

The Erotics of Amputation

ROBERT GOBER

BY NICK YU



ROBERT GOBER, *Untitled Leg*, 1989–90, beeswax, cotton, wood, leather, human hair, 29×20×51 cm. Courtesy the artist and Matthew Marks Gallery, New York.



ROBERT GOBER, *Newspaper*, 1992, offset lithographs with twine, 15 × 42.5 × 33.6 cm. Courtesy the artist and Matthew Marks Gallery.

Robert Gober was born in a small town in Connecticut in 1954 and is known for his wry, terse, whimsical sculptural lexicon and his depiction of domestic, quotidian objects, such as legs, babies' cribs, doors, wallpaper, newspapers, and kitchen sinks. He came to prominence in the 1980s and 1990s with works that were widely associated with the postminimalist movement in New York, many of which draw favorable comparisons to Marcel Duchamp's readymades, as well as the assemblages of the Surrealists. Over the decades Gober has adapted and recreated his works for solo exhibitions and permanent installations at seminal institutions and events such as the Venice Biennale and Whitney Biennial, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Schaulager in Basel, and the Serpentine Gallery in London.

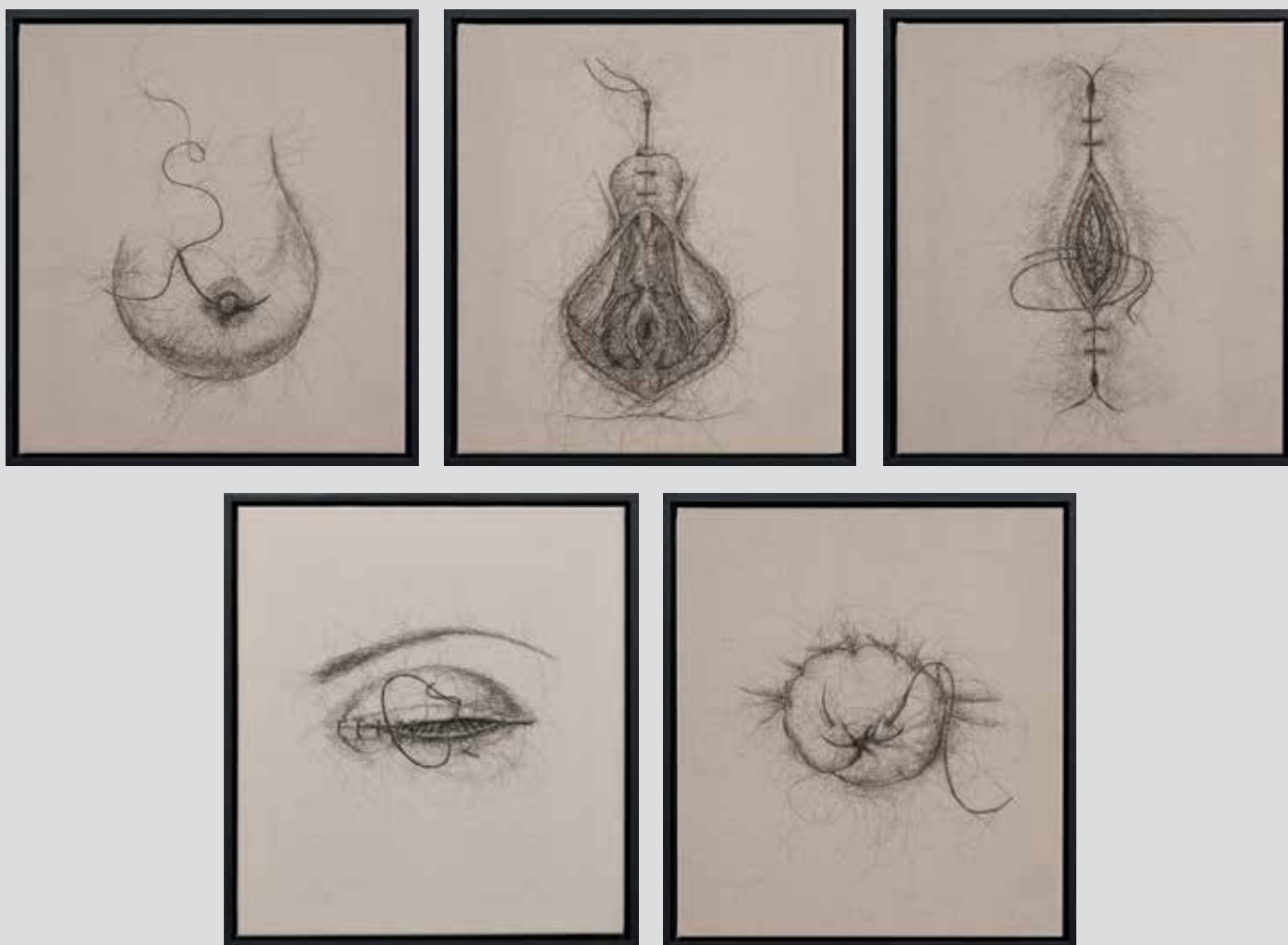
Despite his celebrated status in the West (albeit one shrouded in a certain mystique), Gober has remained largely absent in Asia, and an overview of his career which includes hundreds of exhibitions from as early as 1979 reveals, somewhat tellingly, participation in only two Asian group exhibitions over that same period, namely, "Mirrorical Returns: Marcel Duchamp and 20th Century Art" at the National Museum of Art, Osaka, in 2004 (which later traveled to Yokohama Museum), and "De-Genderism" in Tokyo's Setagaya Art Museum, curated by Yuko Hasegawa, in 1997. This regional exposure was a brief spark amid the neoliberal fervor of globalization around the turn of the millennium when Asian institutions contemplated their inheritance of the ongoing legacy of modernism vis-à-vis Duchamp, while continuing to deconstruct and emphatically resist given ideological and at times colonial structures concerning gender and body.

