

## Parasol unit

foundation for contemporary art

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### *Escape from the clamour of a busy week*

Jackie Wullschlager, *Financial Times*, 8 October 2016

# Escape from the clamour of a busy week

EXHIBITION

## Robert Therrien

Parasol Unit, London

Jackie Wullschlager

Stack three bronze spheres, and you have a snowman. When the sun catches the tin-coated surfaces, "No Title (Silver Snowman)" looks as if it will melt. Press three steel discs together instead and you get a bulbous black cloud. Add some taps, in "No Title (Cloud with Faucets)", and it starts to pour – delicate brass rain drops, affixed to a wall. To collect the water, across the gallery stands "Pitcher with Yellow Spout": an enamel and wood trapezium with an egg-yolk-coloured lip, pointed like a bird's beak. If the bird tries to fly, encase its wings in a metal frame . . .

There are new sculpture exhibitions all over London this autumn – Richard Serra at Gagosian, Tony Cragg at Lisson, Helen Marten at the Serpentine, Tate Britain's Turner Prize show, where all four contenders are sculptors – but none rivals Robert Therrien at Parasol Unit for enchantment and poetic transformation.

Californian Therrien, 69, is known here if at all for immersive games of scale with everyday objects, such as the four-times-enlarged table and chairs exhibited at Tate Modern in 2009, which made viewers cowering underneath feel like toddlers. In a revelatory, historic show, Parasol has gathered Therrien's early, smaller, handmade sculptures from the 1980s-1990s to demonstrate how childhood wonder was always at the heart of his art, amplified in a most unlikely way by formal concerns of modernist abstraction – from the snowman whose ascending forms echo Brancusi's repeated modular units in "Endless Column" to the

looping "Linear Bird Box", referencing Brancusi's seminal "Bird in Space".

Two works flanking Parasol's entrance entice us into Therrien's metamorphosing Alice-in-Wonderland universe: a small (13cm) but still comically aggrandised bronze sculpture of a keyhole, and a pair of three-metre black wood parallelograms joined at a corner. These form "No Title (Dutch Door)": at once gateway to a fantasy giant house, riposte within a domestic context to Serra's monolithic slabs and narrative allusion to 17th-century painting. Such doors, open at the top to filter through air and light but kept closed at the bottom to shut children in and animals out, feature in Dutch genre pictures.

Therrien's immediate roots are in American minimalism, and his asymmetrical, tilting subversions of the movement here have a light, joyous touch: "Untitled (Bent Cone)" tipping over at the top like a dunce's cap; a Magritte black bowler hat about to dance off an upright beam. But throughout this show, the bronze and wooden monochrome pieces of startling simplicity and grace – a saucer tottering on a rec-

tangle perched on a cube; a blue enamel square flapping against a box in "No Title (Butterfly Post)" – bring above all associations with Dutch painting, especially Vermeer.

Mounted as a relief, the monumental white "Pitcher with Black Spout" is a pared-down, geometric version of the black-topped white jug that stands apart on the table like a self-contained still life in Vermeer's "The Music Lesson", and reappears in "A Maid Asleep". In this context, Therrien's recurring motifs of pointed church steeples – in red-painted enamel and brass, in yellow paint, as a mixed-media collage in "No Title (Chapel on a Round Tray)" – and modest wooden dwellings reduced as in child's drawings to geometric blocks ("Blue House", "Green Barn") are also redolent of Dutch townscapes.

Silent and calm as Dutch paintings, by turns baffling and comforting in its musing on the pleasures and impermanences of daily existence, this show is a perfect refuge from the clamour of London in Frieze week.

To December 11, [parasol-unit.org](http://parasol-unit.org)



Untitled (1985) by Robert Therrien — Douglas H. Parker Studios