

TOM OTTERNESS

CREATION MYTH

Marlborough

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TOM OTTERNESS, “CREATION MYTH”

by *Walter Robinson*

Higgins: Can the man you're going to marry make anything of you? That's the point!

Liza: Perhaps I could make something of him. . . .

The story of Pygmalion is basically a love story. It's about falling in love, or more precisely, about the search for a perfect love. In addition, the tale is a parable of artistic creation, a narrative that proposes a powerful model of what art is. It's an example of ekphrasis, an artwork about making an artwork. And tellingly, the story places love at the center of artistic creation. The perfect love is an artist's masterpiece, a transcendently beautiful statue, so beautiful that it enchants its own maker. With the miraculous transformation of a replica into a real being, it posits the artist as a godlike being who is able to convert a lie into truth. His workshop is a double for the Garden of Eden. It's the site of an origin scene that, as the birthplace of that ideal mate, is also the beginning of the family, the dawn of domesticity, and the source of all society. Love and art alike are transformative and ideal.

The Pygmalion myth does have its drawbacks. That Pygmalion can only find perfection in his own creation, in a reflection of his own genius, is what makes the tale so . . . shall we say fertile? . . . as a source of both inspiration and mockery. Considered in the light of male folly, for which we have ample evidence, Pygmalion's presumption is ludicrous. This point would be elaborated by many writers and artists in the centuries since (about which, more below). Pygmalion's most rudimentary fault, for a creation tale, is that it strays rather far from the obvious truth. Needless to say, when it comes to creation, it is women who give birth to men, not the other way round. And when it comes to breathing life into dolls, it is children, especially girls, who achieve that most gracefully in their imaginations and play.

So it is long past time to turn the Pygmalion story upside-down. Tom Otterness has done just that with “Creation Myth,” a monumental public artwork which appears to feature a female sculptor in the process of creating the first man from scratch. Several years in the making, the work has been designed for a park in Rochester, N.Y., and was sponsored by the Memorial Art Gallery there. A feminist monument, then, dedicated to Susan B. Anthony, the anti-slavery advocate and pioneering suffragette who made her home in Rochester from 1845 until her death in 1906. As part of the ensemble, a small bronze sculpture depicts a pair of figures jointly wielding a pen to inscribe on a horizontal plaque the slogan that Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton chose for their newspaper, *The Revolution*: “Men, their rights and nothing more; women, their rights and nothing less.”

In “Creation Myth,” an assortment of large limestone figures and small bronze ones occupy an open green space of grass and trees, with paved pathways and plazas. Diderot in his famous 18th-century *Encyclopedia* claimed that the highest purpose of sculpture is to to perpetuate the memory of famous men and provide models of virtue. In Rochester Otterness has given us something close to that and something different. What we have is a mental and physical playground at once, a suite of idea-objects inserted into a culturally designed swatch of nature, an ensemble that turns public space into a kind of theater and viewers into participants on a stage. People using the park interact with the modeled figures as if the ideas embodied in the work had been made palpable.

At the entrance to the park is a pair of monumental figures, facing each other and providing a kind of gateway. There stands a female sculptor armed with a hammer and chisel, contemplating her unfinished artwork, a male figure only half-carved

from his block of limestone. Nearby is a kind of quarry of various blocks, where another unfinished stone figure lies prone, apparently abandoned due to defects in his construction (an arm is out of whack). A third monumental male sits in pieces, with head and limbs nearby, still to be attached. Smaller figures in bronze animate the scene, measuring out the volumes or perching contemplatively on pieces of rock. The final scene, the summation of the tale, is represented by a separate pair of small bronze figures, in which the sculptor gives her completed ideal man the kiss that breathes life into his completed form.