How might one conceptualize Gober's legacy today, when the cinder of our feverish dreams of progress have once again decayed into a dark teleology of disembodiment, epidemic, war, genocide, violence, and death? Are there trodden pathways or artifacts that can augur toward a future that holds both grief and humor, shame and dignity, submission and hegemony, horror and love, profanity and reverence, mania and serenity?

Drawing on Gober's body-works made in the biopolitical context of the AIDS epidemic, we might find a redemptive reading of the violence of amputation and severance, where "found" body parts acquire subjectivities of their own, becoming free, disobedient, and sovereign. And through a close analysis of selected works from Gober's oeuvre on bodies and their conversation with three other artists of Chinese heritage—Angela Su, Jes Fan, Martin Wong—one can begin to examine the radical alienation and perversion of body (parts), as well as their ensuing erotic and political agency in the US, Asia, and beyond.

Not only was Gober active in supporting the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), many of his works, especially during the apex of this health crisis, have been explicitly political, creating radical imagery such as the sprawling wallpaper *Hanging Man/Sleeping Man* (1989) which juxtaposes patterns of a sleeping white man and a lynched Black man hanging from the tree. Another example is his piece *Newspaper* (1992), a stack of carefully photolithographed and recreated newspapers bearing headlines from 1992, such as "Vatican Condoned Discrimination Against Homosexuals," juxtaposed with a bridal advertisement depicting the artist in a bridal gown.

In works that do not at first glance appear overtly political, like his sculptures of domestic objects, Gober shows an awareness of representation and alienation in his whimsical, sometimes eerie, refabrication or appropriation of ready-mades. Gober fervently believes that from childhood bedrooms to Sunday churchyard sales our daily lives are politicized, including the self. So much so that he once told an anecdote that offers a clue as to the inspiration behind his famous *Untitled Leg* (1989–90) sculpture: "I got the idea while flying in a small plane in Europe. I had been in Bern and gone to see the Natural History Museum and it struck me as odd that contemporary people were omitted from the dioramas. Then, I'm on a small tightly packed commuter plane and across the aisle from me is this handsome business man with his legs crossed. His sock didn't meet his pants on his crossed leg and I was transfixed by this hairy bit of leg. It seemed so vulnerable and exposed but an odd moment to make a sculpture of."



ANGELA SU, *Sewing together my split mind (series)*, 2020–21, hair embroidered on fabric, 56 × 51 × 4.5 cm. Courtesy the artist and Blindspot Gallery, Hong Kong.



JES FAN, *Forniphilia I & II*, 2018, aqua resin, fiberglass, pigment, plywood, and artificial fur, 38 × 35 × 20 cm. Courtesy Empty Gallery, Hong Kong.

