple recognizable object may not be what it seems. Otterson, in effect, is twisting a media phrase that people of his generation have heard throughout their lives. "What you see is what you get" no longer applies. Otterson's sculpture *Devil/Jesus*, for example, combines a reproduction Queen Anne table and plumber's fittings. The normally utilitarian pipe becomes decorative and simultaneously negates the familiar function of the table; it is a cage, barring the table from functioning as a usable surface. No teacups or candy dishes will rest there. For Otterson, it is important that the table is a mass-produced reproduction because the table is a hybrid of sorts. Though its design is old-

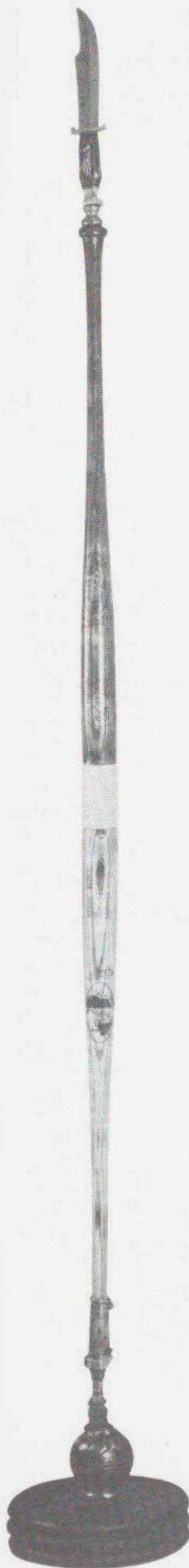
fashioned, it is sold as a new, pristine object. "People buy the tables knowing that they're reproductions, but I think it's denied a little bit," Otterson explains. "It's a mass-produced object made new today just like the copper fittings are. Made probably in a factory almost the same way that the copper fittings are. And I'm interested in that relationship." That relationship, of the seemingly old and precious juxtaposed with the obviously common, is a complex one. Through manipulation the two are made compatible; the rare and the common become indistinguishable. It is a relationship that reflects the highly polished but thin veneer of marketing by which today's consumer-oriented society is often mesmerized.

In *Designer Nucleic Acid*, the references are again to mass marketing and the status associated with certain goods. The sculpture is topped by a bronze cast of a liquid-detergent bottle and incorporates a mag wheel as its base. As anyone who has watched television knows, the right detergent is the crowning glory of the American woman's home—it not only makes her dishes sparkle but gives her soft hands—and for the American male, the correct car is the basis of his status. The wheel rim used in *Designer Nucleic Acid* is from a Porsche. And the title of the sculpture is a pun on DNA, the genetic material that determines who we are.

Otterson's work is figurative. In its vertical form, we are able to see evidence of ourselves. In conversation Otterson alludes to this by describing a sculpture as "the one standing on its toes" or by speaking of the arms and legs of a work. The coiled pieces act as spines and, as Otterson has remarked, some of the soldered fittings are like "cells dividing."

The elegance of these "figures" is derived in part from Otterson's response to the work of Constantin Brancusi, whose "totemic" structures have been a major influence. Two of Otterson's sculptures are titled *Bat in Space* as homages to Brancusi's *Bird in Space*. Otterson has been fascinated by several of Brancusi's ideas, including placing one sculpture on top of another to form a new work, employing contrasting materials as bases, and using the base as an integral part of the sculpture, not merely as a support. However, while Brancusi's method is reductive, Otterson's approach is additive. He brings together found objects, for which we have associations, and he manipulates those objects, shaping them into new ones and changing our perception of them. We come to an Otterson sculpture recognizing its parts—a drinking glass, a baseball, a soda bottle, a table—but we are confused by their conjunction. Otterson is reacting to what he sees as the hybridization of the eighties, the confused nature of consumer objects, and the unrelated images, ideas, and sounds that are strung together on television in a meaningless barrage of information. Otterson wants to make sense of these issues, and he contends with them by contrasting disparate elements, negating their functions, and divesting them of their familiar attributes. It is a reflection of his particular sensibility and vision that he is able to make these elements coexist and form such elegant sculptures.

