

Art in America

OCTOBER 2005

ROBERT BECHTLE

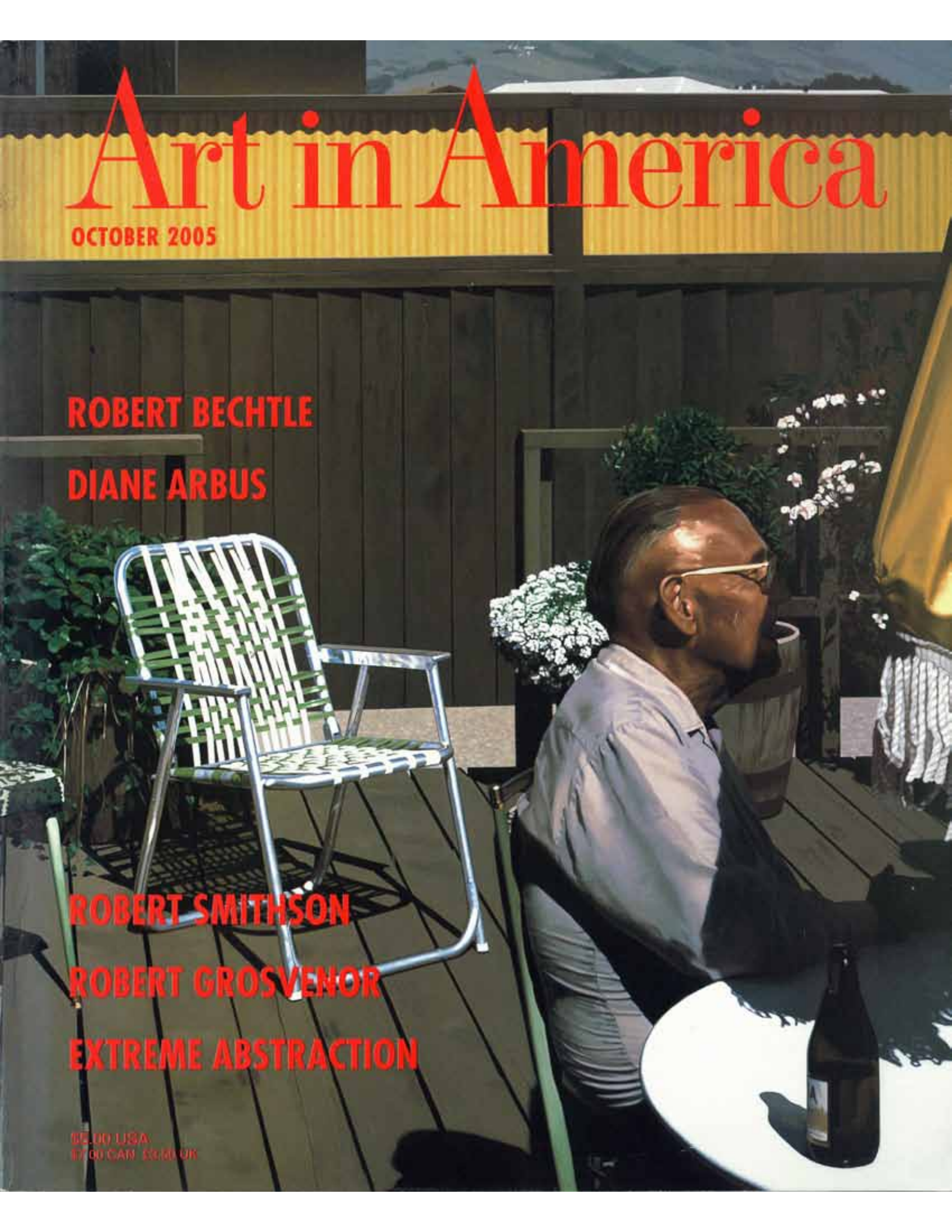
DIANE ARBUS

ROBERT SMITHSON

ROBERT GROSVENOR

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Art in America

October 2005

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Robert Grosvenor: *Untitled*, 1974, pine, 134 inches long. Photo Ellen Wilson. Museu Serralves, Porto. Photos this article, unless otherwise noted, courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.

