Gallery view of sculptures by Robert Gober, 1987, mixed mediums, with *Pitched Crib* in foreground, *Plywood* against wall and *Two Partially Buried Sinks* in background, at Paula Cooper.

unmistakably nasty, of children's furniture—that Gober comes closest to the spirit of Surrealism. *Pitched Crib* is a standard-issue, bare crib frame (mattress and linen, which Gober provided in his earlier beds, have been forgone) whose legs are set dangerously aslant. *X Playpen* is of the obsolete, wooden-cage variety, and its walls crisscross each other, leaving two uselessly—or at least sadistically—small, triangular play areas. While these subversions of function are, in their witty cruelty, characteristic of Surrealism, they also undermine one of its principles: the exaltation of pre-intellectual innocence. In Gober's nursery, the baby has been roused from sleep and evicted from the playpen, its serenity trammeled and its unconscious wisdom dismissed.

Gober is equally irreverent toward nature at large. William Wegman is preeminent among those who have used household pets as conceptual placemarks in the tragicomic epic of humankind and the untamed environment. Gober joins their ranks with an untitled dog bed. It's a generously sized, traditional affair, but upholstered in hand-painted cloth that illustrates deer being hunted and felled. Sweet dreams, Spot. Also included in the show was a modest little armchair, slipcovered in linen painted with flowers that would do Grandma Moses proud. "Primitive" visions are here gently retired, Gober's sink/tombstones standing ready for the interment.

But amid all the cozy domesticity (skewed though it may be), there lurked one anomalous item: a fake piece of plywood (it is actually handmade from laminations of fir veneer and pressed wood), leaning like a delinquent against one wall. Presumably meant as an ambitious joke—on craftsmanship's ambivalent status in contemporary sculpture, on notions of originality and authenticity, on the relationship of natural resources to both consumer goods and fine art—it seemed a bit sophomoric. In the context of less carefully loaded work, its unwieldy freight might not have seemed so out of place.

—Nancy Princenthal

William Tucker at David McKee

The sculptures William Tucker made in the '60s and '70s were in step with his published reflections about modern sculpture; reserved, they sometimes appeared more analytic than visual. Tucker trained with Anthony Caro and was committed to an open, Constructivist-derived sculpture. From the mid-'70s on, his works typically were large, freestanding, linear constructions in metal or wood, reminiscent sometimes of rough picture frames or oversized fragments of agricultural implements. He found surprising ways to connect physically discrete parts into strong wholes. The works occupied a shallow space but activated a much greater depth.

In 1981, five years after his departure from England to North America, Tucker broke from his own history with five small, smoothed-out ovoids made of hydrostone. Since then he has worked mostly in plaster, which is then cast in bronze; the pieces have become ever larger and lumpier.

The three large bronzes Tucker crowded into David McKee's gallery this September had a disquieting intensity. All from 1985, they are titled *Gaia*, *Ouranos* and *Tethys*, after the earliest figures of Greek mythology, ancestors of the Olympian gods. Most striking is their scale. Though not much taller than the viewer and not physically threatening, the sculptures are so bulky that they looked monumental in the room. They resisted close approach, unexpectedly protruding at top or bottom. Like his earlier constructivist works, they fostered a sort of perceptual disequilibrium: when walking around them, one would step or lean back involuntarily. The forms felt like they could shift, that their interiors were gelatinous rather than rigid. All three met the floor abruptly, as though sawn off from a great whole, and each bulged out slightly above the cut, stressing the burden of gravity. Uncharacteristically for modeled sculptures, their surfaces bear no marks of hand or tool. The dark-patinated bronze appears distant, with the soft focus of eroded rock or earth.

The tallest of the three works, *Gaia*, rises in a roughly four-sided shaft; one side, call it the front, bears a navel-like indentation. The back swells out into two rounded protuberances at the top. The unarticulated front reads as a large torso, rather passive and self-contained, while the back conjures up the more aggressive images of a giant fist, a club, or a head of a bone. Seen from a distance, *Gaia*'s scale keeps changing, as image succeeds image; but regarded up close, the images vanish, leaving the amorphous swelling of an uninflected surface. One remained uncomfortably caught between the clear physical authority of 800 pounds of looming metal and the elusiveness of the figure-related images.

Tucker takes a substantial risk in returning to the now marginal tradition of the heroic modeler wrenching form and meaning out of inchoate matter, especially since he eschews the visual pleasures expected in carved or modeled works. Within that tradition, his recent sculptures are highly successful, existing both as blank matter to be encountered and as subject to be revealed.

—Wade Saunders and Anne Rochette

Steven Singer at Bernice Steinbaum

Steven Singer's sculptural formats are deceptively simple. In *Paint Box at Anchorage Place* (a spot near the Manhattan Bridge), Singer has oxyacetylene-torched pieces of scrap metal into an easel-with-painting ensemble. A modest enough conceit, yet there's more to it: if we're to go by the incisings made by torching and sculpting of the "canvas"—a jaggedly rectangular slab of steel (found, incidentally, near the Manhattan Bridge)—we see before us a city in a state of rabid decay, with buildings piled harrowingly against and upon one another in rusty, corrosive reds and siennas. There are passages of sky (where the steel has been cut

out, allowing one to see through the "painting"), yet, implicitly, there is no air to breathe. *Paint Box at Anchorage Place* is a commentary not only on itself, and on the making of art in general, but also on the conditions under which it was made: an urban civilization in decline, the no-middle-class, condo/ghetto state of city living projected (for New York, at least) by future-watchers. This is sculpture, then, about painting that represents a rude, chaotic architecture; the complexities embodied are not just creative, but social as well. Standing four-square on its tripod, *Paint Box* is a brutal, beautiful testimony to Singer's physical travail (tempering and welding hot steel is no picnic) and his weighty urban inspirations.

