

Against the Narrative – An Interview With Artist Robert Lobe

22 June 2018 by [Erik La Prade](#)

The artist [Robert Lobe](#) recently had a one-person exhibition at the West Broadway Gallery, located in Manhattan's Soho district. The show was on view from January 12 to April 15, 2018, and during this time Mr. Lobe was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship grant. The sculptures exhibited at the West Broadway Gallery were in part the culmination of the artist's forty-plus year career of exhibiting. Since 1974, Lobe (*pictured above*) has exhibited his sculpture in galleries such as the Zabriskie Gallery, the Willard Gallery, Blum Helman Gallery, and P.S. 1, among others.

I visited the West Broadway Gallery in April and spoke with the artist, starting with his participation in his first group exhibition.

ELP: Your exhibition history starts with the Whitney Museum's groundbreaking exhibition *Anti-illusion: Procedures/Materials* exhibition in 1969. [1] You exhibited abstract works in that show. At what point in your career did you start creating realist work?

Lobe: Your distinction between abstract and realist art is a value judgement. For example, the critic Rosalind Krauss wrote that Donald Judd and Robert Morris were as much pop artists as Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol, John Wesley were. [2] My point is, I didn't think of minimalism as abstract. I thought of the materials I was using as real rubber (rubber mats on the floor) and real twine in the same way I thought of Judd's boxes as real boxes. I thought each material had a different structural potential but not as materials that were trying to do something abstract. The compositions were the product of drawings on paper, indicated by hinges or pivoting elements describing a space. My early work was about movement—getting people to be able to change the composition, the design, within the parameters of what was possible.

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"wood, wire, sisal, rubber, springs" 1969

Lobe: A composition doesn't have to be abstract or realistic, a composition is a composition. That whole show at the Whitney Museum was basically all about organizing materials, and my works in that show were about audience participation: kinesthetic, which is an extension of happenings and dance. It is a tactile response to experience.

ELP: Did you feel you couldn't go any further in this direction and you needed to make a different move?

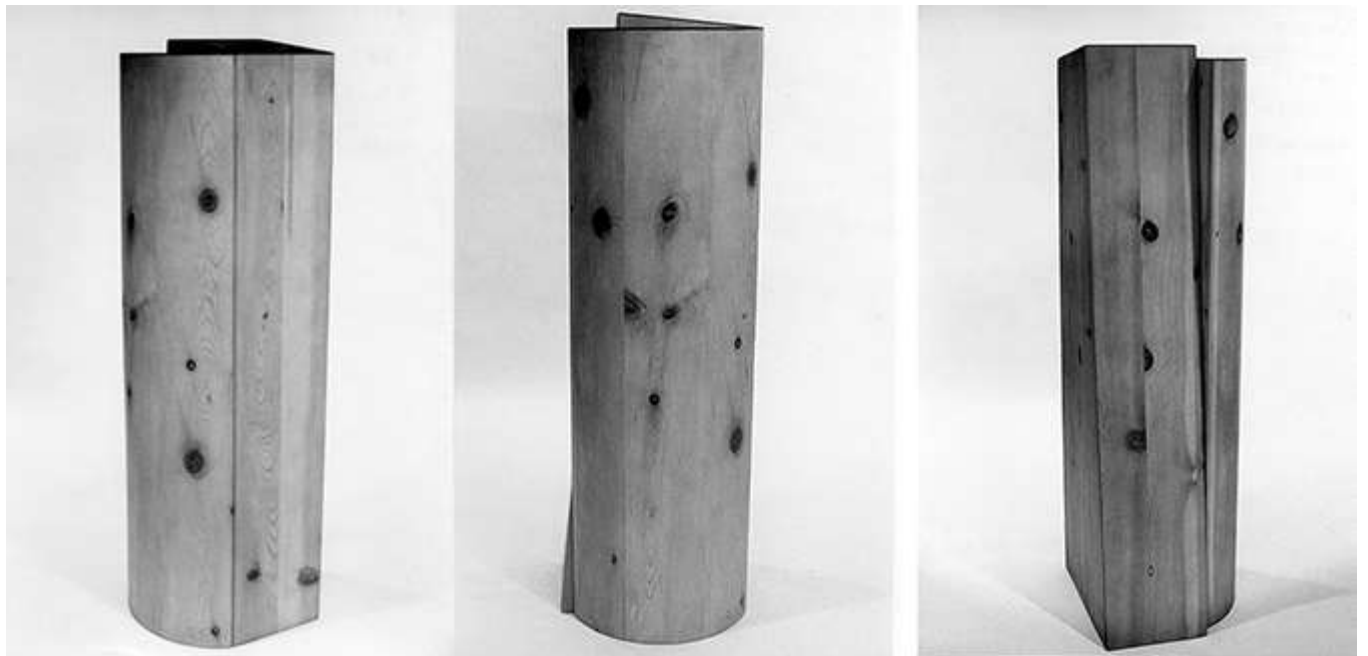
Lobe: It ran its course. What happened was I wanted to turn these pieces into volumes. I wanted to elevate them so they weren't on the floor. Extend them vertically. I got interested in them as being visually, logical contraptions. They continued to have movable parts and have a relationship to the mat of the floor, but they were no longer intended for people to alter or change.