In this tantalizing moment, the eroticization of daily life becomes its eventual transfiguration and representation back into the schema of the museum space. It is poignant to point out that exactly *whose* body gets to be eroticized and politicized cannot escape the strictures of race and class. This lack of intersectionality can be seen in the physical attributes of the “handsome businessman” whose exposed leg attracted the artist’s gaze, as he is presumably Caucasian and socioeconomically elite, like the artist himself.

Untitled Leg—a beeswax cast of Gober’s own leg dressed in cuffed cotton trousers, socks, and leather shoes—is usually exhibited on the ground, jutting out of the wall midcalf as if discarded and forgotten there. The subject’s pale-yellow skin tone lacks the luster of alabaster or the sheen of marble, thus refusing to be retrofitted into the classical European tradition. Its monotone also resists the mimicry of human flesh, resulting in a jaundice-like blob that signifies a human leg in form but without its vitality. In fact, the skin looks sickly and diseased, if not already deceased and embalmed. Not to be outdone by the bare-legged man on the plane, Gober went further back, into his childhood, to assess where the seed of this work may have originated from, claiming that his mother “used to entertain me as a child with tales from the operating room where she worked as a nurse before her children were born. Her very first operation was the amputation of a leg. The doctor turned and handed it to her and she didn’t know what to do.”

As a viewer, one’s gaze is drawn irrevocably to the scrappy hair grafted onto the leg’s surface. Like an unruly hair on a clean plate, they appear intrusive and unwelcome, if not repulsive. In fact, Gober does not try to hide his intention, or the process of grafting; the hairs are clearly imbedded into the surface. And far from growing out of native follicles, they announce their foreignness and make all sense of discomfort apparent.

These feral hairs bring to mind the hair embroidery of Angela Su, a Hong Kong-based artist who recently represented the city in the 59th Venice Biennale. “Those who like bodies like Gober’s works,” Su once remarked. “His horror is deep and both intellectual and visceral . . . It creates an ingrained disturbance in the audience while fascinating them. For example, the hair he uses are not the healthy and beautiful hairs on your head. They are like pubic hair. They are the hair of those who are ill.”

In Su’s series *Sewing together my split mind* (2020–21), the artist’s stitches of unwieldy hair depict body modification and reference its history in radical protests—the lip sewing of detained asylum seekers in Manus Island (2014); artist and activist David Wojnarowicz decrying the government’s silence and inaction during the AIDS epidemic (1989); the performance of New York underground artist Kembra Pfahler sewing her outer labia shut. “Unlike Gober, Wojnarowicz and Pfahler focus much more on pain,” Su said. In her sewing practice, the artist perhaps imagines herself in the place of Asian American artist Lisa Resurrection, who in a 1992 documentary of Pfahler’s performance, *Sewing Circle*, was tasked with being her seamstress. There, the sewing shut of genitalia becomes the ultimate protest against bodies being considered desiring- and consuming-machines.

In the context of body politics, it is no surprise that viewers often humanize Gober’s objects, as when the late art critic Peter Schjeldahl described Gober’s kitchen sinks as “anthropomorphic, with holes (where taps would be) like empty eyes,” and aptly relates its “cold air of clinical hygiene” to the darkest period of the AIDS epidemic when the work appeared. Considering the inverse of anthropomorphism, might we find an analogue to Gober in New York-based sculptor Jes Fan’s objects of forniphilia: the love of becoming furniture and deriving pleasure from being inanimate?

In his first solo exhibition in Hong Kong, “Mother is a Woman,” Fan presented *Forniphilia I & II* (2018), two small sculptures



made of pigmented aqua resin and fiberglass, cast from the taut nipples, chests, and armpits of transmasculine bodybuilder Law Siufung. The chest plates, which have been sporadically dyed, appear like alien skin in hypopigmentation and are camouflaged within a wall-mounted pedestal wrapped in brown artificial fur. Like Meret Oppenheim's teacup, the *Forniphilia* sculptures have a wondrous tactile gravitas that seduces the hand. "Touch it, it's so soft and fluffy," Fan once pleaded. Fan has gone on to produce expansive structures that resemble full-grown biomorphic furniture in a resplendent alien garden. This proto-furniture speaks to an earnest and ancient Ovidian desire to metamorphose, transform, and become fluid against categories of being. After all, if Fan's forniphilic fantasy is to become a sofa, what is stopping us from becoming, say, a bathtub?