Plain Seeing

Deliberate, willing to wait—he has completed just under a score of sculptures during the last 30 years—Robert Grosvenor produces perceptually exacting work that rewards unhurried looking. His largest-ever retrospective recently appeared at Portugal's Museu Serralves.

BY ANNE ROCHETTE AND WADE SAUNDERS

I don't paint with ideas of art in mind. I see something that excites me. It becomes my content.

—Willem de Kooning, 1959

I like things I've seen very fast and I don't remember what they are, but I remember the outline, the image. I'd like my sculptures to be remembered the same way.

—Robert Grosvenor, *Time*, Aug. 2, 1968

Robert Grosvenor's sculptures lodge in memory as few others do. They resist interpretation and remind us that exceptional art is rarely ingratiating. Grosvenor advances slowly: he has completed 18 sculptures and around 35 small drawings and collages since 1975. We can imagine

him keeping company with doubt and grappling with the words "what" and "how." His recalcitrant work matters much to many artists.

Grosvenor was born in 1937, grew up in Newport, R.I., and settled in New York City in 1960. Curators and critics associated his singular, ceiling-attached, cantilevered '60s sculptures with the works of the slightly older, more intellectual and programmatic Minimalists. But his non-modular pieces stood out for their drama and complex yet stripped-down geometry. Grosvenor conceived each work to fit precisely the height of its given exhibition space, and this specificity, regrettably, complicates showing them today. He made these sculptures himself, rather than handing them over to fabricators. His pieces' energy and

unexpectedness were alien to mainstream Minimalism, as was the cheerful impracticality of his realizing two floating works that were anchored to the ocean floor.

He spent years around salt water and sailboats. This exposure in part accounts for the nautical know-how of his early sculptures, which were sometimes built like boats or internally rigged with cables and turn-buckles. Horizontal expanse predominates in Grosvenor's works, and, since the early '70s, he has rarely made anything exceeding his height. In 1984, he moved out to semi-coastal East Patchogue, N.Y. It's a flat-vista, generic Long Island town, neither urban nor rural, neither prosperous nor poor. Grosvenor has taken the vernacular for a crucial part of our visual world and given it pride of place in his recent sculptures.

Spectacle, repetitive production and narcissism are now widespread in art, and we're encouraged to confound brand-name goods with artworks and take petit-maitres for geniuses. Grosvenor appears impervious to that art world. He is willing to do less, wait longer and start fresh. He works behind his house and constructs his infrequent pieces directly and roughly. He has a rare feel for ordinary materials, not just for what they can do—the workaday aptitude of all sculptors—but for what they can imply, and cause to be remembered.

Grosvenor engineers his slowly decided but quickly fabricated sculptures so that they can be taken apart and stored between exhibitions in the 40-foot-long marine shipping containers he has placed on his property. His working set-up suggests an explorer's base camp, both decently equipped and stripped down.

It can be useful to consider what an artist does when not making art, especially one uninterested in production for production's sake. Grosvenor is a large-scale tinkerer and collector of conveyances. In East Patchogue he stocks some odd automobiles that caught his eye, and he has constructed other vehicles from scratch. One resembles an oversize, three-wheeled, propeller-driven go-cart. While Grosvenor doesn't consider his machines to be art, they do share his work's direct craft and peculiarity; they resemble things we know, yet they remain resolutely "off." (Salvatore Scarpitta and Jason Rhoades have a like passion for the four-wheeled world, as did Francis Picabia; sailing matters to Charles Ray and was important to both the late David von Schlegel and Bas Jan Ader.)

Grosvenor has seemed to regard his artistic "career" with the enthusiasm of a gentleman offered an opportunity in trade, and he has left the promotion and explication of his work to others. He had his first and third solo exhibitions in 1965 and 1967 at Park Place, an important New York City cooperative gallery, of which Paula Cooper became director in fall 1965. Park Place closed in 1967, and Cooper opened her own space in 1968.