It goes without saying that these works, like all of the artist's productions, are exemplars of streamlined craft and generous wit. His figures come to imaginary life with a notable precision and character. And for all their simplicity, popularity and charm, they serve fairly sophisticated esthetic notions. The Rochester works, for example, emphasize the social conventions that inform our perception of gender identity, for what one might think are the artwork's female and male figures are in fact all but devoid of gender clues. They are constituted from geometric volumes -- cones, cylinders and spheres -- and the artist and his assistants often refer to the works in just those abstract terms. It is pure social presumption, then, that casts the cones, whose profile arguably resembles an a-line dress, in the female role, with the other shapes being read as male.

The idea of the role reversal, of turning things upside-down, of doing the opposite from what is expected is a commonplace basis for parody, invention, and all manner of avant-garde high jinks. These kinds of disruptive transformations are at the heart of Ovid's 2,000-year-old *Metamorphoses*, where the Pygmalion tale first appears. Real women -- the Propoetides -- are turned to stone for their sexual licentiousness. This scene prompts Pygmalion, who is said to be both a skilled artist and king of Cyprus, the island home of Aphrodite, to craft an ivory statue of his own ideal woman. Nude at first but soon dressed and ornamented, the unnamed creature comes to soft, rosy-fleshed life after a prayer to the goddess. Within the tale is the elemental artistic notion of mimesis as an animating force.

Though it is a chauvinistic male fantasy, the Pygmalion story also recognizes the power women have over men. George Bernard Shaw's 1912 play mocks the aristocratic pretensions of Professor Henry Higgins, and has his experimental subject, the flower-girl Eliza, angrily reject his plans for her. For the 18th-century political philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who was apparently the first to give



Pygmalion's statue a name -- Galatea, Greek for "white as milk" -- in his 1762 "scene lyrique," the emphasis is on the power of Pygmalion's love, rather than the

This longish list of literary variations on Pygmalion is designed in part to demonstrate how differently the theme plays in the visual arts. The contrast is as simple



gods, to bring the sculpture to life. By the Enlightenment, creative vanity has made divine intervention unnecessary. In W. S. Gilbert's 1871 three-act play -- an ancestor of the contemporary rom-com -- Galatea comes to life but prompts so many romantic complications that she decides to turn back into a sculpture. A subsequent London burlesque, "Pygmalion Re-Versed," is perhaps the first to reverse the roles, rendering Galatea as the sculptor of an ideal man, who turns out to be comically narcissistic, fawning over his own image, and a heavy-duty flirt as well. In John Updike's 1981 short story, also titled "Pygmalion," the male narrator, an ordinary suburban husband, has cocktail-party acquaintances "brought to life" by his wife's mimicry of their speech. In Ovid's tale, the promise of consummation comes when the statue's marble softens to Pygmalion's touch like beeswax in the sun; in Updike's update, the suddenly pliable flesh comes during a backrub that puts his wife to sleep.

as that between narration and imagery, like testimony as opposed to evidence. In painting and sculpture, the default position for Pygmalion is practically the definition of erotica: a naked female figure. As such the history of art is enlivened by academic interpretations of the scene by Gerome and Boucher, by a sensuously expressionistic bronze by Rodin and a comically pornographic scene by Rowlandson. It is the Surrealist Paul Delvaux who upends the myth in 1939, painting a nude flesh-and-blood Galatea embracing a similarly nude stone statue of Pygmalion.

For his "Creation Myth," Otterness came up with a completely different solution, and a rather more complicated one. For one thing, the erotic has been eliminated; it is a distraction, after all, and not very useful in a public sculpture. The work instead articulates a sociological proposition, and manages to represent a complete narrative in a way that is not usually seen in figurative sculpture today. In an art world that is generally too ADD for anything that takes more than a glance, Otterness manages to tell an entire fable.

Otterness' reversal of the Pygmalion myth isn't an aristocratic conceit, it doesn't take place in a private atelier. It's not a one-off thing. Rather, we're witnessing the establishment of a matrilineal society. The master builder is accompanied by a troupe of apprentices, like god with his angels or Disney's Snow White and her birds, bunnies and chipmunk helpers. And though individual craftsmanship is in play, we're also dealing with what looks like plans for subsequent mass production: in one small bronze, the cone person is clearly casting a cube person from a mold. This budding gynocracy may well be technocratic, with a cadre of builders poised to produce an entire tribe, if not a whole society.