Green Dog 1, 1970

ELP: Can you talk about how and why your work began to change?

Lobe: The reason was just pure logic; the logic of where my art took me. These rubber, rope and twine pieces became compressed vertically but had the same relationship to the mats on the ground. At some point, I was looking at David Smith's work, whose work had a big impact on me, but I didn't go out and copy him. His influence slowly penetrated my mind over years. Now, the vertical sculptures I did with rope and twine were replaced by the tactical composition of the wood. I created that experience at eye-level and painted it black (like the rubber mats) in contrast to the unpainted wood. They were now columns of wood with the end-grain exposed at the top of the piece. I showed them in a group show at the Bykert Gallery in 1972 or 1973.



Untitled, 1971, laminated wood, 66 x 20 x 21 inches (multiple views)

In hindsight, the work was real and not real at the same time. It is real because it is a facsimile. I could make the analogy of how hammering in the woods around a tree is like making a three-dimensional sculpture. At the time of the Anti-illusion show. Me, Neil Jenny and John Duff were not committed to that work. I was more influenced by Eva Hesse. She was in the Anti-illusion show too.

ELP: What was the next step for you?

Lobe: The next step with these wood sculptures was how the end grain became more and more important because the top wasn't necessarily the top anymore; it now shifted to the side or angled off. It was all about the direction of the grain.

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"Untitled", 1972, laminated yellow cypress

Lobe: I started carving the end grain and leaving a thickness to it. So, if you give enough space to the end grain like four or five inches, you have an area to carve another shape. At some point I asked myself, why are I carving all this up and spending all my time being a carver? I was organizing the grain in the wood sculpture to create a dialogue with shapes, but that became an exercise. I was beginning to be my own carpenter and losing my sense of the immediacy of the creative process. I'm giving the word "process" two different meanings. One day, I picked up a rock and thought, I can break this rock down, mentally, into shapes, without making a drawing.



"First Portrait of a Stone", 1975, laminated yellow cypress

Just recreating a natural form. I started to pick up rocks and reinterpret a rock. I did a couple of them. At the same time, I had a 1957 Aston Martin, I bought in 1972. It was sort of a wreck. It was a car that was hammered out of aluminum. It was Repoussé. [3] I thought, instead of making wood rocks, I'm just going to hammer aluminum around rocks. This was in 1976. I went down to an excavation site in lower Manhattan, where it had been dumped from the World Trade Center and then used as a landfill to start Battery Park City.



