THE BIGNESS OF SMALL: IRA JOEL HABER'S ART

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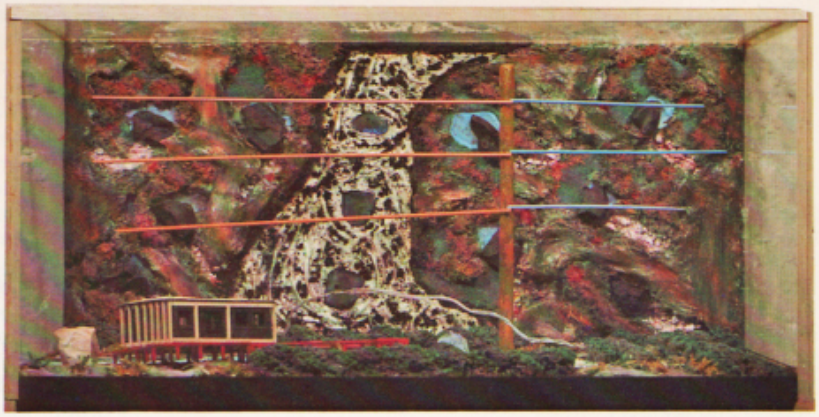


Ira Joel Haber, Summer—Fall, 1977. *Mixed media, 12¾ x 26 x 13¼".* *Courtesy Pam Adler Gallery.*

Remember that wonderful sequence toward the end of the film *Forty-Second Street* when the dancers sing and tap their way to the top of a vast staircase, then turn around in unison, their hand-held scenery flats transforming everything into a scintillating nighttime view of Manhattan? The flare of elation felt at that moment, the amazement that such a simple device can create so much magic, is very like the reaction one has to the sculptures of Ira Joel Haber. His peopleless, mini-scale, landscape tableaus, whether boxed or simply laid out on shelves, present enchanting distillations of reality within the safe confines of a framed frontal enclosure. They invite the mind's eye to travel through panoramic country vistas and cityscapes where the human-made is at nature's mercy, and nature is beautiful but demonically unpredictable. The world outside Haber's dense constructions disappears and you are engrossed in a static fiction where anything can happen—just like in the movies.

Haber plans his sculptures the way a director plans a film, setting the stage for the action and changing the "script" when events demand it. An excerpt from one of his 1969 notebooks tells of purchasing "blanded ballast" from a model railroad company for a Plasticville U.S.A. gas station which "will be set on fire," and then notes that he "also finished a colonial house what will also be set on fire." One imagines his perverse pleasures in performing these destructions as being a little like Buster Keaton's when the train falls through the bridge in *The General* or Cecil B. De Mille's as the Red Sea swallows up the Egyptian army. Despite his obvious miniaturization, Haber's carefully constructed destructions are equally cathartic and exciting.

The static nature of sculpture permits Haber to focus his viewer's attention on details far longer than is possible in film. Going the movie *Blow-up*, one better, he can zero in on a scene and stay there; but instead of solving an exotic mystery, he investigates the mundane with such focused intensity that it is transported to the realm of the symbolic. Ordinary rocks, trees. bodies of water, and houses, sometimes skies and clouds—these are the objects of his attention and the subjects of his simulation. Strange things happen to them. Skies are pulled around corners into Cinerama vistas; trees snake in and out of windows and doors or "grow out" of the hills walling up the space behind the house; buildings are burned, crushed, blasted apart, or tumble brokenly out of the back of a construction. Congealed resin pools into lakes hemmed in by turd-like lumpy hills covered with lichen that is more artificial than fake fauna. Spread over all are lurid, garish colors belonging more to the tawdry world of 42nd Street and to early technicolor movies than to an artist's palette. Haber has written:

> Nature frightens. No slow early autumn walks in the country for me. Nature is a mother with a knife, ready to pounce on us without warning. Mountains collapse, rivers reclaim, skies open up, and caves swallow. But there is also a beauty in this destruction. Keeping myself far away from all things that are natural is what I have a sweet tooth for. The landscapes of my mind reach out for other minds in beautiful acts of aggression.[1]

