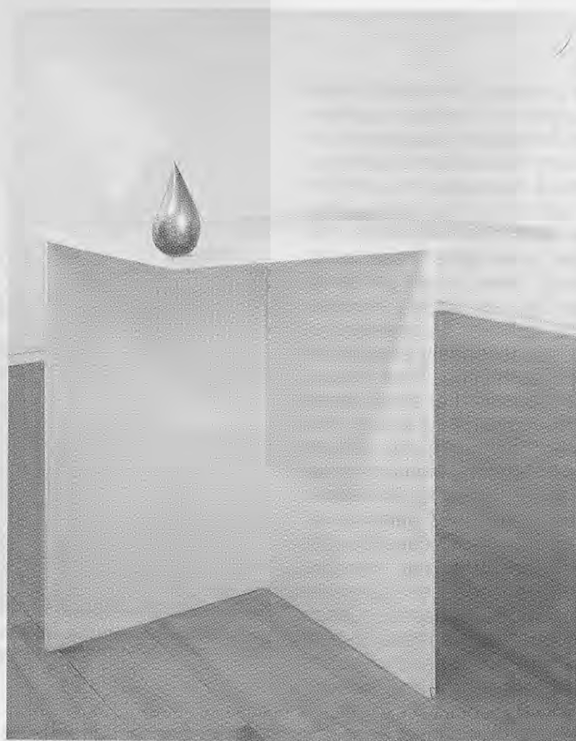
Robert Therrien at Gagosian

The devil is in the details, Robert Therrien seemed to intone in palimpsestlike drawings of gleeful satanic figures disporting on two small sheets of fusty wallpaper figured with a pattern of field flowers no longer in fashion. None much larger than a fingernail, each devil was assigned a color—red, silver, a sort of golden ocher, brown—and set to prancing within the floral field, in at least one instance straddling a flower. The devils raised identical pitchforks in salute to the viewer from within a cluttered pictorial space.

The optical density of iconic elements in the new drawings, all untitled, included in this discursive exhibition—snowman, cloud, halo, chapel spire, coffin, cartoonlike duck bills—suggested the tactile, saturated quality of silkscreen or inkjet printing. But his materials are more complex than that, consisting of various combinations of Japan color, graphite, pencil, ink, tempera and enamel on smooth buff paper marked by pushpin holes at the corners, presented in simple, well-crafted ivory-colored frames. With a regularity attributable to Therrien's use of templates, the forms share a richness and density and, often, a halation at each figure's thin edge. The halo in one ink and graphite work was rendered by a simple line, while in another it was implied by an edge as deep as the rim of a coin, radiant in its own pale glow.



Robert Therrien: No title, 2001, wood, enamel and tin-plated brass, 72⅞ by 48⅞ inches; at Gagosian.

Drawings were sequenced in the gallery according to an internal, formal logic; they spoke to one another like semaphores. In three similar drawings, Therrien deploys descending rows of dots and then keystones. In each, the lower right corner of a grid ends with a head in profile, like the period at the end of a sentence, or possibly representing the source of these icons—a talking head.

In the gallery's center, a tear-shaped, tin-plated brass object measuring about a foot from base to tip, rested at eye level on the corner of an outsized, white enameled table made of wood. Eschewing a perfect finish, Therrien allows the teardrop's surface to reveal the marks of casting and polishing, which impart a sense of substantial heaviness to the object. The enamel finish of the oddly crafted table also reveals the touch of a painter's hand. So did the components of the remaining sculpture—the elephantine flaps of two wood panels butted into the wall at different angles, carpentered to fit but not to touch. Conceived as a Dutch door to nowhere, the work scissored out into the space it was intended to define, as though moving through a looking glass.

—*Edward Leffingwell*

Peter Reginato at Adelson

An orgiastic celebration of color ran through this exhibition of 21 recent abstract sculptures by Texas-born artist Peter Reginato. Most of these painted steel works are about 3 feet tall and were placed on pedestals so that the exuberant compositions burst into view at eye level when one entered the gallery. While the concatenations of colorful parts create a dazzling decorative effect that recalls the lyrical energy of Kandinsky's early abstract paintings, a close look at these sculptures reveals their affinity to Cubist collage. For example, subtly painted highlights on some of the steel shapes contradict the play of shadow that defines the three-dimensional forms.

The works are composed of thick steel wire and various thin, hand- and finger-sized sheet-metal shapes. The artist employs a vocabulary of spines, fronds, splashes and stars, as well as flat, cellular forms that are bent, partly folded and perforated with rounded or occasionally rectangular openings. They are dressed in different hues of thickly applied paint, which disguises the fine welding that joins each element.

In *Stendhal Syndrome* (2001), a passage of red ridges and purple curving forms is connected to a thin yellow bone shape that supports an expansive midsection. Here, one blue and one green tadpole shape extend laterally, opposing a crumpled silver tadpole at the end of a white and orange limb. The interaction of these colorful elements evokes the dizziness and dislocation the work's title refers to, but the piece also suggests a toy robot dancing the funky chicken.

Peter Reginato: *The Last Found Object*, 2000, steel painted with Insl-tron, 59 by 32 by 15 inches; at Adelson.

It is hard not to recognize a figure in works such as *Another Weak Moment* (2001), where a spiky vertical rod functions as a spine, and a gray notched vertical bar is surmounted by a rounded form. In *Original Sin (For Eva Hesse)*, 2001, a corrugated yellow oval with a vertical rectangle cut out just left of center stands on a dark palette shape. Below this is a pale blue hourglass form with a round hole in the lower section. This work appears to have a definite front and back, with strong vertical and horizontal axes, in contrast to the sprawling diagonals of the large *Mild Steel, Stainless Steel, Plexiglas, Insl-tron, Your Mama* (2000-01). While Reginato's approach may be methodical, the pieces share a capricious visual splendor that is more rhyme than reason.

