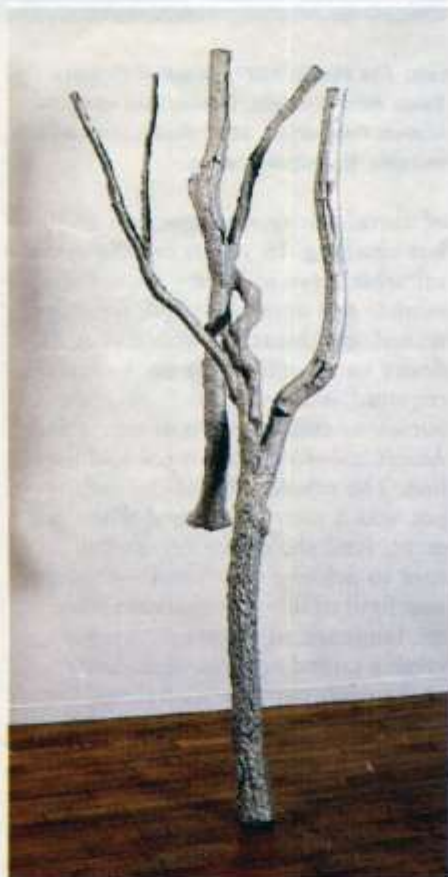


## Robert Lobe: Zen in the Dark and Deep Forest

by Michael Klein



*Dusk*, 1998. Anodized and hammered aluminum, 95 x 32.5 x 25 in.

Amid the lofts of the few remaining factory buildings in Jersey City is the studio of sculptor Robert Lobe. He has worked there since 1990, having left midtown New York after some 23 years for cheaper space.

A native of Detroit, like fellow artists Jackie Ferrara, Tom Butter, and James Casebere, Lobe was educated in the '60s at Oberlin College. Later at Hunter College in New York, he worked and studied with Ralph Humphrey, Patrick Ireland, and Robert Morris. But it was his social life in New York that had the biggest influence on his development as an artist. His six-year relationship with the painter Jo Baer and friendships with Neil Jenney, Gary Stephan, and John Duff while living at 76 Jefferson Street were the mainstays of his early days and the source of his early ideas and influences. Now Lobe is a SoHo resident, married to artist Kathy Gilje, and father of a teenage daughter and son.

Lobe's first public exposure was in the now historic 1969 Whitney Museum exhibition, "Anti Illusion: Procedures/Materials," curated by Marcia Tucker and James Monte. Along with such future art stars as Keith Sonnier, Richard Serra, and Richard Tuttle, Lobe created participatory pieces using non-art materials such as rope, rubber, wood, springs, and twine.

From there he went on to build works in wood and metal, showing in New York with Zabriskie, Bykert, and (for a five-year period in the early '80s) with the now defunct Willard Gallery. There were sales, shows, and favorable reviews. The high point was the inclusion of his large, aggressive wall piece, *Facial Structure*, in the 1987 Whitney Biennial. (Later acquired by the museum this work has just been on a European tour as part of a selection of the Whitney's collection.) Robert Hughes, reviewing the Biennial for *Time*, wrote that Lobe's "tarnished silvery gray 'presences'...are huge and haunting, as though the immobile

landscape had shed its skin like a molting snake." Michael Brenson, a long-time supporter of Lobe's work, has called his sculptures "heroic," "the combination of precariousness and transcendence makes the sculptures moving...with a sweep reminiscent of Clyfford Still and Jackson Pollock."

Today Lobe is an independent artist, having left what was then Blum-Helmer Gallery in 1993. He has successfully completed several commissions, including one for the General Service Administration, and negotiated a few museum exhibitions for himself, including one for the Montclair Art Museum. The show will feature outdoor works. Lobe observes, "though artists are vulnerable to exploitation we tend to drop the cheese. It's hard to learn how not to do this, but it's not impossible."