In his work, Otterness gives a feeling of a return to fundamentals, both in his subjects, which often begin with fables or folk tales, and in his style, which is notably playful and kid-friendly. His figures arguably take the proportions of young children, a scale that can seem small and monumental at once. Their archaic expressions, largely formed with simple spots and lines, are universally communicative as well as being open receptacles for the subjective projections of their audience. Even the colors of his sculptures, which can be gold, silver and bronze, seem relics of early civilizations.

Especially brilliant as an esthetic strategy is the way Otterness aligns his figures with the world of childhood. Their simple geometry, their cuteness -- that "kawaii" quality so definitive of Japanese pop culture -- and their cheerful demeanor as they perform the elemental tasks of workaday life, it all suggests an innocence freed from the depredations of the adult world. To quote Rousseau on Pygmalion, it is an ideal world where "everything tends to the common end.... Each follows the prompting of the other, each obeys, and both are masters."



Still more literary variation can be found in a 1987 short story by Isaac Asimov, this one titled "Galatea," in which a female sculptor named Elderberry promises to pay \$1 million for the animation of her nude sculpture Hank. She refuses to pay, however, after a snafu renders her otherwise perfect lover "soft all over." And in Neil LaBute's 2001 play, "The Shape of Things," the role of Pygmalion is taken by a young woman art student, who seduces and manipulates a naïve young man for his own improvement, only to humiliate him publicly as part of her thesis performance -- an outcome that emphasizes her heartlessness and ends up making the tale sharply misogynistic.

































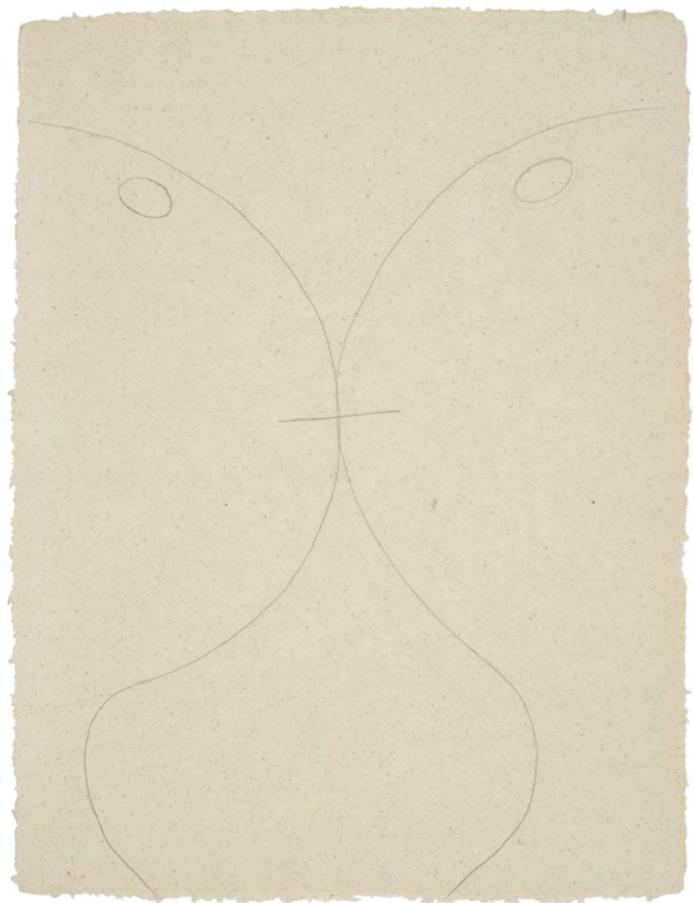
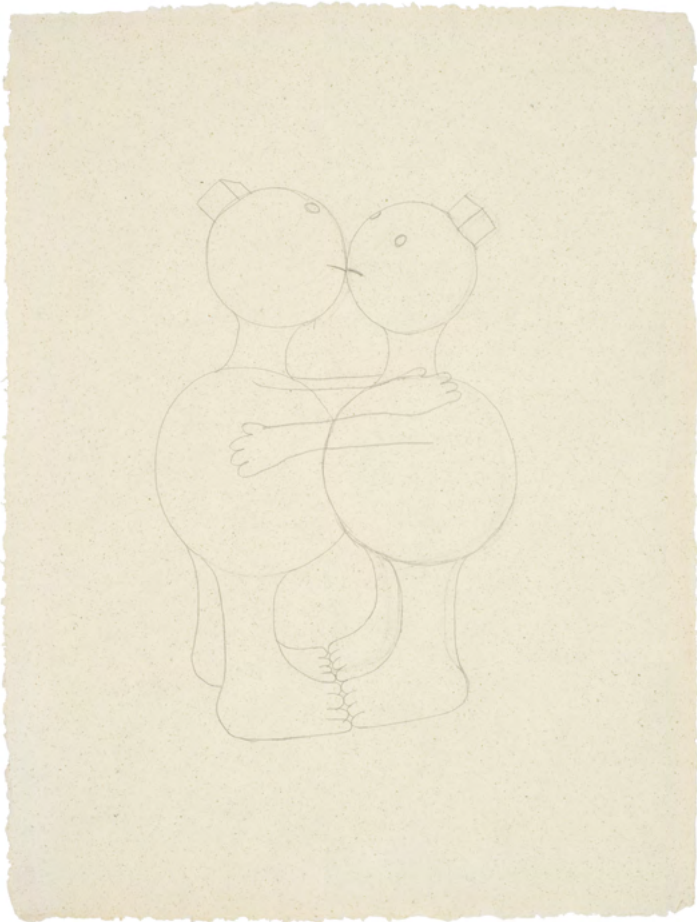




