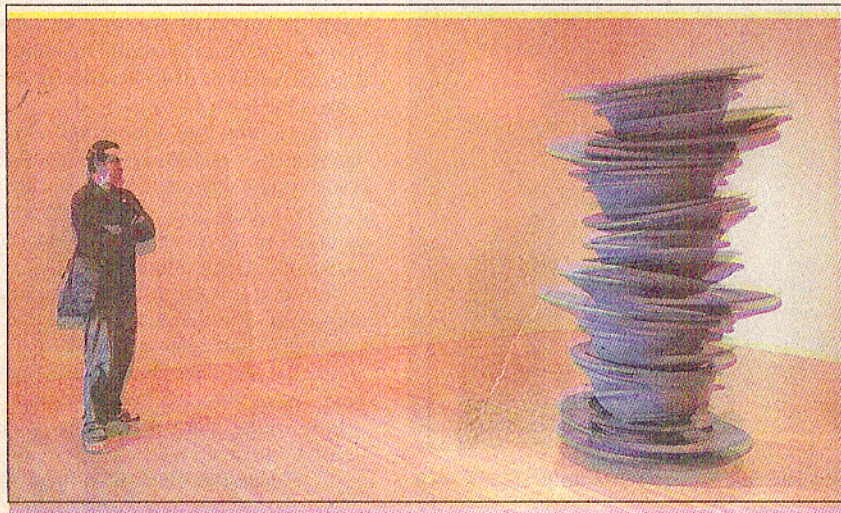


THE PLAYGROUND OF MEMORY

Review • Robert Therrien's towering sculptures transport viewers back to childhood and all of its scary wonders.



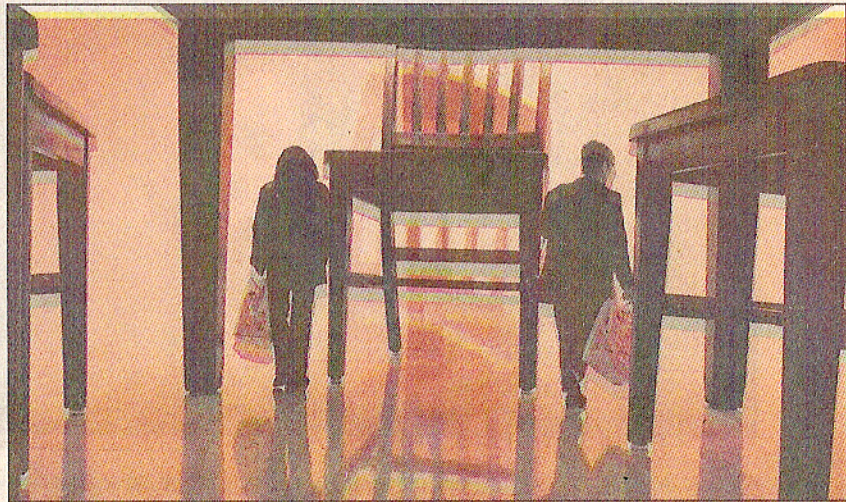
By CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT

Robert Therrien's sculpture has taken a remarkable turn in the 1990s. Once his work walked the very delicate line between figurative clarity and elusive abstraction—a tall, narrow, six-sided wooden form hung on the wall but plainly reminiscent of a coffin, say, or three silvery, slightly irregular metallic spheres, stacked one atop the other, like an industrial-strength snowman. These poetic objects seemed to occupy an indescribable space, a resonant but

amorphous area residing between what we know and what we don't know.

Or, better, between what we think we know and don't know.

Recently, though, Therrien has been making exquisitely crafted sculptures that are easily recognized as objects encountered in the daily world. The extraordinary exhibition of his work from the past decade that opened last week at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art features a monumental table and chairs, a precarious stack of 20 blue plastic bowls and dishes, some beds, an oilcan, several fake beards of



Photos by CLARENCE WILLIAMS / Los Angeles Times

ART

Oversize sculptures—such as “No title, 1999 (fake beard),” right, “No title, 1999 (blue plastic plates),” below left, and “Under the Table,” 1994—essentially shrink viewers to child-size.



the type a department store Santa might wear, and more.

Yet, however recognizable the object, the sense of estrangement in these new sculptures is more pronounced than ever before. (Fake beards?) Customary associations start to crack wide open—along with a grin on a visitor's face, followed by a disturbing ripple in the cerebral cortex.

Scale has always been critical to Therrien's sculpture, which is concerned with the way it physically relates to a spectator's nearby body. But a recent, substantial increase in size has shifted things. A half-dozen of the sculptures at LACMA deserve to be called monumental—not just because they're big, but because they make a visitor feel small.

The most deliberate in this regard is the wooden kitchen table and four matching chairs, a terrific sculpture that was a standout when first shown in San Diego at inSITE 94 and again at the 1995 Carnegie International in Pittsburgh. Twenty-six feet long and nearly 10 feet tall, with chairs askew as if giants had just departed the room, "Under the Table" puts you right where its title says, down under the table amid a welter of wooden legs.