William Tucker: *Gaia*, 1985, bronze, 87 by 55 by 50 inches; at David McKee.

Steven Singer: *Paint Box at Anchorage Place*, 1986, scrap metal, 61 inches high; at Bernice Steinbaum.

Blight is once again the theme in *East River*, a long (132-inch) stretch of steel girder set on the floor. Cut into, bent and rusted (Singer finishes the steel with acids), the piece shows both man-made and natural ravagings. A loop of black steel on which the title appears in raised letters juts above the girder-base like a shark's fin, one end of it moored in a hunk of concrete that plainly reveals the imprints of a pair of shoes. The rest of the "victim" turns up disturbingly on the other side of the piece, in the form of a cast death's head embedded in the concrete. Has someone drowned and washed up against a pier? Been crushed by a falling girder? Or, gangland-style, been provided with cement overshoes? *East River* is both witty and frightening, with something of an *On the Waterfront* shadiness about it. Like *Paint Box*, it also signals a move away from the mythological subjects that Singer favored a few years back.

Singer's favorite American sculptor is David Smith, and some similarity can be seen in Singer's robust vision that derives much of its energy from the city, and in his love for the ugly, the ungainly and the "found." Yet, as was the case with some of the sculptures shown in his 1984 exhibition at Kornblee, there's also more than a touch of Rodin in evidence. For example, *Sleep*, a small steel cube-figure (9 by 7 by 12 inches) with head bowed, arms wrapped around knees and long hair flowing down from head to toe reminds one of the French master at his gentlest, his most feminine.

The coup de grace of Singer's recent show was provided by the standing *St. Sebastian*. The young saint is shown chained to a steel "tree," a girder into which his head, belly and legs have been movingly incised, with spikes—left in their original positions or, as with the feet, implanted—serving as arrows. The subject matter is Christian, but the martyrdom is universal. Singer is a young sculptor whose visual imagination and esthetic resourcefulness seem unbounded. —*Gerrit Henry*

Gerhard Merz at Barbara Gladstone

Travel to the South has long had a special resonance for the Germans. Whether this is a matter of escaping the Northern European climate or seeking the thrill of the exotic, or whether it springs from some darker fantasy—a need to complete oneself through a primitive Other—the persistence of this obsession is certified by a flood of cultural evidence both high and low, ranging from Goethe to Karl May, from Hölderlin to Leni Riefenstahl. It was also the subject of Gerhard Merz's recent installation "A Sojourn in Italy," an open-ended rumination on the place of Italy in the German consciousness.

The Gladstone space has enormously high ceilings, and Merz fully exploited its grandeur. Each wall was painted raspberry pink, leaving a border only a couple of feet wide at the ceiling and floor, as well as in the corners. This enveloping color served as a background "drone" tone against which all the other colors reacted. At the far end of the gallery, the wall facing the entrance was painted with a gigantic pink square, across which huge Roman numerals for 1987 were emblazoned. Beneath them, in smaller letters, was the phrase "E FA DI CLARITA L'AER TREMARE" ("the air trembles with clarity"), a quotation from Cavalcanti drawn from Pound's *Pisan Cantos*. Below that, like the lowest stratum in an archeological excavation, was a row of five skulls cast in bronze.

The show principally focused on the rather large rectangular objects on the side walls: two on one wall, three on the other. These horizontal constructions of wood and canvas were vaguely reminiscent in format of Donald Judd's segmented aluminum wall pieces. All were made of dark-stained wood with internal dividers of the same material. None was more than a yard high, deeper than 9½ inches or longer than about 12 feet. Between the internal dividers in these frames were rectangles of canvas painted in flat colors selected to evoke the ambience of Italian cities, the names of which were lettered in gold at the bottom of each frame. *Venezia*, for example, was divided into six equal areas of jet black. Against the hot pink wall, the pitch-dark color of this piece recalled the Venice of Longhi and Mann. The seven panels in *Roma*, separated by fasceslike posts, were of a deep imperial red. *Trieste* had three long horizontal sections; its bluish green color, like the sea in certain lights, absorbed and held the viewer's gaze.

Merz's use of color as a language of indirection, of implication, that provokes associations in the viewer with the feeling and history of a particular place owes much to Proust's distinction between the sensual paleness of the things one remembers intentionally versus the poignance of memories that break in without conscious invitation. Merz articulates this insight in a visual syntax derived from many sources, two of the most notable being Italian Fascist architecture (he is a trained architect) and the color rooms of Blinky Palermo—though Merz's allusiveness is much more literary than Palermo's.

What was initially impressive about Merz's installation was the absence of the kind of prepack