An early work of Gober's also embodies a yearning for the body to shapeshift. *Slides of a Changing Painting* (1982-83) is an 89-frame moving image documenting a board that Gober painted over again and again for approximately one year. Leitmotifs that eventually become Gober's sculptural lexicon—human chest, body hair, steel pipes, tree trunks, drains, flowing water—return and haunt with an obsessive persistence. In this incredible feat of object permanence performed and borne by the body, we see a furious struggle to change and mutate, despite a metaphorical cage that holds its shape.

A primal scene Gober returns to again and again is that of the prison window, and *Untitled*, a site-specific installation first shown at Dia Center for the Arts in 1992, led viewers into an immersive room. The walls were camouflaged with woodland scenery, as lowly hung kitchen sinks sprouted continuous streams of water, while stacks of newspaper and a box of rat poison lay on the ground. Up above, prison windows with metal bars showed a blue sky beyond. Entering the space, viewers were arrested by its immediate beauty, leading them to suppose that staying in the prison, even if for just a little while longer, may be preferable. Imprisonment thus becomes a choice.

Gober also mined the concept of self-imprisonment in a subsequent series of drawings, a medium he employs in his studio, away from the public sculptures. Drawing with graphite and colored pencil on found drawings, he suffused the original drawn subjects with his own motifs, seamlessly combining what he received with what he gives. In *Untitled* (2020), two hands cross in the shape of a flying dove, while a tree trunk emerges out of the arcs of the hands. A prison window appears on the back of the hand, so that if we flip the hands around the picture depicts the perspective from the other side, looking back into the prison.

ROBERT GOBER, *Slides of a Changing Painting*, 1982-83, 3 parts: 1) 23 slides; 2) 42 slides; 3) 24 slides, 15 min, detail 4 of 42. Courtesy the artist and Matthew Marks Gallery.



ROBERT GOBER, *Untitled*, 1992, mixed media, 1300 × 923 × 450 cm. Courtesy the artist and Matthew Marks Gallery.

Similarly, the late Chinese-American painter Martin Wong created sinuous images of homoerotic life in prison, inspired by tales the artist heard from ex-inmates in his social circle. In his painting *Mintaka* (1990), Wong depicted body parts behind imposing steel bars—faceless torsos, throbbing buttocks, arching backs, and discombobulated limbs engaging in hypersensualized, rough gay sex that exists between fantasy and pornography, its orgiastic excess giving the illusion of liberation. This is the inverse of the pristine postminimalist installations of Gober, though both point to an unsolvable paradox between freedom and imprisonment, whether in daily life or within the institution.

While Wong died in 1999 due to an AIDS-related illness, his works frequently appear in exhibitions with a cohort who succumbed to, endured, or fought against the AIDS crisis, such as Wojnarowicz, as well as Gober. Such exhibitions have included a presentation titled “Afterlife: a constellation” (2014) by artist Julie Ault in the section curated by Stuart Comer for the

Whitney Biennial, and “Love Letter from the War Front,” (a quote from Félix González-Torres) a section at the Whitney’s inaugural exhibition “America is Hard to See” in the Meatpacking District. For those who did not live through the crisis, their remembrance brings to fore the loss and longing that return in the present through other predicaments and catastrophes.

One could theorize that we are attracted to body horror because we need “practice,” through repeated exposure, to face even graver, more sinister horrors in our daily life. In the case of experiencing Gober’s works, when regarding our alienated and amputated body we come to the realization that our body is not quite our own, that Others are living through *and* with us. It is via this truism, this paradoxical and perverse embrace of xenophilia and xenophobia, that a profound potential emerges, wherein we are capable of loving those that are deemed abject, dejected, and discarded. For Gober, the museum is a haunted house, where the detritus of human bodies is recycled into love stories.

Robert Gober is an artist whose work has been exhibited since the early 1980s, most notably in one person exhibitions at the Dia Center for the Arts, New York; The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; Schaulager, Basel; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Fondazione Prada, Milan; and Glenstone, Potomac. He represented the United States at the Venice Biennale in 2001. His curatorial projects have been shown at The Menil Collection, Houston; The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston; Matthew Marks Gallery, New York; Cable Gallery, New York; Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. He lives and works in New York and Maine.

Nick Yu is a curator and writer based in London. He curates and organizes public programs at Asymmetry Art Foundation.