

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Robert Therrien at Parasol unit

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EXCERPT FROM IDEAS AND OBJECTS: THE POETRY OF DEPENDENCY BY DR. ZIBA ARDALAN

From the beginning of his artistic career in the mid-1970s, Robert Therrien has always worked in two and three dimensions, making drawings, prints, photography, and sculpture. Working with various media in parallel seems to particularly suit his flexible mind which, as one can see by looking at his works, runs from one idea to another and in the process can lead him to create a work of art of an altogether different nature and perhaps in another medium. Looking at the career that Therrien has been developing throughout more than forty years, one realizes that some familiar motifs crop up in different forms, that one image has the potential to reappear and mutate into other images in ways that are perhaps more appropriate in the different medium. For example, the images of a snowman, a cloud, a loosely drawn spiral and a pencil sketch—with three crocheted balloon shapes—of a young girl wearing a long skirt, are all related to one another and in many ways could be interchangeable. Likewise, the silhouette of a chapel could mutate into the image of an oil can or perhaps a flagpole. In his insightful essay for the publication that accompanied the *Robert Therrien: Works on Paper* exhibition at Kunstmuseum Basel, Switzerland, in 2008, Christian Miller discusses this point.¹ In Therrien's practice, just as one image can mutate into another, working in one medium can inform another. For example, the catalyst for the larger-than-life works he embarked upon making in the 1990s—sawing dishes, pans and pans, and enormous sets of tables and chairs which, although not part of this *Works 1975–1995* exhibition at Parasol unit, are extremely important within the artist's oeuvre—was apparently some Pyramid photographs he had snapped casually here and there. By definition, photography has the power to both capture and manipulate reality, which makes it a precious tool for a conceptual artist. Therrien's photographic activities may also have contributed to his interest in rendering fragments in his work, a sort of syntax of fractured reality that brings to mind

Surrealism, as it frequently engenders psychological spaces and associative meanings. Paradoxically, however, such objects in Therrien's repertoire can preserve their sense and at times timeless appearance.

The works selected for this exhibition span a period of twenty-five years from the mid-1970s, and for the most part are man-made. The show also includes some large objects that are slightly taller than most people, yet remain within the viewer's vision and thereby allow face-to-face communication. What has always fascinated me about these somewhat smaller works—which by the way Therrien is still creating to this day—is his total personal engagement, his attention to detail and choice of materials without the interruption of any manufacturing process. So, in some ways the equally interesting realm of oversized scale—his fabricated and towering pots and pans or gigantic tables and chairs under which one can stroll and feel again what it's like to be a toddler—is not relevant to this particular exhibition. From the outset, my aim was to bring the viewer into close contact with some of his most challenging and intelligent works, the simplicity of which could confound even the most astute of minds. The more than forty pieces in this exhibition include works on paper, reliefs, and freestanding sculptures made at a variety of scales.

With each encounter, the audience faces new dimensions of enquiry. For example, while sculptures are clearly endowed with a physical immediacy they do not intrude into the viewer's space; rather, they state their presence within the gallery space by quietly and simply being there. In some cases they are clearly out of context, such as *No title (after surrealism)*, 1985. They are also manipulated in scale or idealized in shape, which gives them an ethereal quality and encourages us to consider them as surreal objects that have perhaps parachuted into the gallery, where they await discovery. When Therrien sets his mind on an image, he uses it time and again, probing the idea of it at different scales and in various media, as is attested by the simplified image of a snowman. For example, it could take center stage as a drawing on a large sheet of paper, as in *No title (snowman)*, 1983, then reappear as a relief and as sculpture, and in such case the artist provides us with enough tools and opportunity for discovery, for exploring our relation to the subject, what does the pictorial space mean in the drawing and what does the mutation of scale clarify in another media? In a 1989 interview with Margit Borell from a catalogue published by the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, Therrien explained: *The lepholds inverse me, because they are small sculptures but occupy lepholds. Also they read as a silhouette, so they cut road as a negative space but they are the opposite: they are three-dimensional, and they are not small.*

That Therrien continues to play with images and objects, which keep mutating and reappearing, could reveal a certain dependency between the creator and that which is created, or between artist and art work. Looking at Therrien's works time and again, I have, paradoxically, felt there is some parallel with the early sculptures of Alberto Giacometti (1901–1966) that were modelled on the idea of a board game, such as his *Oh so your plus (No More Play)*, 1953, which may have inspired Joseph Cornell in creating his mysteriously beautiful boxes. The works of Giacometti and Cornell imply that the viewer may make an internal move, while with Therrien's, the viewer at most engages intellectually and, interestingly enough, it is the artist's mind that makes the internal move. In his practice it is indeed Therrien who intellectually inhabits the board game, and possibly it is where and how the dependency between him and his art started.

Robert Therrien
No 096, 1987–90, enamel
and brass, 76.5 x 4.25 x 4.54
inches (197.8 x 11.8 x 11.7 cm)
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Therrien Society (RTS), New York.
Courtesy of Gagosian
Collection. Photo by Dorothy
Reisman.

1. Christian Miller, *Robert
Therrien: Works on Paper*, eds
cat., Kunstmuseum Basel, 2008,
pp. 36–37.

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