She showed a number of artists from Park Place, and gave Grosvenor a one-person exhibition in 1970; since then he has had 13 more solo shows with her, and a 14th is scheduled for 2006. In his yard, he has re-created—at full scale—the walls of the main space of Cooper's 534 West 21st Street gallery, so he can conceive and see his works in the context of their primary destination. Cooper has almost single-handedly kept his sculpture in view.

Untitled, 1970, aluminum, 375 inches long by 3 1/4 inches in diameter. Photo Rita Burmester, courtesy Museu Serralves, Porto.





Untitled, 1980-81, pine, paint, creosote, 67 by 133 by 74 inches. Photo Eeva-I.

Grosvenor's work was included in "Primary Structures" (1966) at the Jewish Museum, in the Whitney Museum's Sculpture Annual of 1968, and its 1973 Biennial. His work last appeared in a New York City museum in the Whitney's "200 Years of American Sculpture" (1976), though P.S.1 showed eight pieces in 1984. Four American museums own a sculpture by Grosvenor, but only his impressive outdoor piece commissioned by the Storm King Art Center is currently on display.

In Europe, his work was exhibited in Documenta 6 (1977), Documenta 8 (1987) and in the Lyon Biennale (2003). Grosvenor had a solo show at the Kunsthalle Bern (1992). Ulrich Loock, who curated the Bern exhibition, is now deputy director of the Museu Serralves in Porto, Portugal, where he recently showed 11 Grosvenor pieces spanning the period from 1970 to 2003. This was the artist's largest-ever exhibition, and the museum purchased two sculptures. Commitment like Loock's and Cooper's to Grosvenor is rare in the art world, where current renown is often all.

The erudite 160-page catalogue issued by the Serralves is his first substantial publication; we've relied on it in writing this piece. The artist chose the book's landscape format, which is reminiscent of old volumes recounting geographical explorations. All of Grosvenor's sculptures since 1980 are documented in this catalogue, as well as many important early works, and a number of his snapshots, collages and drawings are reproduced. The snapshots show the artist's wryly observant take on his world.

Over four decades, Grosvenor has written and said little publicly, and few of his pieces are titled. The catalogue includes excerpts from an interview with the artist conducted by Loock. Grosvenor's brief and gruff comments offer help for those seeking insight into his decision-making. A number of his remarks deal with how he "looked" his pieces into being and remind us that a demanding eye is central to his practice. The athwartness of Grosvenor's approach is salutary.

Located in a beautiful 1930s park, the Serralves's quietly elegant stone building was designed by the renowned Portuguese architect Alvaro Siza Vieira and features a seamless mix of natural and artificial lighting, as well as more square footage than one expects on seeing the building from the outside. (Sizable shows by Raoul de Keyser

and João Penalva were on view in the rest of the museum when we were there.) Grosvenor's recent sculptures summon a sense of place but are not site dependent, since each is relentlessly autonomous. The Serralves's generous and flowing rooms were a good setting for these large pieces, which are built to be displayed indoors and require circumambulation and slow attention. Photographs convey their singularity and pragmatic making, but don't capture their sly humor and evocativeness. Grosvenor planned the exhibition with Loock but did not travel to Porto; his son Jeremy supervised the installation.

Though the works were not installed chronologically in Porto, we've chosen to discuss them here in the order they were made. The earliest piece shown at the Serralves was an untitled work from 1970. The 375-inch-long sculpture is fabricated of 3/4-inch-diameter aluminum tubing and is suspended from the ceiling by two light wires. The sculpture was reconstructed for Porto, the first version, made of 4-inch-diameter sandblasted aluminum tubing, having disappeared some time ago. (Almost half of the no more than 40 sculptures that Grosvenor made between 1965 and 1975 no longer exist.)

The tube zips horizontally across space at eye-height and then jags slightly upward starting at its midpoint, with the two welded-together segments forming about a 170-degree angle. It was installed in the museum's anteroom with the end of its horizontal run butted against a tall window which overlooks some white birches.

