

ARTFORUM

Rimanelli, David "Robert Overby," *Artforum*, April 1997, Issue 36, pg 82-83.

ROBERT OVERBY

The work of Robert Overby (1935-93) admits perhaps two overriding interpretations, distinct but not incompatible. On the one hand, his cast latex reliefs of architectural environments and fixtures belong to the history of the late-'60s/early-'70s experiments in antiform, process art, post-Minimalism, what have you. From the perspective of art history – or, more precisely, an art history of "movements" – it is precisely these works that constitute the salvageable core of the artist's output. But the show at Jessica Frederick's gave the impression that, in addition to the "good" process-art style of the casts, Overby worked in at least a second manner, a "bad" representational style of painting that is an amalgam of Richard Lindner, Tom Wesselmann, Nancy Grossman, and David Salle, among others. The fact that he worked simultaneously and prolifically in various other modes breaks down the simple narrative of "good" works; the oeuvre as a whole, good and not-so-good alike, seems at least as interesting a reading as the one that recuperates Overby as a "single-movement" artist.

It is certainly the renaissance of post-Minimalist forms in the sculpture of the '90s that fuels the rediscovery of the palatable. Art-historical Overby; in the reviews of the artist's shows since his death, scarcely one fails to mention the work of Rachel Whiteread. If Whiteread is Overby's contemporary reference, Bruce Nauman is the historical one. Few commentators have failed to mention his plaster casts of negative space from the mid '60's, such as *A Cast of the Space under My Chair* 1965-68. Overby was no doubt fully aware of this work (Nauman was living at this time in Davis, California). A piece from 1970 is titled *Projected Space Between My Legs*, making the link explicit, even as it engages another aspect of Nauman's cast sculptures, those that referenced the artist's body. Interestingly, Nauman is always mentioned in connection with his contemporary, Overby, but often enough has been forgotten with respect to Whiteread, although her works are more obviously derivative. Unlike Whiteread's *Ghost*, 1990, and *House*, 1993, Overby's casts are not of negative space but of surfaces (through there are exceptions, such as *Stairwell*, *Paul's Place*, 1971). These pieces are like the skins of interiors, and the traces of paint, detritus, and wood embedded in them confirm their indexical status.

On the other hand, Overby remained interested in more conventionally pictorial values: according to Michael Duncan, "pigment and some applied marks were added to the surface to achieve an aged and weathered appearance." Such obvious "faking" would probably have been anathema to Nauman's work (recently examined by Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss in their catalogue to "*L'Informe: mode d'emploi*"), decay functions in Overby's casts in a way at once more literal and more fictional. They simultaneously record decay and represent it. Traces of the ruined original persist, but he could not resist tarring them up as images of ruin. Hence, the whiff of melodrama that clings to these pieces.

Perhaps Overby's work is more interesting, then, not as exemplary of a single moment of prescient intuition (the cast latex pieces), but rather in its entirety. There is evidence to suggest that this is the interpretation the artist himself would have favored. One need only peruse Overby's extraordinary little book *336 to I: August 1973-July 1969*, in which he obsessively documents every work of art he made in that period. After looking at a copy, one realizes that the apparent dichotomy in the iceberg: no, it's not a question of two competing styles, but maybe ten, twenty styles, all of which the artist worked in at more or less the same time.

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Alongside avant-gardist experiments, there are painterly pastiches after the old masters. Process art and Pop art. Nauman, Keith Sonnier, Eva Hesse, Robert Ryman, Richard Serra, ect. Andy Warhol and Claes Oldenburg. The book is organized in reverse chronological order: the earliest works are acrylic paintings, some on shaped canvases, recalling Frank Stella's "Protractor" and "Polish Village" paintings. Incidentally, these early works have obvious similarities to graphic design, the field in which Overby excelled. (He was responsible for the Toyota logo, various MOMA catalogues, Kiwanis magazine, etc. His imperiousness was notable as well; were a client to question his designs, he would reputedly simply walk out of the meeting.) The eccentric layout and cropping of the pages of 336 to 1 confirm the importance of graphic design to Overby's work in addition to its status as an artist's book as much as a catalogue. The extreme heterogeneity of nearly simultaneous works is weird. What's one to make of Overby's predilection for swollen, gaudily painted lips? The temptation is to view this bad taste as self-conscious, even funny, though the evidence supporting the latter interpretation is scant. One begins to suspect, nonetheless, that the subject of Overby's corpus cannot be boiled down to works executed in an acceptable style (which is the gist of accounts emphasizing the more palatable cast latex reliefs, ect.). Rather, his work seems to thematize style itself.