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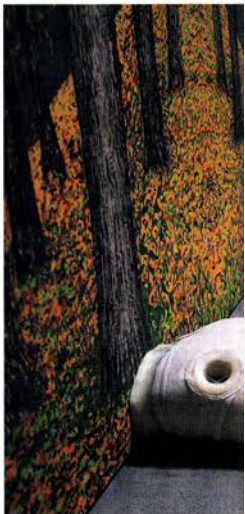
# Weekend Arts II

The New York Times

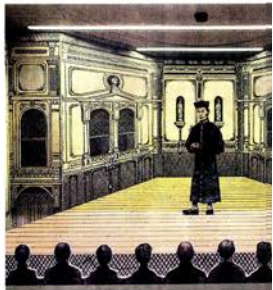
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## Reality Skewed and Skewed (Gushing, Too)



### Reality Skew And Skewer (Gushing, To)



### Great Job on the R Now Go Back to the

The tea dumped in Boston Harbor's party came from China. So did George Washington's china. The Erie Canal was inspired by China's Grand Canal. And the lure of Chinese trade spurred the building of the transcontinental railroad. The labor force for its western segment was 80 percent Chinese. With- out Chinese exclusion laws, and American history of groups which by the late 19th century were severely restricting Chinese immigration, the regulations and bureaucracy that now shape immigration policy might never have arisen. But the narrative at the New York Historical Society's vigorous and imaginative new exhibition — "Chinese American. Exclusion/Inclusion" — is not just of China's impact on United States history (which is part of the story) or of the experiences and suffering of Chinese immigrants (which is an-

other part). It is identity came to discrimination and conflict trials give way to The society's conjunction with exhibition down Years of Archival evolved out of Chinese That show's of the experiences and suffering of Chinese immigrants (which is an-

From Weekend Page 21 stants precariously, while in another, a playboy is twisted into an X. Both vividly handle their usual occupants. And in the next, seemingly benign wallpaper repeats hand-drawn images of a black man hanging from a noose and a white man safe and asleep in his bed, while signs of fish and party — including bags of styrofoam and an ivory satin bedspread — hold the floor. Later on, the woman lower half of a man's body, hyper real from the hairy legs and jammed against the wall as if crushed, is dotted with pale dots above from the staks. The implicit obsession with cleanliness expands here and the size drains also echo AIDS-related Kaposi's sarcoma. Still later in the show, a slipcovered easy chair is run through with an enormous red-outlined, a shocking collision of filling comfort and backbreaking work and a form of penetration so violent it weaves to mind.

The exhibition forms a partial, often painful portrait of a nation, while also suggesting a reclamation of repressed American reality that runs from Homer and Exkins to John and Vito Corleone, and includes DuSant, Howard, Walker, and Edward Hopper. It highlights some of the conditions of Americanness: the country's triumph and tragedies, its amazing grace and falls from grace, its faith in a just cause and preoccupation with sin, and its forgotten aspects for manual labor and craft. (In addition to wallpaper, less traditional mediums used here include basket weaving and leather working.) It also offers sobering recognition with recent history and autoethnography: the palpable legacy of slavery, the tabloid dystrophy by the AIDS crisis, the shattering that was Sept. 11.

It's always at the center — of the show and of art — and in the resilience and vulnerability of so much that Mr. Guber has done, dwells the theme of redemptive love and the all too real effect of its absence, which is poisonous here. This much is evident in a forest, in the show's title: "Robert Guber: The Heart Is Not a Menorah." The show's national portrait is revealed by an artist who is also an immigrant and an aesthete and an anthropologist of his own childhood and psyche, which were shaped by growing up gay and Roman Catholic in mostly Protestant New England. He is also a modest poet who all but disappears behind the mirroring familiarity of his work. Discussing the meaning of his art in The New York Times in 1995, Mr. Guber told Steven Henry Madoff, "It's a kind of homophobia, with who is in it of it. That's who I want to stand on from the work." He said, "Yes, Not me."

As deeply as I've been affected by Mr. Guber's art over the years, I wasn't sure how his all-dress treatment at the Met would turn out. A little Guber goes a long way, and it tends toward door, short on humor and color. It can seem repetitious. (In the mid-1980s, he made more than 50 increasingly excessive triptychs.) But the show clarifies his development, revealing his pace



Robert Guber's survey includes, from top, "Shattered Playboys," "Chair With Pipe," "The Heart Is Not a Menorah" with wallpaper that has a racial motif, and sinks installed in a forest.

He even presumes to invite two galleries to work by other artists that appeared in group shows he organized, demonstrating a characteristic generosity with inspiration or influence. At the same time, the museum seems to have met his every wish, drifting through floors and inventing glazing where there was none.