Despite being only a long, thin cylinder slightly bent, the work has a complex visual presence. The sandblasted aluminum's silvery silhouette hovered in front of our eyes and was extended outward by its reflec-

Untitled, 1984-85, steel, plastic, tar, oil paint, 67 by 67 by 71 inches. Edward R. Broida Collection. Photo Andrew Moore.



tion. The sculpture created a horizon line where we expected none, only to gently bend it and test our sense of stability. The end of the piece placed against the window escaped our scrutiny, while the other end seemed to come at us with uncanny speed when we passed before it. This is Grosvenor's last work not to touch the ground, and it has a factual grace stemming both from the simplicity of its means—a barely bent pipe, two wires, a room with a view—and from the precision of its proportions and placement.

Between 1971 and 1975, Grosvenor made about a score of linear wood sculptures, which are his simplest and least volumetric pieces, the *degré zéro* of his practice. These discreet works were transitional, coming after his daunting '60s cantilevers and before his '80s-and-onwards visual complexity. They were as close as the artist ever came to working serially, since he used the same method to make many of them.

An untitled work from 1974, measuring 7 by 3½ by 134 inches, was shown at the Serralves. At first sight it appears to be an ordinary piece of pine lumber set on the floor. The wood has twisted slightly as it has dried. On close inspection one remarks a facing pair of vertical cracks about a foot in from either end and may deduce that the artist has fractured the beam in two places. (In the '60s, Grosvenor badly broke both his legs stepping into an elevator shaft.) The uninterest of the object lifts when we realize that twice breaking such a beam, without scarring its surfaces, would require more leverage than the present 1-foot ends could have provided. Thus Grosvenor must have started with a much longer beam, which he cracked well in from its original ends and then cut down to its present length. Here the artist offers us just enough evidence to let us reconstruct cause and, perhaps, intention.

Grosvenor realized four large assembled wood pieces between 1976 and 1981 using the heavy, 1-foot-square-cross-sectioned timbers once common in waterfront construction. The original effect of the thickly creosoted sculptures was partly olfactory; the smell of the shore is more than salt alone. Thinking back to Wooster Street 25 years ago, we reexperience R.K. Baking's sugary effusion. Industries and their odors have largely left our cities, and there is something elegiac in the now less-pungent presence of Grosvenor's massive, 5-ton work from 1980-81, measuring 67 by 133 by 74 inches. (In speaking with Loock, Grosvenor emphasized that the piece is not about weight, since by then he had acquired a forklift, which renders mass weightless, at least for the sculptor.)

The sculpture comprises 66 1-by-1-foot beams set on end and massed tightly together in a 6-by-11-foot grid. Grosvenor notes that the piece is less direct than it seems, since he constructed it around an earlier, smaller sculpture that he deemed inadequate and decided to raise up

Grosvenor's work is not harder to perceive than other sculpture; rather, it is harder to "see," and seeing of this kind takes time.

and surround with another layer of beams. The wood looks to have been salvaged. In Porto the piece was installed on a steel plate to protect the Serralves's floor. This introduced a slight break between the work and the floor, a gap which displeased the sculptor, who may care less about keeping the building pristine than do its caretakers.

The sculpture occupies space in an awkward manner, obstructing



Untitled, 1986-87, steel, plastic, concrete, 60 by 108 by 96 inches. Edward R. Broida Collection. Photo Andrew Moore.

our visual field. It's too small to be architecture, but too large for us to consider it an object. (Tony Smith spoke of his 6-foot cube, *Die* (1962), as being neither object nor monument.) Grosvenor used a chain saw to rough up the top face of the work, which is at a tall viewer's eye level. We strain to examine the piece's irregular topography and get sucked into a slow pondering—unexpected, given the sculpture's direct address.

Grosvenor increasingly has come to use time as a compositional element, like line, plane and color. His work is not harder to perceive than other sculpture; it is harder to "see," and seeing takes time. This 1980-81 piece is his last monolithic sculpture and his last to be of a single material, if one excludes its coatings and largely hidden connecting hardware. It closes out the decade when he chiefly worked with wooden beams.

The possibilities of surface have been central to Grosvenor's

Few important sculptors are as interested as Grosvenor in the sculptural skin. In his work, surface and volume are equally active.

endeavor, and few important sculptors are as interested as he in the sculptural skin. In his work, surface and volume are equally active and decided upon simultaneously. He continually explores the force of texture and color, either as provided by the materials themselves or with the addition of paint. And from the '80s onward, a pervasive but elusive drawing figures in many of his sculptures, where lines, profiles and articulations are crucial.