While Lobe's work is in numerous public and private blue chip collections such as the Walker Art Center, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, and the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, right now he is favored by only a select group of curators and critics—those who are less likely to be swayed by trends and who spend much of their time looking for what might be called "visual accomplishment." Nonetheless, time out of the limelight has allowed Lobe to focus more intensely on his work in and out of the studio. Among the most recent works is a series of wall reliefs, small, energetic three-dimensional sketches made from sites along the New Jersey riverfront.

Lobe is the first to admit that he is shocked by the public's confusion at his involvement with nature and the beauty of nature. "They have been educated to believe," he says, "that the only art that counts right now is highly abstract or morbidly figurative or conceptually filled to the brim. I'm working toward creating objects with a genuine sculptural presence and authenticity."

Lobe's sculpture combines subtle craft with the shape and movement

of natural elements like rocks, boulders, and trees. Through the process of repoussé Lobe literally hammers his works into existence. Broken and solid pieces of metal are formed to describe the irregular and idiosyncratic webs of tree, earth, and rock that Lobe finds. He molds the object's skin so that the finished enterprise is something of an ideal portrait combined with the formal, authoritarian compositional arrangement of a Cézanne still life. Many of his works are meant to hang from the wall so that the bas-relief effect further amplifies their sculptural presence both on the wall and in the viewer's space.

Distilled and quiet, Zen-like contemplation and spiritual solitude exude from the production of these works. Isolated and barren, the trees stand like Giacometti figures, mute except for a degree of psychological self-consciousness. Their singular isolation as objects suggests that they are neither free nor mobile, two conditions against which Giacometti's figures struggle. The condition of their being finds echoes in Jean-Paul Sartre's closing remarks to his 1958 essay on the Swiss-born sculptor: "I am alone" the objects seem to say and "therefore involved in a necessity which you can do nothing about. If I am only what I am, I am at least indestructible. Being



Below: *Harmony Ridge #35*, 1991. Anodized and hammered aluminum, 51 x 107 x 29 in.  
Left: *Reflected Landscape*, 1997. Hammered aluminum, 80 x 67 x 80 in.

what I am, and without reserve, my solitude knows your own."

It is the indestructible and stubborn power of nature that haunts Lobe. When he unites stone with wood there is now a subtle force at work, which distinguishes one element from the other through color, texture, or design. Endurance is symbolized by the growth of trees, timelessness characterized by rocks and terrain formed millions of years ago.

Lobe has set up another, outdoor studio in the northwest coast of New Jersey, in an area called Harmony Ridge. He works there several days a week, good weather or bad, cold or hot, season after season. "Nature is my toy box. It is fantastic and full of surprises. These manifestations of tactile geometry wait to be harvested,

not as metal pelts, the empty chambers of ghostly spirits, but as human architectures and physical relationships which bear the marks of time."

From there he then brings some close-to-finished pieces to his indoor studio for completion and contemplation. Indoor or outdoor, the works have an extraordinary presence, characters and fragments of a much larger scenario dragged into a different, often times distinctively isolated, realm.

King's Bluff is another work location closer to home in Weehauken. While it sits high above the endless stream of traffic moving in and out of the Lincoln Tunnel, below it is a special place steeped in history: the last vestige of an ancient forest atop a rocky promontory, which remains much as it was when the *Half Moon* sailed up what would become the Hudson River in 1609 and where Alexander Hamilton was felled by Aaron Burr in 1804.

As much as Lobe is immersed in nature he is in his heart an urban artist. He understands nature through nature's contradictions: its fragility, longevity, survivability, rich and infinite variety, and extraordinary splendor. Lobe's work is not simply a copy of nature; it is nature distilled, drawing from its cunning, strength, and wonder. His craft transforms his surroundings into specific compositional fragmentation, piece by piece, part by part, one tree at a time.

*Michael Klem is an independent curator, writer, and educator.*



REFLECTED LANDSCAPE: RICARDO BARRIOS