

Robert Overby

Around the House and Across the Street



Dec 1971

Narrowing the Reality Gap Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer

It was 1971. It was going to be an exceptionally productive year for Robert Overby who was just then starting to realize how to make ideas and matter really gel on a whole other level. He was turning thirty-six. And after prolonged, stop-and-go schooling at several art institutions over the preceding seventeen years, he finally had gotten his bachelor's degree in fine art from Chouinard Art Institute in Los Angeles only a year earlier. And it was only one more year before graduating that he had explicitly switched career paths and decided to become an artist, having previously distinguished himself as a highly celebrated and superlatively successful graphic designer from 1960 to 1970 (and sporadically thereafter) when he could count among his clients such high-octane corporations as Boeing, BS, IBM, MGM, LACMA, and later Toyota (for whom, for instance, he design the logotype they still use today).

Within the first year of working as an artist, Overby described his initial efforts as exercises in formal spatial concerns, working around ideas of "Atmospheric illusion, Overlapping planes, Perspective illusion, Empirical [sic] logic." From the beginning, there was an attention to

developing (and complicating) the illusionary and representational powers of art while thinking about them in relation to methods of empirical rigor and overlapping planes—two principles that intersect through physical matter at the point of indexicality. His early invocation of “overlapping planes” endures, as well, as emblematic of what would become perhaps the definitive quality of his entire practice: a constant pursuit of various parallel artistic tracks at once, like “maybe ten, twenty styles,” as David Rimanelli has estimated (not even counting Overby’s intermittent design work, let alone the model airplanes he crafted in private), “all of which the artist worked in at more or less the same time.” Thinking about overlapping planes begins to get us closer to the practice’s persistent impression of simultaneity [See his cult “red book,” aka Robert Overby: 336 to 1, August 1973-July 1969]. There is the sense that his many seemingly divergent aesthetic strains are united at the deepest level by the shared time of their making and the connectedness of Overby’s branching but of-a-piece consciousness.

A year into his artist’s life he had seven series going concurrently: “1. Plaid 2. Stretch 3. Leftovers 4. Around the house 5. Tradition 6. Light 7. Environments.” Even just in literary terms, the combination of series, full of purposeful diction and precise rhythm, constitutes a halting and searching thing, something like a poem. Its array affirms a liberated multiplicity, a democratic inclusiveness, and the artist’s affinity for associative dispersion (or, in other words, a lack of an identifiably singular—i.e. branded, marketable—signature style), all of which quickly emerge as the necessary consequence of such a worldview.

Soon, Overby began to more explicitly orient his practice toward the communication and transcription of “the aspects of time.” He began, as Lee Lozano would say about her own work around the same time on the opposite coast, to multiply by T. This project coincided symbiotically with Overby’s discovery, early in 1971, of rubber as a casting medium with amazing material properties that opened up new possibilities in terms of scale and indexicality in sculpture. Having already begun casting doors in transparent PVC, fiberglass, and concrete, the timing was perfect. His first rubber experiment (Rubber Sock, February 1971) so forcefully impressed upon him the medium’s potential that he quickly followed it up with a large-scale, fifty-foot-long casting of the entire façade of a building that April. A month later and after several smaller latex impressions of a human body, car door and windshield, and garage door, he cast two impressions of the urban topography in which he lived. The first, Across the Street, May 14, 1971, was a ten-foot-wide latex swath spanning the distance across the street in front of his house and the second, Around the House, May 16, 1971, was a narrow two-hundred-foot-long ribbon of latex he had cast along the perimeter of his Clinton Street house. These two rubbers made up what would be his first real solo show (out of school) which took place at Cirrus Gallery in Los Angeles in December of that year.

Regarding Overby’s Rubbers: Latex became LAtex—recording the urban script of the city’s streets and rundown facades. Tactile transcription, like a kind of gritty Braille.

Painted onto architectural surfaces in cumulative layers and then peeled off like a dried facial mask, like skin, Overby’s latex casts acquired strangely aged patinas and complicated coarse textures in which embedded dirt, grime, loose old paint, tape, and bits of wood clung, ripped

from their source. They signal decay and the abjection of age, time: wrinkled, soft, sagging, scaly, charred, ashen, splotchy, cracked, torn, worn, tired. You might think of a Halloween witch's mask, or cosmetic prosthetics, then stage sets with hanging backdrops and movie props, or Claes Oldenberg's soft sculptures, and you'd be on the right track. Heading in quite the opposite direction from corporate graphic design.

From a hand-bound sketchbook, dated July 1, 1972: "One of my goals is to narrow the 'reality' gap. Question begged as why not use object as it exists? ...Answer— actual object (thing taken from) does not usually convey overstatement necessary for communication." Overby's rubbers are overstatements of reality.

Rubber casting allowed for much more detail to be captured than either concrete or resin. Its soft flexibility made molds of very large surfaces possible and not altogether impractical. In its indexicality, the process of Overby's latex casting approximated a photographic approach in sculpture. A mold is like a three-dimensional photograph, or, rather, a photographic negative. Or, perhaps it is more like printmaking because his latex impressions are always actual size, scaled one-to-one with reality. Casting is like that; it quotes verbatim and preserves its subject's environmental, monumental size. The result seems equally painting, photography, printmaking, and sculpture.

Existing as equivalently scaled to (if also an overstatement of) reality, the latex casts of real places and real surfaces align process—the art as evidence of a performed action in time—and the aestheticized depiction or representation of a place, a time.

Latex has a malleable translucence that can be easily pigmented or left nude, imparting an evocative skin-like, hide-like quality that relates its surfaces to bodily textures in more than one way, given that, like mortal flesh, it degrades un-archivally over time. Conservation considerations ensured that any of Overby's latex casts would not only represent and reference time's passage elsewhere in the world, but that they would themselves insistently embody and participate in matter's entropic impermanence by the very instability of their substance.

A final note on body and process, or bodily processing: Masking a fragment of architecture or skinning a house (his house) suggestively anticipates Overby's paintings, begun a bit later, of S&M black rubber skin-tight masks, straps, bras with cut-outs, floppy gloves, and other fetishistic gear worn by the (female) body.