Loock included three of the five corrugated-steel-sheet pieces the artist made between 1984 and 1990. The metal had previously served other purposes, and Grosvenor used paint to heighten the color as well as to unify the surfaces. An untitled work from 1984-85, measuring 67 by 67 by 71 inches, is assembled of numerous pieces of steel bent and welded to create a closed, vessel-like form, whose four-cornered top tapers down to a roundish foot. The artist's piecing together

of the rippled metal recalls how a seamstress builds a garment, or a child a paper object.

The work is surmounted, or lidded, by two battered, $\frac{1}{16}$ -inch steel plates, linked together with smaller scraps. Grosvenor squeezed four flattened bundles of orange plastic fencing, partly smudged with black, in between these rusty steel planes. The strident orange of the plastic, set against the charred, wrinkled, reptilian skin of the corrugated metal, brings a palpable energy to the neither organic nor geometric form. The scale and the resistance of the materials to the artist's shaping induce a sense of violence, and the piece disconcerts, as though something familiar were stepping out of character.

A work from 1986-87, measuring 60 by 108 by 96 inches, has a more serene, even playful, presence. A 60-inch-high canopy stands over a chunk of a masonry wall now lying flat on a piece of bright blue plastic tarpaulin. This canopy is patched together of blackened corrugated steel, curved in a low arch against its structural inclination. An assembled, round-cornered, squarish form of corrugated green translucent plastic sits centered atop the wavy metal, its ridges turned 90 degrees to those below. The plastic might be a skylight, were its transparency not denied by the steel underneath. The canopy stands on four green, spindly, perforated-metal legs; a flame-cut disk of rusted

Untitled, 1987-88, steel, plastic, 96 by 246 by 96 inches. Photo Andrew Moore.





Untitled, 1991-92, fiberglass, cement blocks, sheet metal, paint and plastic, 50 by 216 by 216 inches. Museu Serralves, Porto. Photo Geoffrey Clements.

steel, placed on edge, is attached to the lower extremity of each, giving the airy metal structure visual ballast.

While little in Grosvenor's sculptures is hidden, rarely does anything quickly explain itself. According to the artist's remarks quoted in the catalogue, Grosvenor, having decided to knock down an old cinderblock wall in his East Patchogue yard, pushed it over with a forklift. Part of the wall came down intact, which surprised him. When he examined the fallen wall, he realized it had been made in a singular manner. Normally cinderblocks are laid with mortar joints, each course offset half a block-length from the course below. The builder of this wall must have had more concrete than time, so had stacked the blocks any which way and then poured concrete down into them. The mason's ad-hoc solution remains visible in the wall's exposed cross-section. The sculpture's frail canopy appears to protect the dense, recovered masonry and preserve Grosvenor's pleasure in discovering its unexpected strength. His piece is as pragmatic as the hurrying workman who inspired it.

The third corrugated-steel work, from 1987-88 and measuring 96 by 246 by 96 inches, stood in the Serralves's spacious lobby, where it blocked visual access to the entrance of the galleries. On first viewing, the work suggests a crude boxlike shelter, with a door opening and three windows cut into one of the long walls, but with roof, floor and one end wall missing. Its dimensions are close to those of a trailer or small shipping container. The sculpture is directly constructed from patched-together steel sheets and extrusions, the material marked by occasional rivets and holes. The sides are raised a foot off the floor by four stubby, roughly 5-by-5-inch recycled angle-iron legs, one per corner; we see the feet of viewers passing by. (In the catalogue Grosvenor describes armoring, with secondhand steel, a trailer he stored his

tools and materials in, and later gutting out the trailer and transforming the rough carapace into the present sculpture.)

Many details catch our eye and make us wonder. Why, at the open end, are the vertical edges of the long sides slightly slanted? Why is the end wall doubly thick and lower than the long sides it adjoins? And why is this shorter wall surmounted by a horizontal piece of corrugated fiberglass flocked green? The piece is in between—neither open nor closed, both sculptural and architectural, nomadic-seeming as well as static or settled. Even after we repeatedly walk around and through the work, our eyes have trouble catching and keeping its form. John Cage famously described the noises he heard in an anechoic chamber; in thwarting our ability to classify, Grosvenor's sculpture induces a kindred dissonance. The piece flickers in our mind like a ghost ship, a fleeting image with staying power, something the artist had wished for 20 years before.