The Incredible Shrinking Museum Visitor is instantly transformed into a helpless child, hiding out from the grown-up world. A giddy feeling of playfulness is edged with gnawing anxiety. For the sheltering space beneath the table does feel like a refuge, but refuge also signals that danger or distress lurks outside.

Memory is integral to the experience of Therrien's sculpture, and recollections from childhood flood the galleries. Those three gigantic beards, hung on 15-foot-tall display stands by wire hooks that would fit over huge ears, bring to mind the unspeakable grade-school horror of scampering up on fat Santa's lap while grinning parents with cameras record the awful moment for posterity. Or, the cartoon-like stack of blue plastic dishes rises before you like a Merrie Melodies riff on Brancusi's rough-hewn sculpture "Endless Column"; the stack of dishes, taller than the average player in the NBA, seems poised to come clattering down if you don't tiptoe by.

Fifteen single beds are attached end to end and twisted into a corkscrew spiral running the length of the room, like an animated sign for the time-tunnel that constitutes a state of dreaming. Hard-working Cinderella could have been the one to have left behind the dark and prickly scrub brush tenderly depicted in an immense, 10-foot-wide photograph, especially given the object's CinemaScope presentation. Nearby, the elegant sculpture of an

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oversize oilcan suddenly seems a disaster waiting to happen, since the Tin Woodsman will surely rust without it, and then he'll never get his heart from that fearsome Wizard of Oz.

Santa, Cinderella, assorted giants, Oz—none of these fairy-tale folk is actually present in the work, except by glancing association. Yet the association is nonetheless powerful, as childhood memory tends to be, not least because an idea such as a 15-foot-tall sculpture of a fake beard is so flat-out strange. Therrien even takes the oddity all the way back to first principles: A big, spooky photograph shows the skinny, yellow, sword-like beak of a stork, which enters the frame from the left to deposit a white cloth bundle onto a rumpled bed. The picture records one of the more bizarre cultural myths concocted to explain to curious children the miracle of life.

Therrien's recent work is at once playful and dark. It gives startlingly original form to the murky labyrinth of childhood experience, which is so often viewed from behind the rose-colored adult glasses that compensate for unspeakable anguish. Through a masterful orchestration of scale and memory, space becomes psychically charged. The destructive myth of innocent childhood is exploded here, as terror, joy, sorrow, amusement, cruelty, loneliness—a full range of human feeling—are given tangible poetic voice.

The myth is also set in motion. Monumental sculpture is typically static, as Therrien's is here. Yet, as art historian Norman Bryson astutely points out in one of the exhibition's catalog essays, the artist has designed his work with the elastic look of cartoon animation in mind. Formally, the splayed legs in the twisting spiral of beds might bring to mind the furiously dancing stools from "Fantasia." Those frightful beards are the sort that might have been worn by the lecherous mountain men who always seemed to be chasing Betty Boop over hill and dale.

Animation, or the process of simulating motion and life, has always been an aim of art. In an image-saturated world like ours, animation is ubiquitous. It's also ephemeral and illusionistic, though, which is where Therrien's art dramatically parts company with the technique.

Therrien's memory-laden scul-

ture is given the heft of material stuff. Wood is stained, polished, rubbed until a warm glow emanates. Tin is fused as an exquisite surface skin for cold steel. Cascades of facial hair are rendered in different ways: the silvery glint of stainless steel, which catches the light in its sharp and impenetrable tangle; the soft, soapy density of hand-worked white plaster; the surprising tactile beauty of plastic, sprayed in visually deep layers of blue-black color.

Making is meaning in Therrien's art, as it is for otherwise very different sculptors such as Jim Isermann and Robert Gober. Modern animation gets reclaimed. A mechanical and industrial process, whose wondrous seductions we happily indulge in and take for granted, is transformed into a sensuous hand-made object, occupying the same space in the room as our bodies. This is disconcerting, to say the least—and brilliantly evocative.

LACMA curator Lynn Zelevansky organized the show (it will travel to three other cities after closing in May). She included one earlier work by Therrien in order to suggest an organic evolution in his art, rather than a sharp break between his 1990s sculpture and what came before.

A small 1981 gouache on paper shows a stack of three dark circles that together make a "Black Snowman." Nearby, a 10-foot-long 1996 sculpture bulges from the wall overhead, its three swelling black orbs fitted with faucets like a storm cloud that has been harnessed with plumbing.

Similarly, a second two-dimensional work resonates against a subsequent sculpture. A framed board softly brushed with off-white enamel is the ground for a pencil drawing that traces the path of a graceful, looping line (it looks like a cross between an elementary school penmanship exercise and an uncoiling spring). The drawing, hanging in the first room, also hangs in your memory when you encounter the wild spiral of beds farther on.

In both cases, the beguiling simplicity embodied in the drawing is clearly critical to the sculptural power of the later work, which required complex fabrication skills. The relationship between them somehow begins to seem not unlike the tangled one between child and adult. □

• Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 5905 Wilshire Blvd., (323) 857-6000, through May 20. Closed Wednesday.

Christopher Knight is *The Times*' art critic.