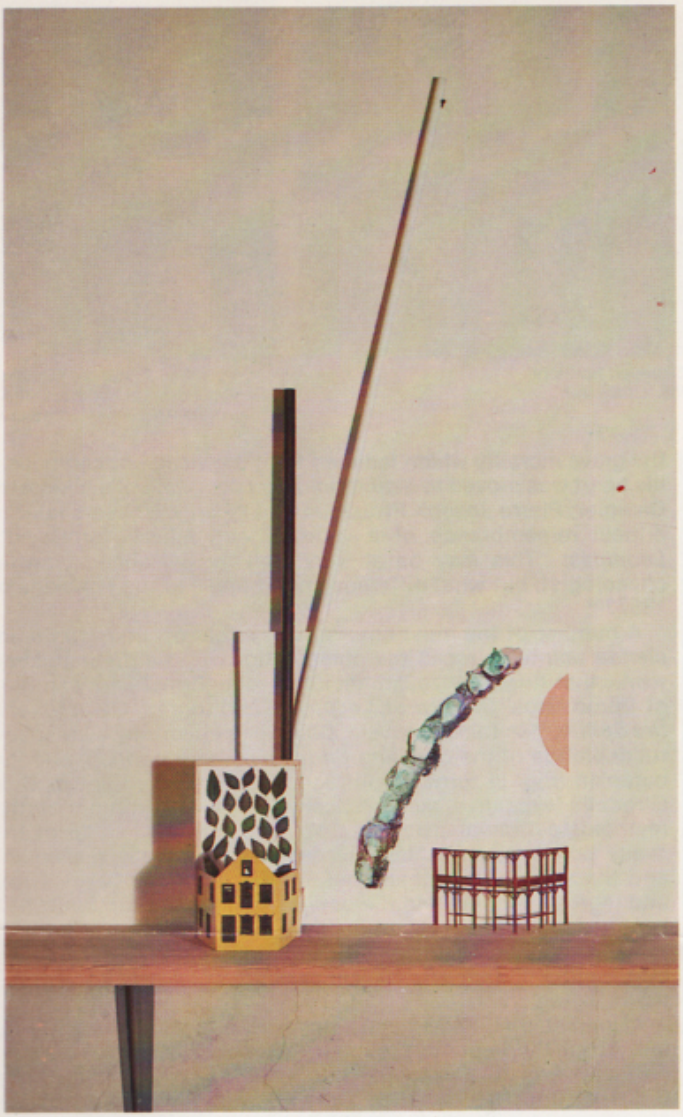
True artifice comes easier to the celluloid strip than to the theater where real people up there on a stage amid real furniture are trying to make a story seem real. This distinction separates Haber from Michael Hurson, Robert Graham, and Roland Reiss, all of whose work involves aspects of holistic, consistently illusional theater rather than jump-cut, collaged film. A film is the quintessential modern collage—anything, any time, any place can be instantaneously juxtaposed to anything else—since it is literally constructed out of snippets. Haber unsettles us by juxtaposing aerial views with lateral angles, large scale with small, color with black and white, real materials with photographs, in various disturbing ways. Also, he frequently works in series or sequential configurations. One 1974 work, *My Landscape Grows Older When I'm Not With You*, features 16 separate "scenes" lined up along a 10-foot shelf, like a 3D panorama waiting for the camera to zoom in for a long pan.

It should come as no surprise that Haber adores films, and there are few worth viewing that he hasn't seen at least once. Many of his early conceptual works involved movie theaters, performances, and pictures. Besides *Radio City Music Hall* (1969), his "conceptual publications" of 1969-71 include two pamphlets listing his favorite films according to when and where they premiered or he first saw them. An early projected performance, or street work, had him reading aloud a list of his favorite films in front of Variety Photoplays, a tacky movie theater on Third Avenue and 13th Street. While his lists reveal little interest in most foreign films, ordinary "family" flicks, or camp sentimental fantasies like *The Wizard of Oz*, he does love the "classics," particularly those of the thriller or musical variety.

The thrills may differ, but a horror show is just as pleasure-producing as a musical, and peering into one of Haber's boxes is always a pleasure, whether it contains a charmingly early Manhattan panorama or a later '70s scene of gory devastation where one's fear of the unknown is objectified, and thus controlled. Having one's face only a few inches from a two-story house or an entire mountain is the exact Gulliverian reverse of the full screen facial blow-up, but it has the same effect of displacing you from the real to the imaginery. All the light, all action is distilled to essences, concentrated in one special place full of many-leveled meanings and associations. In experiencing Haber's works, like going to the movies, one knows the pleasures of reverie that lie between dream and reality.