"Rosetta Stones", 1976, hammered aluminum (from excavation tailings of World Trade Center)

I would find rocks there and fashion aluminum pieces with them. Those pieces were shown in the second exhibition at P. S.1. in Fall 1976. [4] Soon afterwards, I was up in Rhode Island during the summer, and I found a boulder supported by a tree. I made a

piece from that and it was in the Exxon exhibition, and now it is in the Guggenheim Museum. [5]



"Tree Supporting Boulder", 1977

ELP: Looking at that work now, it seems to be a little ahead of the 1978 New Image show [6] and the trend that developed around that show. Did you sense a stylistic change within your generation was occurring when you began making these aluminum works in the mid-nineteen seventies?

Lobe: Yes. I was in sync with that style and there was no reason I could not have been in that show because I was dealing with imagery. But, that show didn't address natural imagery and it didn't address nature. I had one foot in the earthwork art of the late sixties, early seventies.

I wasn't in the *Earthworks* [7] exhibition in 1969, but my gravitation towards nature led me into dealing with how art related to nature, which at that time meant addressing how artists worked with nature. Which meant, earthwork art. So, by necessity I had to consider that history had already been stamped out by Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer, and Dennis Oppenheim. And other sculptors such as George Trakas.

I didn't study Oppenheim's work but I was impressed with Smithson. I was still showing my wood pieces in the summer of 1976. After I started working in aluminum, I made a large aluminum sculpture based on a boulder. By then, I stopped working in wood.

ELP: When you studied with Robert Morris at Hunter College in 1967-68, were you pulled into his influence by things he talked about?

Lobe: George Sugarman was also one of my teachers. They both came to my studio at 76 Jefferson Street, but I don't think it was so much about learning from either one of them. I think their encouragement was more important. Robert Morris was a confrontational person.

ELP: Was he challenging?

Lobe: In the sense that he didn't have a teacher's nurturing manner. He really wanted you to explain what you were doing from a critical point of view. It was almost like he didn't really care what it was you were doing.

ELP: Sounds like he was pushing you toward a theory about your work.

Lobe: Maybe...I strove not to join that narrative. I wanted my work to be something new. Something that hadn't been done before and I still feel that way. A new approach and a new idea with at least a scrap of originality. I don't know about digital and light

and mixed media. I don't have any criteria to judge that by. But I can say that today art is all over the place. A number of artists today just choose a strategy and then develop an idea within that strategy. But they don't develop their own strategy. I've got my own strategy. I count myself fortunate that I was able to experience the tail-end of modernism before it went down the drain. In my mind, modernism stopped with the artists of the picture generation. Cindy Sherman, for example. It was inevitable that would happen at some point because how far can you go with cubism and modernism.

At Hunter College I had a teaching fellowship which meant that I took attendance for classes when the teachers didn't show up. I never even saw the inside of a sculpture class there. For sure Brian O'Doherty's theory class was the most engaging along with some seminars with Barbara Rose and Kiniston McShine.

ELP: If we step backwards, do you see some of your work having a connection with Rodin's work?

Lobe: In a way. Rodin incorporates space in an interesting way. He scoped objects but he scoped the space between the objects too. If you have a woman sitting on a bench, there are gaps between the limbs. You perceive interior space in his work in a funny way.

ELP: Neil Jenny has said, "I make abstract work the natural way." But, is Neil saying naturalism is a form of abstraction?

Lobe: Compositionally, Neil is creating an image but in the way it is arranged the subtext is realism, arranged abstractly. He's arranging things in a way you haven't seen before and that's the abstract element. He's using nature as the subject but he's stylizing it his way. Abstracting nature.

ELP: We started talking about your work in the *Anti-illusion* exhibition and how it has evolved. In your recent show, I find it it moves between realism and abstraction, depending on one's angle of vision.

Lobe: Thank you. I think that the reception of work today that demonstrates skills or dexterity or seems accomplished is suspect. A lot of artists don't have skills, they have a strategy as I mentioned before. They find stuff off the street to make collages, or break things and glue them together, or print things out.

ELP: Or, point a camera.

