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Robert Lobe's Field Studies

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In love with natural environments since childhood, sculptor Robert Lobe confesses to being fascinated by working in the woods: "Perhaps it reminds me that as a boy my heart was up in the trees where countless hours went by. I loved building things in the woods. I still seem bound to these shapes, materials, textures[1]." An inveterate object maker, Lobe began working with motifs drawn directly from nature in the 1970s. In late 1960s he was a practitioner of process art, creating pieces of temporal character using varied pliable and disposable materials — the dictum was to keep the process of works' evolution fully visible. These works brought him early recognition and inclusion into major exhibitions. In the early in 1970s he began working with wood, solidifying shapes and volumes of his sculptures, some of which reflected the reductive tendencies of Minimalism prevalent at the time. While working almost exclusively with wood, Lobe became interested in the varied shapes of stones, their assertive presence and implied permanence. This attraction turned them into almost animate objects and led to series of works titled *Portraits of Stones*. Ironically, these were still fashioned from wood.

Although Lobe is known mainly for his large aluminum pieces it was not an art -related activity that led him toward that material. With the proceeds from early sales Lobe purchased a 1958 Aston Martin sports car that was in dire need of major repairs. Lobe decided to undertake the work himself. During the lengthy process he noticed that many car parts were created in aluminum and he became attracted to this lightweight, shimmering metal. This however did not conflict with his ever present fascination with nature — it lead toward the unique practice of connecting the man made materials and tools with the nature derived subjects. To facilitate the use of the newly discovered material Lobe studied an age-old technique of *repousee* in which sheets of metal are laid over an object to be reproduced. The malleable metal is then hammered and molded into shape over the existing object. Still in love with stones he began enveloping them with aluminum sheets and hammering the surfaces, thus making their impressions — in fact their "portraits." He began working primarily out of doors, a practice he now extends to a year-round activity.

The careful observation of nature led to Lobe's realization of struggles often unnoticed by an occasional visitor. Seemingly effortless coexistence of various elements is frequently the result of hard battles for light and space. Trees envelope their roots around stones that can stabilize them, but in turn can stifle their growth. Lobe scouts for locations where the existing elements will yield a compositional clarity and emotional charge, even after being removed from their original surroundings and subjected to a great deal of fragmentation. When such a place is identified, the artist sets to work enveloping selected elements with sheets of aluminum of suitable thickness. The choice of hand and pneumatic tools is also dictated by the site conditions. After finishing the work in situ, the piece is dismantled and trucked to the studio where the surfaces are finished and work assembled into permanent configuration by welding, riveting or bolting. Lobe's work is enormously physical and far removed from the predictable studio and gallery environment. The pieces are drawn from nature but within their shapes

they contain a wide array of meanings and allusions to the issues connected with creativity, aesthetics, man's past and present relationship with nature, the history of American art to name just a few. Working primarily outdoors makes Lobe one of the handful of American artists upholding the august tradition of creating plein air work. Lobe draws inspiration from this country's extraordinary nature and early American masters who liberated this nation's art from European dependence; rarely bucolic, often fearsome, always full of unexpected vistas and dramatic formations that never cease to inspire. One of the most magnificent areas in the eastern U.S. is the Hudson Valley, where the present exhibition is taking place and which yielded the inspiration for the *Field Studies*. Lobe sees the forest and tree groves not as a pastoral environment but as a set of frequently competing elements, many in the process of decay, but also of re-birth.

There are varied interpretations of Lobe's work. It could be seen as an apotheosis of the natural beauty and its endless riches of shapes, volumes and textures. In making us aware of our often exploitative approach to the environment and the resulting dire consequences, Lobe confronts us with many questions as to the true meaning of our relationship with nature and the propriety of our stewardship. His compositions are imbued with meaning deeper than the sum of their parts, dealing with the issues of composition and structure in art as well as those of representation. They also bring to mind the ideas of the Transcendentalists and other early American philosophical constructs as well as our never-ending national dialogue with and very real dependency on nature.

Robert Lobe is married to renowned painter Kathleen Gilje. The couple has collaborated on numerous works, including *Kindred Spirits*, which is included in this exhibition.

Charlotta Kotik
Curator Emerita, Brooklyn Museum

Robert Lobe was born in Detroit, Michigan in 1945 and studied at Oberlin College, Ohio and Hunter College in New York City. His work was celebrated in a number of one-person and group exhibitions and is included in major collections such as Guggenheim Museum, Whitney Museum, and Brooklyn Museum in New York, National Gallery in Washington D.C., Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Storm King Art Center, Mountainville, New York, Laumeier Sculpture Park, St. Louis, MO. He is the recipient of numerous grants and awards — National Endowments for the Art Fellowship and Pollack-Krasner Foundation Award among them.

[1]*Harmony Ridge by Robert Lobe*, p.1, published by U.S. General Services Administration.

Robert Lobe, b.1945
Invisible Earth, 2007
Heat-treated hammered aluminum,
9 x 5.5 x 13.5 ft
Photo by Adam Husted

An inspiration for this piece was found in Kittatinny Ridge which runs through the Sunrise Mountain section of Stokes Forest in New Jersey. It was through the generosity of Ed and Doris Risdon, who opened the Harmony Ridge Campground there in the 1960s, that Lobe was invited to scout the place for motifs and produce work at the site.