The Long Island Railroad links New York City to East Patchogue, and it is a short drive from the station to Grosvenor's house. Along that stretch of two-lane, one encounters a remarkable range of topiary and ornamental eccentricity. Over the past 20 years, the artist has increasingly brought vernacular architecture and decoration into his sculptures. On occasion he keeps his source's form but makes it in a different material, once rendering a metal canopy in Plexiglas. Or he reconstructs larger "finds" as simulacra, re-creating a flagstone-paved entrance on two large, low wooden dollies in a 1996 piece. More recently, he appropriates things as he first encountered them—ornamental glass balls, in one instance.

In his later sculptures he juxtaposes three or more elements of differing natures and divergent qualities. Grosvenor proceeds as an

In his later sculptures, Grosvenor juxtaposes three or more elements of divergent qualities, so that he starts from, and ends with, heterogeneity.



*Untitled, 1997, stone, concrete, steel, glass, 53 by 370 by 100 inches.
Photo Adam Reich.*

optical, poetically inclined chemist, combining his visual and emotional agents in differing manners and proportions until he gets a complex reaction he sees as worthwhile, however obscure its mechanism. Although there are echoes of early modernism in his method, Grosvenor's three-dimensional mix of collage, montage and association is neither literary, in a Surrealist way, nor formal, in a Constructivist manner. He starts from, and ends with, heterogeneity.

Grosvenor carries over aspects of his sculpture-making into his infrequent works on paper, which largely move in step with his volumetric pieces. In his spare collages, he uses bits of his photos to stand for snippets of reality or lifts illustrations relating to habitat from 1950s magazines. He evokes concrete yet ambiguous places. We sense him probing what he has seen, though the logic of his juxtapositions isn't readily accessible.

His small-scale drawings of the past 15 years appear to be as much discovered as developed. Grosvenor values spontaneous marks and impromptu gestures, once cutting out and framing a section of drywall on which he had penciled explanatory diagrams. Some works are like hasty visual notes for or from pieces-in-progress, and in others the slight lines feel ready to float off the paper's surface.

Everything in his sculptures and works on paper has been noticed and made intentional. His pieces transmit a sense of immediacy, of sharp decisions conjointly taken by eye and hand. Yet you have to look long at Grosvenor's works, look hard, take in

the specificity of their materials and relations, allow their allusions to come through, and let them go. Then look again, allowing what's before you to be ever more manifest.

At the Serralves, Loock showed five of the six sculptures Grosvenor has completed since 1992; all five belong to the artist. A work from

1991-92 measuring 50 by 216 by 216 inches and one of comparable size from 1996 shared a large room, though either could have commanded the space alone. Stephen Westfall wrote discerningly about the 1996 piece in these pages, and we refer the reader to his discussion [*A.i.A.*, Sept. '96]. In the Serralves catalogue, Grosvenor describes the genesis of the 1991-92 piece:

I had painted a steel tube which was standing upright. Then I made the wall and placed the tube on top of it. When I turned my back it fell off the wall. I caught just a glimpse of it falling. So I fixed the tube to the wall in this transitory position. I then wanted a barrier around the wall to protect it. This barrier became the fiberglass circle.

Grosvenor flatly lists a succession of actions of which he is initiator and observer, and enumerates the sculpture's components. Yet he does not account for the striking dynamic among the big tube,

short wall and large ring, and leaves out the work's exhilarating blend of formality and matter-of-factness.

The cinderblock wall, five blocks high by six wide, stands smack in the center of the 18-foot-diameter fiberglass circle; the roughly 8-foot-long-by-1-foot-diameter steel tube hangs off the side of the wall

Untitled, 1999, fossil rock, sheet metal, plastic, acrylic enamel paint, 34 1/4 by 382 by 342 inches overall.