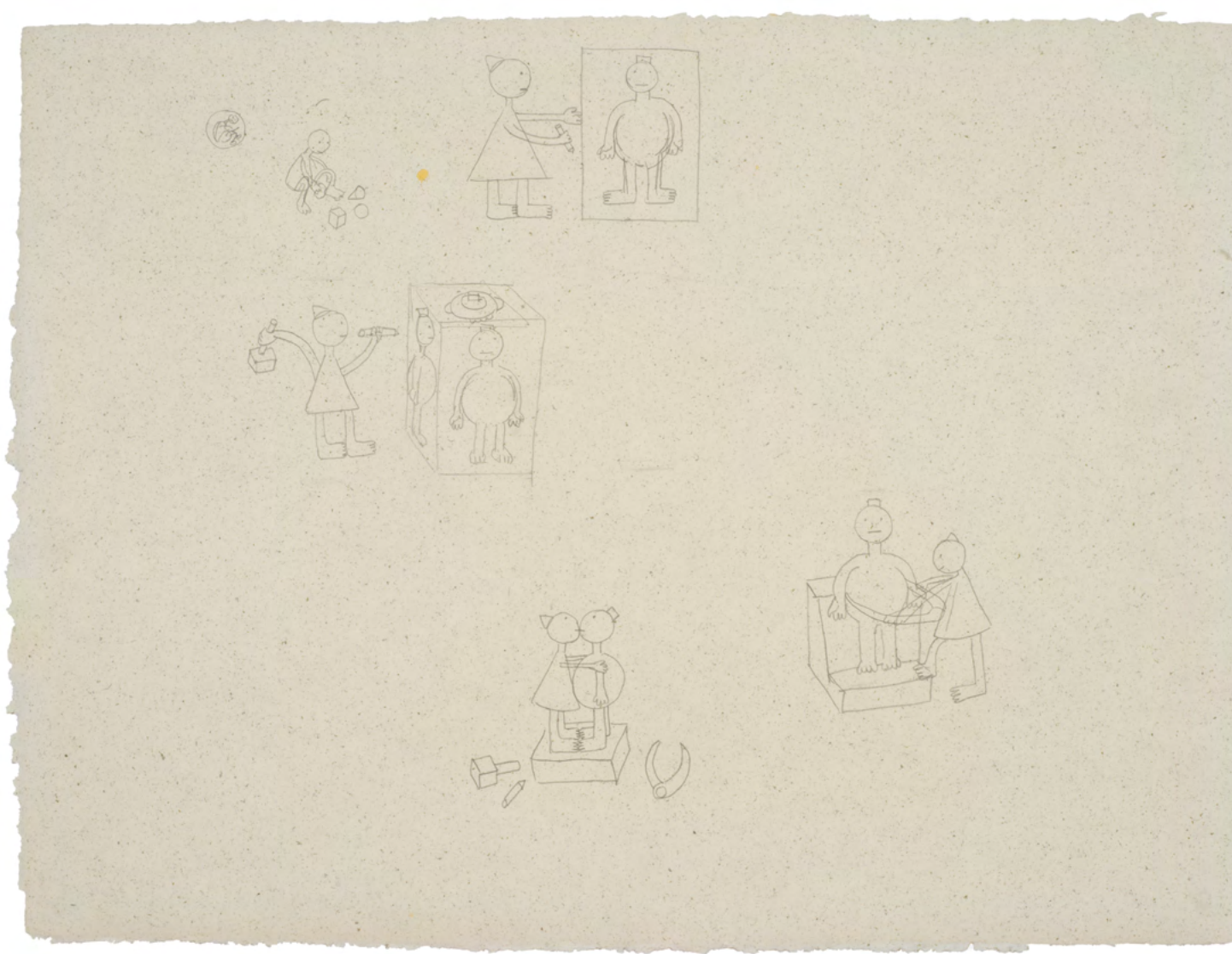


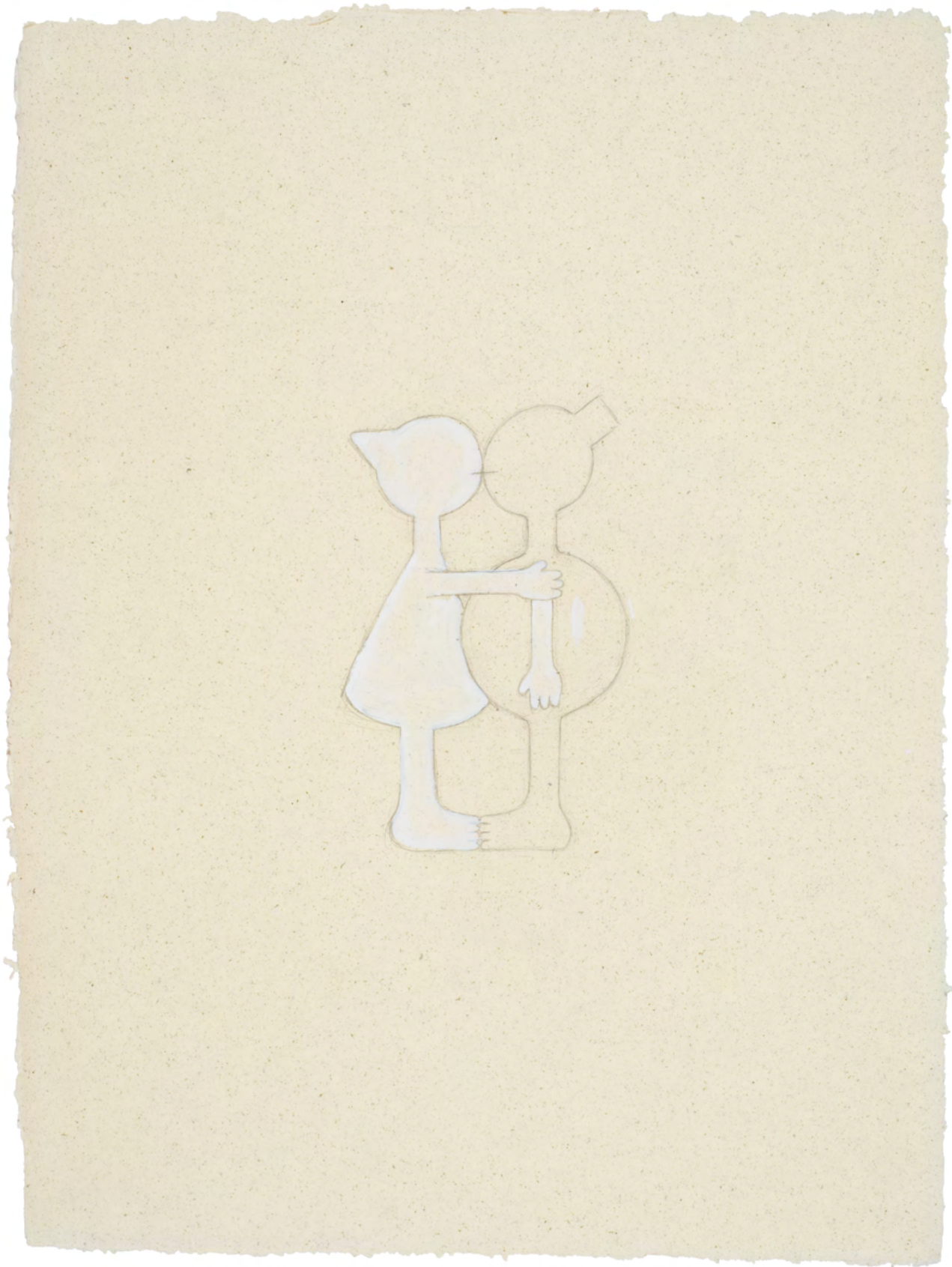












TOM OTTERNESS

1952 Born in Wichita, Kansas

The artist lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.

SELECTED AWARDS AND RECOGNITION

- 2003 Art Achievement Award, 2003 Biennial Exhibition of Public Art, Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase, New York
- 2005 Certificate of Merit, The Municipal Art Society of New York, New York, New York
- 2009 Alumni Achievement Award, Scholastic Art and Writing, New York, New York

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2012 Tom Otterness, Marlborough Monaco, Monte Carlo, Monaco
Tom Otterness, The Cultural Council of Palm Beach County, Palm Beach, Florida
- 2011 Tom Otterness: Animal Spirits, Marlborough Gallery, New York, New York
- 2007 Tom Otterness: The Public Unconscious, Marlborough Chelsea, New York, New York