The opening gallery introduces a lexicon of themes: the body (a man's leg protruding from the wall), the insistence on hand-drawing, whether difficult or nearly invisible (a scenography real- ized on a piece of made-of-car glass); the natural world (a study about the various plants painted on the slipcover of his first easy chair) and language (a print of a handwritten card advertising a waiting service). Most arresting is "Classical Cases" (2011), a quilted door frame revealing a shallow, dead-end space. A symbol of family secrets, punishment does not speak its name, the artist's preoccupation with architectural detail, while also reflecting his family home, built by his father. But the installation has, foremost, an uncanny beauty that typifies the stillness and quiet of his work.

I arrived in New York in 1976 with an art bag pretty much packed. He was not yet 21, had a bachelor's in the art in from Middlebury College and was soon making big, detailed-dollhouses that he was sure he could sell art. Yet in 1982-83 Mr. Guber created "Shattered Playboys," 19 paintings of a Chinese painting in his storefront studio in the East Village. He made a slide of each motif, then scrapped the

Robert Guber: "The Heart Is Not a Menorah" runs through Aug. 18 at the Museum of Modern Art; 212-368-9400, monart.org.

That, there's Goli Thomsen, a nephew of Martin Bormann (Hitler's private secretary) and veteran mountaineer, who falls in love with Doll's zafiq wife, Hannah. And, finally, there's Steve, a member of the Sonderkommando, "who added men in the history of the world" — prisoners forced to assist in the disposal of bodies in the crematorium and gas chambers — who observes that nightmarish "are incapable of coming up with anything even remotely as terrible as what I do all day."

Small serves as the moral conscience of this book, and the sections narrated by him underscore the horror of what is really going on at Kat Zet, beyond the other characters' jabber about efficiency, hitting their numbers and reporting out "representatively proper means of taking care of business."

Throughout his career, Mr. Amis has been highly attuned to the horror of what is really going on in this novel speak in the clatter of American industrialists with a few dashes of British aristocracy (condescension). He makes us hyper-aware of the supreme oddness of their evil. What adds to Thomsen's attention at the camp, he writes, "were not the men but the women, as they queered or scurged in lines," but "the figures in city business suits, designers, engineers, administrators from IG Farben plants in Frankfurt, Leverkusen, Ludwigshafen, with leather-bound notebooks, retractable yellow measuring tapes, gaudily picking their way

past the bodies of the wounded, the unconscious and the dead."

Mr. Amis has grappled with the atrocities of the 20th century before. He wrote about Stalin's slave labor camps in the engrossing "Kafka the Dead" and the deeply affecting "House of Meetings." In this case, the reader sometimes feels that Mr. Amis is being overly self-conscious about what he's up to. And he makes too much of the novel's title, about his Nazi bureaucrat's "apathy" because to the victims of the crimes against humanity they were "not even considered."

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paint and began again. It is stunning to see how much of his art this work reveals. Two major turning points arrived in the late 1980s and early 1990s, by which time Mr. Guber was an AIDS activist. First, the wax likeness of men's legs and their bodies appeared. Three floors occupy a radiant gallery, where a corpse-size cigar lies in state, and hallucinatory scenes of refracting autumnal forests and spider webs paper the walls.

Second, and perhaps more shocking, the artist finally function, acquiring faces, planting and audibly raising water. A capricious sympathy of rights and sounds contrast control and freedom. Inarted prison windows versus open forests, facets that wash like waterfalls versus bases of rap raions. These oppositions, unveiled at the Dia Foundation in 1992, later visible in bursts of old newspapers full of reports of power and its discom- forts. Several have ads featuring Mr. Guber in the bridal gown: a gay man forbidden to marry.

The show culminates in Mr. Guber's memorial to Sept. 11, first seen at the Matthew Marks Gallery in Chelsea in 2001. It makes even stronger impression here, in tighter quarters, its responses more heartbreakingly intense. Sprung from The Times's Sept. 11, 2001, report about the terrorist attacks approximate stained-glass windows. They are drawn with glimpses of embracing bodies, a combination that

powerfully contrasts public and private life. The pews are apparently painted of acrylic plastic foam (actually painted bronze), displaying objects that evoke loneliness, birth and the Crucifixion. On the altar wall, a headless body hangs as if on a cross, water spraying from his nipples, recalls the first child. A spring rolls in perches on his arms. There are more layers of history and meaning to be explored here, but Mr. Guber's great subjects are autonomy and self-knowledge, which this exhibition demonstrates at nearly every turn. As he said, "You. Not me."

Part of a memorial to Sept. 11, above. More photos from the show: nytimes.com/design.

John Walker

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