

# frieze

LaBelle, Charles. "Robert Overby," *Frieze*, November- December 2000, Issue 55.

## Robert Overby

UCLA HAMMER MUSEUM, LOS ANGELES, USA



Irreverent, often brilliant, and occasionally fatuous, the prolific output of Robert Overby, who died in 1993 at the age of 58, is only now becoming more widely known. Moving between drawing, painting, printing, and sculpture, the artist specialized in a brand of corrupted (he called it 'Baroque') Minimalism. He instilled a highly personal, poetic, and social content into what were basically reductive, process-oriented works; marrying pure materials such as rubber, lead, canvas, concrete, resin, and wood to banal objects and abject spaces. All manner of crappy, dirty, broken things formed the subject of his work: socks and handkerchiefs, shattered windows and splintered doors, bondage masks, beaver shots, coat-hangers, cans, bellybuttons, and man-hole covers all cropped up during the high point of his production in the 1970s. With his been-down- so-long-it-looks-like-up-to-me sensibility Overby wasn't afraid to crawl in the gutter and the resultant work refused to accommodate itself to the expectations of market or spectator. In one instance, *Across the Street* (1971), he covered a section of public road with thick latex, creating an undeniably ugly, unwieldy work that brought formlessness to a new, all-time low. As a gesture, it was fierce and passionate and crazy: one lone man battling the monster city. When it was over, he returned home with the flayed 'skin' tied to the top of his VW Bug like a hunting trophy.

This literal 'grounding' of his work in the 'real' is what separates Overby from his American contemporaries such as Nauman, Morris and Oldenburg and makes him a godfather to a diverse array of younger artists such as Marc Quinn, Tim Hawkinson, Sarah Lucas, and Gabriel

Orozco. Indeed, it was something of a revelation to see Overby's show so shortly after Orozco's MOCA retrospective. Their work rhymes in many places: in their poetic transformation of common objects; in their mutual fascination with time and the forensic quality of their gaze; in their dismissal of continuity and adoption of a self-reflexive circularity; and, finally, in their acute awareness of how memory informs perception. Looking at Overby's small cast of the space inside his clenched fist, *Monkey Grip* (1970), one sees a sexualized, punning version of Orozco's *Pinched Stars* (1997). Similarly, Overby's numerous rubber socks recall Orozco's own plaster casts, *Socks* (1995). Even Overby's rubbings of tile floors, which he transformed into large grid paintings, show up in Orozco's charcoal rubbings pulled from the walls of the Paris Metro.

Yet, where Orozco's work is tightly controlled, Overby's is possessed by an engaging sloppiness. Looking back, his was a risky, self-destructive course of action filled with false starts and quick shifts. Consuming and regurgitating ideas like a bulimic bingeing at a cake stall, Overby worked at an impossibly frenetic pace. His self-published *Red Book* (1974) documents 336 separate pieces made over four years. The degree of this commitment is especially sobering when you consider his career as an artist during this time was basically at a stand-still. With a scant three solo shows between 1971 and 1979, the majority of this work was never exhibited, most of it, until recently, languishing in storage.

Pregnant with possibilities, Overby's first cast door was significantly titled *Madonna Door* (1970) and featured a narrow French door with a prominent bulge at its center rendered in clear plastic. It was a purposefully immaculate conception, its transparency announcing that there were no gimmicks, no hidden tricks, no art direction. *Madonna Door* insisted that art's point of entry should be perfectly clear. But at the same time, its clarity marked an attempt to penetrate the inner workings of art, to unlock its evident mystery.

A search for meaning is what becomes most apparent when you look at Overby's work. His fascination with the way art functions is infectious. His casts are not copies, nor replicas, nor 'samples', but more like the three-dimensional equivalents of musical dubs, re-mixed versions of originals. And, in the improvisational spirit of dub, no two of Overby's works are the same. Constantly taking his ideas one step to the left, even pieces which look similar (such as the numerous latex doors), are varied; pigment added to some, cuts have been made in others. Investigating the interaction between surface and meaning, Overby frequently dubbed his dubs, making new sculptures from casts of other works or creating canvas 'Tone Maps' of his latex pieces. Like De Niro packing on pounds to play Jake La Motta, Overby - the consummate 'method' artist - understood that the inner truth of something could be revealed by altering its form, that meaning can be apprehended from the outside-in.