

HYPERALLERGIC

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SCULPTURE DOES NOT NEED TO BE PERMANENT TO BE GREAT

by John Yau



Robert Grosvenor, "Untitled" (2020), concrete blocks, rubber liner, water, 18 × 10 × 3 feet

Made of stacked concrete blocks, a black rubber liner, and water, Robert Grosvenor's "Untitled" (2020) is an expansive rectangular structure that sits in the middle of KARMA's first gallery space, like an impractical fountain or swimming pool.

When I went to the exhibition, *Robert Grosvenor* (January 8–February 23, 2020), I saw bubbles on the surface of the perfectly still water, leading me to think (irrationally) that I might be looking at a very large sheet of glass. After hesitating for a moment, I touched the surface and learned that it was a "block of water," which is how the artist refers to the installation in the gallery press release.

"Untitled" is a work of temporary permanence. The stacked cement blocks are not uniform in appearance. Without any proof, I got the feeling that they had been previously used, or recovered from a demolished structure.

The blocks are not cemented together. A black rubber liner has been placed inside the cavity formed by the stacked blocks; it overlaps the top of the structure's four walls, where it is weighted down by an additional row of cement blocks, which are smaller and narrower than the rest, like paving stones. Everything about how the piece was made is visible.

The structure is filled with water. I don't know what will happen when the water begins to noticeably evaporate, or when other changes, such as stagnation, occur. I think this question is part of the meaning of the piece.

"Untitled," which is simple and brilliantly economical in its construction, is funny and generous and more than that. Ultimately, it is generative in the domain it opens up, a space for looking and thinking. Starting with its material crudeness and impermanent state, "Untitled" gives the viewer a lot to think about.

In fact, the longer I thought about “Untitled,” the more I realized how many assumptions about sculpture that it undid. Could you put it in a museum? Not likely, especially when the smell of stagnation starts wafting up from its pool of still water. Could this provisional “block of water” be seen as a retort to the fountains of the David H. Koch Plaza directly in front of New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art?

Or perhaps Grosvenor’s work might be seen as a celebration of the vanishing, as well as an implicit criticism of the ideal of permanence that is synonymous with sculpture, from Michelangelo’s “David” to Jeff Koons’s balloon dog and any of Richard Serra’s recent monumental pieces?

“Untitled” is the carefully deliberated opposite of permanent sculpture. It is not fabricated. It celebrates the industrial, matter-of-fact crudeness of its materials, rather than a revel in sleek or chicly rusted surface.

Made to fit within the gallery space, it challenges the ideal of monumentality and the need to awe the viewer. Grosvenor accomplishes all of this with an immense amount of dry wit. Pools are supposed to be permanent, are they not? The water is always supposed to be fresh, perhaps even in constant motion.

By eschewing fabricated material and calling permanence into question, Grosvenor does more than undo commonplace suppositions regarding sculpture’s status. He questions the relationship between the sculptor who fabricates massive work and the financial structures behind it, exposing the anti-democratic, hierarchical forces that go into the making of an impeccable monumental sculpture — the celebration of the artist as successful entrepreneur rather than a laborer. You could say that the triumph of American art that supposedly occurred in the 1950s has been replaced by the triumph of capitalist art.

Grosvenor refuses to embrace the capitalist mode, its emphasis on production and predictability, which is why younger artists who are just starting out, without huge resources at their disposal, regard him as an independent figure. They know that obtaining the capital needed to make a permanent work often requires becoming the proper servant or mascot of the privileged class.

In addition, as I have previously pointed out, Grosvenor has neither developed a signature form, nor does he try to impress the viewer. I stated this in a review of his show last year at Paula Cooper, and I see no need to change it, but rather emphasize how important, powerful and illuminating his work is. Grosvenor is able to walk right up to the line separating art from function without crossing over or commenting on it. That’s his gift, and I don’t know of another sculptor who has it.

The playfulness we sense in “Untitled” becomes manifest and sweet in the back gallery, where a shelf spans all four walls. Model planes, helicopters, rockets, motorboats, submarines, and vehicles of all sorts from different periods sit on the shelves, many with motors. There are two German paperbacks by Max Valier (1895-1930), an Austrian rocketry pioneer who in 1927 helped found the Verein für Raumschiffahrt (VfR—“Spaceflight Society”), the world’s largest amateur rocketry society at that time. The title of one of the paperbacks is *Raketen Fahrt* (*Rocket Ride*) while the other is *Der Vortoss in Den Weltentraum* (*The Advance into Space*).

The models reveal another side of Grosvenor, who has previously shown sculptures, photographs, and altered cars at KARMA. While he has clearly adapted some of the models, in other cases it is not evident whether he has done anything to them. His

fascination with vehicles and speed animates their presentation.

There is no sense of a favorite or that one model is prized above others. With their toy gas motors, some of the model planes look like they could fly, while you are not sure about others. The designs are varied, wild, aerodynamically challenged, and odd. I wondered what the boats might do on the “block of water” in the other gallery.

Grosvenor’s playfulness and sheer sense of joy is evident in these small works. But that is not all that is apparent. There was once a time when an interest in rockets and interplanetary travel was an innocent pastime, and not inextricably linked with dreams of power, the colonizing of space, and the founding of the United States Space Force, a new branch of the American military devoted to space warfare.

There are many artists who claim to be political, but Grosvenor has never been one of them. And yet, in his work, he questions mainstream society’s aesthetic assumptions and its belief in the benevolence of capitalism by offering a challenging alternative. In the pool of water that perfectly reflects the ceiling above, he has made a work that is open and accepting of the world, while quietly rejoicing in its changing material condition. He reminds us that nothing is forever.