- 2006 Tom Otterness in Beverly Hills, Beverly Hills, California
Tom Otterness, Marlborough Monaco, Monte Carlo, Monaco
Tom Otterness in Grand Rapids: The Gardens to the Grand, Frederick Meijer Gardens and Sculpture Park, Grand Rapids, Michigan
- 2005 Tom Otterness on Broadway, New York, New York
Tom Otterness in Indianapolis, Indianapolis, Indiana
- 2004 Several Strange Objects, John Berggruen Gallery, San Francisco, California
- 2003 Free Money on Park Avenue, Park Avenue and 57th Street, New York, New York
Bombeater, Skoto Gallery, New York, New York
- 2002 Tom Otterness: Free Money and Other Fairy Tales, Marlborough Gallery & Marlborough Chelsea, New York, New York
See No Evil, Marlborough Gallery, New York, New York
What the Hay, Utica, Montana
Tom Otterness, Nassau County Museum of Art, Roslyn Harbour, New York
- 1999 Tom Otterness, Galería Marlborough, Madrid, Spain
Tom Otterness: Gold Rush—New Sculpture and Drawings, John Berggruen Gallery, San Francisco, California
- 1998 Tom Otterness: The Marriage of Real Estate and Money and Other Recent Projects, PBCC Museum of Contemporary Art, Lake Worth, Florida
- 1997 Otterness, Marlborough Gallery, New York, New York
Life Underground, Battery Park City Authority, New York, New York (through 1998)
- 1996 Tom Otterness: Marriage of Real Estate and Money, Motel Fine Arts, New York, New York
- 1995 Tom Otterness, On the Commons: Recent Sculptures, MetroTech Center, Brooklyn, New York
Tom Otterness: The Tables, Wichita Art Museum, Wichita, Kansas
Tom Otterness: Drawings and New Sculpture, Brooke Alexander Gallery, New York, New York
Tom Otterness: Recent Sculpture, Public Art Fund at Doris Freedman Plaza, New York, New York
- 1994 Tom Otterness: Recent Drawings and Small Objects, Gallery of Contemporary Art, Krannert Art Museum, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Illinois