Albatrun, 2002, aluminum, wood, paint, steel; element on left with base: 85 inches high; element on right: 100% by 63 by 15% inches. Photo Tom Powell.

on two bent lengths of rebar, its bottom just below the wall's top. The ring's low height and shiny blackness suggest an experimental apparatus, but also evoke old-style fireplace fenders or circular railings in museums. Such barriers sometimes protect us and other times protect what they enclose. Here the ring implies danger and keeps us from examining the tube and wall close up. And it gives a visual spin to the sculpture, as if the space surrounding the ever-starting-to-fall pipe on its stolid wall was turning like a vortex.

Line, plane and circle are among the beginning letters of the sculptural alphabet. Grosvenor slows down their formal reading by presenting them as semi-recognizable things. And he introduces other complications. The roughly made cylinder was painted white but not immediately used, so rust started spotting its surface. On this motley background, the artist painted a pattern of thick black lines suggesting the outlines of many small adjoining stones. He enclosed about 70 percent of the tube in shrink-wrap plastic. Our

perception of that section of the pipe is blurred and delayed. For Grosvenor, less has long been more, but his details incarnate a funkier god than *lieber meister* Mies's.

While Grosvenor's dramatically cantilevered sculptures disturbed space in an almost physical manner, like a speeding boat's wake, his recent pieces activate space allusively and emotionally. We get caught in loose narratives led on by the works' strange familiarity. Their mix of seduction and refusal, of expressivity and muteness, partly accounts for their power. The sculptures remain resilient under our gaze, forcing us to favor our kinesthetic perceptions over our language-based understandings.

A sprawling work from 1997 measures 53 by 370 by 100 inches. Two nearly identical low walls are butted end-to-end to form a very open angle, as though mirroring each other. They are based on stone walls that Grosvenor photographed in Aruba, and their tops are curved

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Grosvenor

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lengthwise, lower at the centers than at the ends. These roughly 2-foot-thick-by-16-foot-long elements are made of flagstones laid with mortar over a hollow structure and are images of walls, not actual walls in their own right. If walls generally enclose and exclude, these are too low to partition space, but present enough to subtly differentiate it, creating a within and a without where, nevertheless, no enclosure exists.

On one wall, Grosvenor placed two mirrored 10-inch-diameter glass spheres, one blue and one green, in shallow depressions about 4 feet apart and roughly centered length-and-width-wise. On the other wall he laid a linear silver-painted welded-steel structure. He made this cryptic component from an approximately 9-foot-long piece of tubing to whose ends he welded, in a somewhat symmetrical manner, slightly smaller tubes in arrangements suggestive of abstracted root and branch systems of trees, TV antennae or hat racks. The volumetric ends lift up the central tube, so it floats above the slumping wall like an improbable horizon.

The piece is an unsettling combination of pairings—two sections of wall, two balls, two branching forms spliced together. And the glass spheres double the doubling, since each reflects the other as well as the entirety of the sculpture. The work likewise seems to double and quadruple its time frame. The glass balls are contemporary, but evocative of 18th-century witch's balls, cannonballs or decorations sometimes found in gardens; the walls, and their Aruba original, were constructed to appear to have sagged, but very old stone walls do sometimes sag; TV antennae generally have given way to satellite dishes or (unseen) cable. There is an element of nostalgia at work here, but also a willingness on the artist's part to give a chance to what he has seen and remembered. On a grassy lawn we might consider the ensemble to be an amusing folly; in a pristine gallery it's far-fetched and compelling.

At the Serralves, this piece shared a large room with a work from 1999. Both sculptures stand out within Grosvenor's production for their whiffs of exoticism. The 1999 work is frontal and low to the ground, with axial symmetry and a favored mode of access between two 34-inch-high piles of white coral rocks. (Grosvenor began frequenting the Florida Keys in the late '90s.) In a landscape we would take them for cairns, stone piles indicating a path, or a place of local religious or historical importance. The lower front part of each pile is covered with a second layer of rocks soaked in a blood-red paint. This disquieting shield appears to protect the inner white coral rocks from the oncoming visitor.