—*Gerard McCarthy*

James Croak at Stefan Stux

Wolves 7, Theory 0, the title piece of James Croak's exhibition, is a shiny electronic scoreboard stopped at the last minute of the fourth quarter of a game that "theory," apparently, has no chance of winning. For Croak, the wolves symbolize something primordial—be it instinct, death or brute natural force—and theory comprises the strategies of civilization that vainly seek to contain it. The scoreboard is a somewhat wry representation of this uneven

battle, as if the inexorable triumph of primal forces over the ordering schemes of science and philosophy could be captured in so prosaic and inconsequential a contest as a high school basketball game.

His *Dirtman Shows the Monsters*—a larger-than-life sculpture made of cast dirt—suggests a similar meeting of an ever-present primal or supernatural reality with a protective but ultimately fleeting gloss of mundane, civilized culture. The figure (one of several, along with a series of "Dirt Babies," Croak has created in the past two decades), a kind of Everyman, is depicted wearing the anonymous garb of

Atelier van Lieshout: *Compost Toilet*, 2001, wood, fiberglass, foam; at Tilton/Kustera. (Review on p. 103.)

a salesman—overcoat, hat and tie. He holds before him a rack of small gargoyle figures that display various forms of monstrosity. Unlike much modernist figural sculpture with which the Dirtman bears a superficial affinity (e.g., works by George Segal), Croak's sculpture is as much about its constitutive substance as its form. The dirt suggests both an *arte povera* repudiation of precious or fine-art materials and a deflating commentary on the ultimate significance and fate of human creations. Here dirt suggests less fertility or integration with nature than defilement or degradation. Ashes remain ashes, dust remains dust, whatever transient forms human ambitions may impose.

Although for Croak the wolf stands as a symbol of the ineluctable force of nature, it is not a nature understood in an Edenic or pastoral sense. Rather, it is a kind of mythical or ur-nature, one associated with a primordial existence, chthonic gods and the enigmatic and destructive figure of the sphinx. Such a sphinx—assembled from cast resin, the feet and wings of a Canadian snow goose, and the skin of an anaconda—lay coiled in its own room at Stux. In another room, *Monolith*, a large slab of cast dirt leaning against the wall, evoked ancient forms of religious worship while it simultaneously lampooned the pristine surfaces and aspirations to permanence of certain Minimalist sculptures.

Finally, a wolf cast from dirt walked in a puddle of tar on a mound of more than a thousand books. If the conjunction of wild animal and text was heavy-handed and portentous, the wolf itself—raw, mangy, totemic, roughly hewn—stood as a powerful emblem of a primitive force threatening to engulf a culture that can only temporarily keep it at bay. *—Jonathan Gilmore*

Willem de Kooning and John Chamberlain at PaceWildenstein

This beautifully curated pairing of Willem de Kooning's paintings and John Chamberlain's sculptures at PaceWildenstein pointed up the power of that underused (and nicely didactic) format, the two-person exhibition. Although the show is subtitled "Influence and Transformation," the issue of influence is problematic: while Chamberlain, nearly 25 years de Kooning's junior, shared the painter's action-oriented Abstract Expressionist ethos, he was scarcely an acolyte. What the exhibition did make abundantly clear, though, is that from the late '50s on de Kooning and Chamberlain were exploring similar terrain, and in doing so their art intersected in surprising ways. The great pleasure of this exhibition lay in its ability to set up a nuanced interplay of formal readings. In an age of insistent iconography, it is a relief to be able to simply savor the workings—at the highest level—of line, plane, surface, color, gesture, mass and material.

Left, Willem de Kooning's *Untitled XIV*, 1976, and right, John Chamberlain's *Haute Cinq*, 1990; at PaceWildenstein.

The two artists reveal much about each other. While Chamberlain's use of color has for years put him at the forefront of painterly sculptors, the juxtaposition of his work with de Kooning's reminds us of just how sculptural the latter can be. With their outscaled gestural scaffoldings set in an atmospheric welter of bold brushwork, paintings like *Palisade* (1957) and *Door to the River* (1960), evoke, by their physical presence, visual weight and a suggestion of perspectival depth, a clear three-dimensionality. Seeing, for example, the battered and roughly cut planes of Chamberlain's *Swannanoa/Swannanoa II* (1959/74) next to *Palisade* made one aware of how similarly de Kooning's structure is poised, canted yet stable, in space. (The correspondence of the yellow and blue element on the left wing of the Chamberlain with the similarly colored strokes of the de Kooning was a particularly nice curatorial touch.)

If the exhibition underscored the contrapuntal relationship of the sculptural to the painterly in de Kooning's work, then seeing his paintings alongside Chamberlain's pieces altered the way we look at the sculptures as well. Their materiality seems to fall away, and they achieve an unexpected pictorialness. The sullied blues and pinked cadmium reds of de Kooning's *Untitled XIV*—one of his great 1976 pictures—are paralleled by the consonant hues of the metal pieces in Chamberlain's *Haute Cinq* (1990), the crumpling of the steel *in* space feeling remarkably

James Croak: Detail of *Wolf*, 2001, cast dirt, books, tar, 61 by 112½ by 65 inches; at Stefan Stux.