- 1993 Galerie Weber, Münster, Germany
Tom Otterness: New Sculpture, John Berggruen Gallery, San Francisco, California
Tom Otterness: The Tables, The Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
- 1992 Tom Otterness, Brooke Alexander Gallery, New York, New York
- 1991 Tom Otterness: The Tables, Sculptures and Drawings, Institut Valencia d'Art Modern, Centre Julio Gonzalez, Valencia, Spain; traveled to Portikus/Senckenbergmuseum, Frankfurt am Main, Germany; and Haags Gemeentemuseum, The Hague, The Netherlands
Tom Otterness, Nancy Drysdale Gallery, Washington, D.C.
- 1990 James Corcoran Gallery, Santa Monica, California; traveled to Brooke Alexander Gallery, New York, New York
The Tables, Lannan Foundation, Los Angeles, California
- 1987 The Tables, Brooke Alexander Gallery, New York, New York
Projects: Tom Otterness, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York
Sculpture and Drawings, John Berggruen Gallery, San Francisco, California
- 1986 Tom Otterness, PPG Plaza, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
- 1985 Brooke Alexander Gallery, New York, New York
- 1984 Galerie Rudolf Zwirner, Cologne, Germany
- 1983 Tom Otterness, Recent Drawings, Brooke Alexander Gallery, New York, New York
Sculpture, Brooke Alexander Gallery, New York, New York

PUBLIC COMMISSIONS

- 2013 Creation Myth, Memorial Art Gallery Centennial Sculpture Park, Rochester, New York
- 2011 Big Girl Playground, Ridgehill, Yonkers, New York
- 2010 Otterness's Playground, Silver Towers, New York, New York
Free Money, Wi City Blooming, Ilsan, Korea
Centennial Sculpture Park, Rochester, New York (commissioned by Memorial Art Gallery, University of Rochester)
Wild Life, Connell, Washington
Another World, Happy Hallow Park & Zoo, San Jose, California
Play Garden Park, Fulton, Mississippi
- 2008 Millipede, Wichita State University, Wichita, Kansas
Large Covered Wagon, DUMBO Brooklyn, New York (through January 2009)
Social Invertebrates: Millipede, Scorpion, Walking Stick, Phoenix Convention Center, City of Phoenix, Office of Art and Culture, Phoenix, Arizona
New Direction, Hunterdon Museum of Art, Clinton, New Jersey
- 2007 Coqui, P.S. 20, New York, New York
Matriculated Nature, City of Claremont, California
DNA, University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida
Immigrant Family, 18 Yonge Street, Toronto, Canada
- 2005 Mr. Stinky and Amorphophallus Titanium, New York Botanical Gardens, Bronx, New York
Humpty Dumpty, Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, New York, New York
Large Frog and Bee, Montefiore Children's Hospital, Bronx, New York
Large Covered Wagon, Pioneer Park, Walla Walla, Washington
- 2004 Life Underground, 14th Street Subway Station ACEL Lines, Metropolitan Transportation Authority, New York, New York
El Coqui Gigante de Las Cavernas del Río Camuy, Parque de Los Cavernas del Río Camuy, Camuy, Puerto Rico
Untitled, Museum Beelden aan Zee, The Museum Foundation, Scheveningen, The Netherlands