Lobe describes the genesis of *Invisible Earth* as follows: "I noticed this tree leaning against the boulder, and it had exposed root structure. It was very animated, and about to tip over. There was a lot of potential energy. I might see something like this and I might not come to it for many years. But I came back and put some time into this one and found the idea and how to develop it. What brought it together for me was another tree that had fallen nearby, which I brought over and it gave context and narrative. I had to get to the bottom of the tree, so I pulled the rock away. The tree fell down within a week and I could do the bottom roots. This is an aggressive structure and has heat treatment as well as interior members, an aluminum bridge and flanges inside."

Robert Lobe, b.1945
Antique Jenny, 2011
Heat-treated hammered aluminum,
11 x 5 x 13.5 ft
Photo by Adam Husted

As with countless other pieces, the tree/boulder configuration that resulted in *Antique Jenny* was discovered by Lobe along the Kittatinny Ridge in New Jersey at Harmony Ridge. The strong horizontal tree element reminded the artist of spokes on early industrial wheels when the steam engine was called a "jenny." Viewing nature as a source of raw material was a necessity for the industrialization of the country but it also became a tool of the subsequent destruction of the natural environment. The germination of the piece is commented on by the artist as follows: "The idea of Antique Jenny grew out of contemplation of Transcendentalism and the Industrial Revolution when the steam engine tore through the natural landscape." The dichotomy of nature—forests, tree groves—and culture—trains and industrialization—is frequently addressed in Lobe's work.

Robert Lobe, b.1945
Good Morning America, 2015
Heat-treated hammered aluminum
8.5 x 6 x 8 ft
Photo by Adam Husted

While scouting for subject matter for another sculpture in the Kittatinny Ridge in New Jersey's Sussex County, Lobe was attracted by a particularly scenic configuration of boulder and tree precariously situated on the sharp incline of a ridge. A sharp angle of morning light made the natural formation even more dramatic. In the artist's mind, the microcosms of the forest were translated into the vastness of the American continent. The title of Lobe's piece is derived from the lyrics of Steve Goodman's song, *The City of New Orleans, "…Good Morning America, how are you? Don't you know me, I'm your native son"* made famous by the 1972 Arlo Guthrie recording. The refrain of the song gave the name and the music theme to the ABC television program *Good Morning America*.

Robert Lobe. b.1945
Field Study, 2014
Heat-treated hammered aluminum
Dimensions variable
Photo by Adam Husted

When sketching pen and ink drawings along the trails of Mohonk Preserve, Lobe encountered an interesting configuration of a tree fallen over boulders and a narrow stream. Sensing this might translate well into a sculptural piece, he took notes of the location to later return. Apparently the tree with two equal trunks growing from one root system was not stable enough to support its increasing height and it ultimately collapsed. Lobe took the tree to his studio for a *repousee* process. After taking the impression he decided to create a work that did not follow the horizontality of the original find, but to create the ideal situation – the sculpture shows the tree grooving vertically and reaching for the sky.

Robert Lobe, b.1945
Bearly, 2010
Heat–treated hammered aluminum,
69 x 37 x 26 in
Photo by Adam Husted

To generate ideas for his work, Lobe scours not only natural and poetic locations but also city streets and places filled with refuse. In fact, some of his first outdoor pieces were inspired by stones found in the Battery Park City landfill in the l970s. *Bearly* is based on impressions of tree sections, deemed by the artists to be truly beautiful in their expressiveness, that he found in the Bergen County dump. He created impressions of individual segments, the middle one being the same as the bottom one, but rotated, and being of a thinner gauge with a richer texture. He then set all three up as one totemic piece. As some of the shapes in the work reminded him of the likeness of bears, and being aware of their presence in the forests of the North East, he decided to call the piece *Bearly*.

Robert Lobe, b.1945 and Kathleen Gilje, b. 1945
Kindred Spirits, 2009
Oil on canvas, hammered aluminum
64.5 x 84 x13 in
Photo by Adam Husted

Robert Lobe is married to painter, Kathleen Gilje. The artist couple recently decided to collaborate on a number of pieces. Together they select location and take photographs. Then, while Kathleen renders the likeness of the place in grisaille painting, Robert makes three-dimensional renderings of the most significant elements that would frame the work. Their first such collaboration is titled *Kindred Spirits*, which celebrates the couple's relationship while alluding to the renowned 1849 painting of the same name by Asher B.Durand that depicts Durand and close friend, fellow painter Thomas Cole, overlooking a scene in the Catskill Mountains. Both were the most prominent members of the 19th-century Hudson River School.

Photo by Glenn Koehler

Mohonk Preserve protects and manages over 8,000 acres of mountain ridges, forests, fields, streams, lakes, and other unique environments. As New York State's largest nonprofit nature preserve, we are home to diverse animals and plants and welcome 165,000 annual visitors who come to rock climb, mountain bike, hike, ski, and study and enjoy nature. The Preserve provides education to school children and the public; is the site of conservation research on climate change, wildlife, water quality, and other crucial issues; and works with local communities to protect open space.

Cover: Photo by Adam Husted

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