Marjorie Frankel Nathanson
Curatorial Assistant
Department of Painting and Sculpture



- **Bat in Space.** 1984. Wood baseball bats, baseballs, bottle of blue cream soda, tin trophy figure, steel, and slate, 9'5" x 11'1/2" x 11'1/2" (287 x 29.3 x 29.3 cm). Collection Josef and Marsy Mittlemann
- **Fetish Perfect.** 1985. Wood baseball bats, bowie knife, cast-iron ornament, cast-iron free weights, fragment of aluminum baseball bat, sheet copper, band clamps, and copper fittings, 8'4" x 11" x 11" (254 x 28 x 28 cm). Collection John Sacchi
- **Bat in Space.** 1986. Bronze and steel, 6'6" x 12" x 12" (198.1 x 30.5 x 30.5 cm). Collection Mr. and Mrs. James C. A. McClennen
- **Designer Nucleic Acid.** 1986. Brass, copper, iron, and galvanized-steel fittings; bronze; and mag wheel; 6'4" x 18" x 18" (193.1 x 45.7 x 45.7 cm). Collection Emily and Jerry Spiegel
- **He Man: Master of the Universe.** 1986. Pool cues, wood, cast-iron free weights, and bronze, 9'9" x 12" x 12" (297.2 x 30.5 x 30.5 cm). Collection Werner and Elaine Dannheisser
- **Eurostyle.** 1986. Copper fittings, bronze, drinking glass, and chrome-plated free weights, 64 x 8 x 8" (162.5 x 20.4 x 20.4 cm). Collection Vivian and Justin Ebersman
- **Artificial Intelligent.** 1986. Copper and brass fittings and wood table, 6' x 18" x 12" (182.9 x 45.7 x 30.5 cm). Collection Anne and William J. Hokin
- **Non-Found, Un-Found.** 1986. Aluminum baseball bats; redwood driftwood; copper, brass, and galvanized-steel fittings; and brass valve; 6'8" x 24" x 13" (203.2 x 61 x 33 cm). Collection George H. Waterman III
- **Non-Found, Un-Found Attracting Configurations.** 1986. Aluminum baseball bats, copper and galvanized-steel fittings, and brass valve, 6'8" x 17" x 13" (203.2 x 43.2 x 33 cm). Courtesy Beckman Collection, Connecticut
- **Devil/Jesus.** 1986. Copper and brass fittings, mahogany table, and galvanized steel, 71 x 38 x 38" (180.4 x 96.5 x 96.5 cm). Courtesy Gallery Nature Morte, New York
- **Euro-Chic.** 1986. Brass, copper, and iron fittings; bronze; and cast-iron free weights; 64 x 11 x 11" (162.5 x 28 x 28 cm). Courtesy Gallery Nature Morte, New York
- **Atomic Fact.** 1986. Bronze, 6'3" x 9'1/2" x 9'1/2" (190.5 x 24.2 x 24.2 cm). Courtesy Gallery Nature Morte, New York

Fetish Perfect. 1985
Collection John Sacchi

biography

Born Los Angeles
October 12, 1959

education

Parsons School of Design, New York
BFA, 1982

individual exhibition

1984

Gallery Nature Morte, New York

selected group exhibitions

1986

Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston
Endgame

Curt Marcus Gallery, New York
Inaugural Exhibition

1985

Texas Gallery, Houston; Rhona Hoffman
Gallery, Chicago; Vanguard Gallery,
Philadelphia; Aspen Art Museum
Infotainment

Grace Borgenicht Gallery, New York
Invitational Exhibition

Whitney Museum of American Art,
Fairfield County Branch
*Affiliations: Recent Sculpture and
Its Antecedents*

Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts,
Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.
Smart Art

1984

Artists Space, New York
Forced Sentiment

International With Monument, New
York, and Galerie Jurka, Amsterdam
Still Life with Transaction

1982

Gallery Nature Morte, New York
Inaugural Group Show

selected bibliography

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Contemporary Art; Cambridge, Mass.,
and London: The MIT Press, 1986,
pp. 71-90

Lawson, Thomas. "Nature Morte," in
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J Berg Press, 1985, pp. 23-52

McCormick, Carlo, and Walter Robinson.
"Slouching Toward Avenue D," *Art in
America* (New York), vol. 72, no. 6
(Summer 1984), pp. 134-61