Lobe: Yes. They do what I call, back-read into things and tell you it means something. Museums today are more about having events then showing the art. If you put certain galleries together today, their shows are equal to shows at the Whitney Museum.

ELP: When you were coming up in the late sixties and seventies, the early eighties, was there a hierarchy in and around Soho and the Bowery?

Lobe: I didn't go to Soho very often. 76 Jefferson was its own incubator of artists and we all looked at each other's work and debated our ideas, Neil, Eddie Shostak, Gary Stephans, and John Duff for the most part. Richard Marshall did "76 Jefferson," a show, at the Moma Library in 1976.

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John Duff and Neil Jenney at 76 Jefferson, sitting on Lobe's "Walk-On," a Lobe piece from 1968

ELP: You mentioned how “there were more artists on the Bowery” but Soho had a concentration of “younger artists.” It had, or has, a mystique.

Lobe: Don’t forget, the galleries Castelli, etc., were all still uptown. You’re talking early seventies. I’m talking late 60s. The Bowery had Roy Lichtenstein, Eve Hesse, Will Insley. The Bowery was loaded with artists. I did go to Max’s Kansas City but I really didn’t mix with that crowd. I was going out with Jo Baer and she had her own group of friends. So, I gravitated to that crowd. People like Sol Lewitt. Dan Graham. Richard Bellamy visited my studio. We would go to parties that I would not have normally been invited to. They were major parties and they were all on the Bowery. There were no two art worlds back then. This was at the time Clement Greenberg had his faction and the Minimalists had their faction.

ELP: But, you could still fit them all in the same room?

Lobe: Yes. You could still fit them all in the same room. Everyone came to the same parties.

ELP: Then, was the hierarchy of the art world at that time dependent on what group you were with?

Lobe: Not really.

ELP: What happened when you started moving toward your own scene?

Lobe: I had my first one-person show at the Virginia Zabriskie gallery in 1974. I started dating Gwen Thomas and that brought me downtown and into contact with another group. But the idea of fitting the art world into one room fell apart in the seventies as Soho got bigger. Once galleries like Castelli started opening up on West Broadway, it really changed.

ELP: Do you feel your recent show at the West Broadway Gallery was a turning point in the works you are known for? I mean, do you sense a stylistic change in your approach to sculpture?

Lobe: No. I felt the show was a high point in what I was doing but now that it is over, it has made me reach deeper into my roots.

ELP: Do you think your sculpture makes some kind of environmental “statement,” considering how nature is now heavily polluted by plastic debris and industrial fracking?

Lobe: My work has addressed nature in its various forms; myth, history, geology. And now more than ever, ecology and the destruction of nature.



“Natures Clock,” 2011, heat-treated hammered aluminum

ABOUT ERIK LA PRADE

Erik La Prade lives in New York. His interviews and articles have appeared in *Art In America*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *artcritical*, and others. His latest book is *NEGLECTED POWERS*. Last Word Press. 2017. Some of his poems currently appear in *J Journal*. He has a B.A. and M.A. from City College.

PHOTO CREDITS

All images courtesy of [Robert Lobe](#).

ENDNOTES

[1] *Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials*. Whitney Museum of American Art. May 19, 1969-July 6, 1969.

[2] Robert Lobe is referring to the book, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*. Rosalind E. Krauss. Viking Press, New York, 1977.

[3] “A metalworking technique in which a malleable metal is ornamented or shaped by hammering from the reverse side to create a design in low relief.”

[4] Institute for Art and Urban Resources. P.S. 1. Long Island City. New York. “A Month of Sundays.” September 19–October 10, 1976.

[5] Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, “Young American Artists, Exxon National Exhibition.” May 5 – June 11, 1978.

[6] ‘New Image Painting’ at the Whitney Museum, New York. December 5 to January 28, 1978.

[7] EARTH ART. Curated by Willoughby Sharp at The Andrew Dickson White Museum of Art, Cornell University. February 11–March 16, 1969.