About 25 feet away, an irregularly shaped, thin platform of brightly painted metal hovers 6 inches above the floor. The 176-by-89-inch expanse supports two large objects resembling long-handled maracas, which are laid crossed like pirate-flag bones. These latter were each made by bolting together the narrow flanges of two 2-foot fiberglass hemispheres, then placing them at the end of 6-foot-long metal tubes and spray-painting them silver.

With effort one may discern that the platform's outline reproduces a Chinese ideogram, its warm red moving through orange to a glowing yellow at its center, as Chinese characters are sometimes printed in newspapers. We can imagine Grosvenor being interested by what happens when a common kind of sign, which we are used to seeing casually and vertically, is enlarged and displayed horizontally. Red and yellow are the colors of authority in China, used both by the emperors and the Communist Party, and are standard signifiers for explosions and energy bursts in comic books.

The sculpture creates a sense of place, with narratives ended or about to begin. The two cairns give the work a ceremonial entry: we could almost be approaching a warrior's grave, marked by their laid-out weapons. Yet the platform and its two giant candy pops are as loony as serious, and the piece is also just two small rock piles, a garishly ungraceful cutout and some weird contraptions. Meanings in Grosvenor's sculptures are at once evanescent and persistent, and more syntactically complex than those of today's hit-maker artists. Each of his recent works establishes its own grammar.

Albatrun (2002), Grosvenor's latest sculpture to date, is derived from fleeting images of other sculptures: Grosvenor has cited as sources a badly printed black-and-white guidebook photograph of a public sculpture in a small Swiss town and an exhibition catalogue's cover illustration, perhaps showing an artwork and a viewer. The evocative title harks back to his earliest pieces like *Niaruna* (1965), *Pylunamid* (1965) and *Transoxiana* (1965), titles suggestive of exotic places or foreign words that one might come across in old copies of *National Geographic*.

Empty space plays a crucial role in the piece, where two completely unrelated vertical elements stand apart from each other, yet are inseparable. The Swiss-derived constituent is a 76-inch-tall, 6-inch-thick, flat, roughly circular shape placed at the center of a crudely made 16-by-8-by- $\frac{3}{4}$ -foot plywood platform painted gloss white; the object's two faces are aligned with the platform's long sides. Fabricated of welded aluminum and painted a dense yellowish beige, the form is pierced near its center by two round, side-by-side holes. At first glance it appears to be symmetrical left to right and top to bottom, but it's not.

Seen frontally, the shape vaguely evokes a cartoonish face. (But it could be taken for a simplified image of a fruit or an enlarged mechanical part.) It claims the platform for its territory; much like a Brancusi, what presents and what is presented becomes one. The sculpture's second vertical element stands on the floor about 16 feet diagonally off one of the platform's corners. This 100 $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch-tall, brown-lacquered, linear construction is made of 11 sections of square steel tubing welded up into four articulated lines. It could almost be a stick figure or two of them tangoing together.

The sculpture creates a sense of expectation, but no component is more, or less, charged than the others, and none betrays tension. Our gaze keeps seeking a response from the two eyelike voids in the beige form, and we try to turn the four lines into something we can be certain of. Emptiness is active within each of the two units, and we become conscious of the gap between them. Though they have been placed at different distances apart in successive installations, the separated elements remain locked across space in a slow dance of intimacy and estrangement. Like Wallace Stevens's jar in Tennessee, *Albatrun's* odd couple takes dominion everywhere. Should we consider this interdependent solitude as local to the piece? Should we imagine it to refer to art or to life in general? Our description tumbles into anthropomorphism, and still this blank and unyielding work refuses our greed for meaning.

Robert Grosvenor thinks through the act of seeing and making. We artists revere the singularity of his eye, his obdurate touch, his readiness to rebegin. His sculptures resemble no others and are worth their slow trouble. □

The survey "Robert Grosvenor" appeared at the Museu Serralves in Porto, Portugal [Feb. 4-Apr. 17, 2005]. Grosvenor had a solo exhibition at Galerie Max Hetzler in Berlin [July 2-Aug. 6, 2005]. He will show at Paula Cooper Gallery in the 2005-06 season, and his work will be included in SITE Santa Fe in 2006.

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