- Tornado of Ideas and Horse and Rider, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas
- 2003 The Return of the Four-Leggeds, Northwest Museum of Arts and Culture, Washington State Arts commission, Spokane, Washington
- 2002 Mortellito Memorial, Branchbrook Park Station, New Jersey Transit, Newark, New Jersey
Makin' Hay, Utica, Montana; Sun Valley, Idaho; traveled to The University of Washington, Pullman, Washington; The Outdoor Art Collection, Stanford University, Palo Alto, California; and San Antonio, Texas (acquired by the Alturas Foundation; through 2009)
- 2001 Suspended Mind, Carl Sagan Discovery Center, Montefiore Children's Hospital, in collaboration with Rockwell Group, Bronx, New York
The Lesson, Little Red School House, New York, New York
Independence School, P.S.234, New York, New York
- 2000 Time and Money, Public Art Fund, Hilton Times Square, Hilton Hotel Corporation, New York, New York
- 1999 Gold Rush, United States Federal Courthouse, General Services Administration, Sacramento, California
The Music Lesson, Music Building, the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Greensboro, North Carolina Arts Council, Greensboro, North Carolina
Feats of Strength, Western Washington University, funded in partnership with Washington State Arts Commission, Art in Public Places Program, Bellingham, Washington
Rockman, United States Federal Courthouse Minneapolis, General Services Administration, Minneapolis, Minnesota
- 1998 The Gates, Cleveland Public Library, in collaboration with Maya Lin, Cleveland, Ohio
- 1997 Law of Nature, United States Federal Courthouse Portland, General Services Administration, Portland, Oregon
Visionary, Metro Tech Center, Brooklyn, New York
- 1996 The Marriage of Real Estate and Money, Roosevelt Island, New York, New York
- 1995 Dreamers Awake, Wichita Art Museum, Wichita, Kansas
- 1994 Upside-Down Feet, Krannert Museum of Art, Kinkead Pavilion, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Illinois
- 1993 Upside-Down Feet, Krannert Museum of Art, University of Illinois, Champaign, Illinois
Die Überfrau, State Library, Munster, Germany; Architect: Bolles-Wilson
- 1992 The Real World, Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller Park, Battery Park City Authority, New York, New York
- 1991 The Frieze, Weatherspoon Art Gallery, Greensboro, North Carolina
The New World, The Edward R. Roybal Federal Building, General Services Administration, Los Angeles Federal Building, Los Angeles, California
- 1984 Kings Parade, Buchhandlung Walther Koenig, Cologne, Germany
- Kemper Art Museum, Kansas City, Missouri
Frederik Meijer Gardens and Sculpture Park, Grand Rapids, Michigan
Miami Art Museum, Miami, Florida
Museo Rufino Tamayo, Mexico City, Mexico
Nassau County Museum of Art, Roslyn Harbor, New York
Palm Beach Community College Museum of Art, Lake Worth, Florida
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, California
The Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York, New York
The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, Israel
The Miyagi Museum of Art, Sendai, Japan
The Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York
The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, New York
Weatherspoon Art Gallery, Greensboro, North Carolina
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, New York

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Arts Council of Indianapolis, Indianapolis, Indiana
Beelden Aan Zee Museum, The Hague, The Netherlands
Eli Broad Family Foundation, Santa Monica, California
Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, Texas
Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington, Delaware
Gateway Foundation, St. Louis, Missouri
Grounds for Sculpture, Hamilton, New Jersey
Hunter Museum of American Art, Chattanooga, Tennessee
Institut Valencia d'Art Modern, Center Julio Gonzalez, Valencia, Spain
IVAM Center Julio Gonzales, Valencia, Spain

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