When Haber planned a film of his own in 1970, it was to last only three minutes and have the following actions: "The curtains [on the big front windows in his loft] should be opened very slowly until the view across the street becomes visible. [They] may stay open, but they will probably close very slowly. That will be the end of the film." It is obvious from the film proposal that Haber sees his life as his subject and his art as its objectification. What is not obvious is its intersection with Albert Pinkham Ryder's two beloved windows on a West 15th Street backyard garden which Ryder said he "would not exchange for a palace with less a vision."[2] Something of a poet and a loner, like Ryder, Haber's hardnosed romantic-expressionist vision has conscious and unconscious sources in that 19th-century eccentric's art.

Amplifying connections can always be made between Hab-



Ira Joel Haber, Whitmanesque, 1979. *Mixed media, 14-7/8 x 12¼ x 36".* *Courtesy Pam Adler Gallery.*

er's art and artists of the past, from Walt Whitman to John Sloan, from Art Deco to Jack Kerouac. An auto-didact, Haber naturally has wide-range enthusiasms. Hartley, O'Keeffe, and Dove have had their effect on his landscape drawing style; Stuart Davis and the German Expressionists have tinted his color; the German Dadaists probably inspired his frequent use of mechanical illustrations; while Duchamp's *Box in a Valise* and Joseph Cornell's constructions prefigure in turn his boxed miniatures and their poetic qualities. Like any ambitious artist worth his or her salt, Haber packs as much meat into his art as possible. He says, "Every artist is a notebook," though not all are as well filled as he. Haber also makes literal diaristic notebooks—ruled composition books in fact—where he transforms the events, images, and thoughts of his daily life into art. The early books are wordier than recent ones, where every page is a full picture or collage, but a poetic sensibility is evident throughout:

small tables
small houses
small skies
small movies
small bikes
small smalls
small

small feet
small cocks
small chairs
small people

I'm in control when things are small. It's a small world.

He wrote this in 1969, long before thinking small became an acceptable '70s way of retrenching. Haber is small, his lifestyle simple, and his financial resources diminished. (He derives some of his income from part-time work in a movie memorabilia shop.) But, then, $1.50 buys five feet of fencing, which is plenty when the largest dimensions of any work are measured in inches. Besides, limits help an artist focus.

Haber is self-taught. He was born in Brooklyn in 1947 and began "making his art," as he would say, at the age of one. His doting, proud mother has saved everything, including a small box landscape he did at 11 years of age which uncannily presages his mature work. Though he has lived in New York City all his life, and rarely even left it as an adult, Haber's actual move across the river to Manhattan seems, from a 1969-71 notebook excerpt, to have been one of his biggest moments:

clear stream—water green—blue green
deeper blue middle
river bed—brown, yellowish
dyes yellow, green, blue, brown, white
How terribly excited we were the day before "Big Rose,"
that dirty old ferry, came to take us away.

Modern art is city bred, just as surely as Impressionism was born of the shift into those cities. Even though he may say "I can draw a thousand trees and it still wouldn't be enough," Haber is always looking at or thinking about those trees from the comforting safety of his second-floor loft. There were trees on his street in Brooklyn, there are none where he lives now, and a holiday anywhere but Provincetown or the sand bars of Long Island is out of the question.

Haber lives alone. His friends are poets and other artists. "My landscapes are lonely. I did them alone. My art is very alone." One youthful idea for a film would have shown him, the artist, trying to cut off his own hand which "should look like a piece of meat on a butcher's block." The hand was being seen as a sexual object, the film as a suspense thriller; the connections with Van Gogh, Rothko, and suicide are obvious. In another note he compares artistic production with bodily excretion, and elsewhere he says, "I'm concerned with the primitive man of today." All these bare-bones-basic ideas lie behind the truly cathartic nature of Haber's art, at least most of the work he's done during the ten years of his career from 1969, when he made his first boxed houses and trees, to 1979, when he began to feel he had gotten much of it out of his system. In 1972 he said, "I want my sculptures handled as if they were bombs set to go off." Now, in 1980, his sculptures are being displayed openly on shelves, without the protection of an enclosure, and the means of their making are no longer being hidden. As pristinely Constructivist as his previous work was dark, dense, and Expressionist, his new pieces nevertheless have precedents in some of his "Minimal" nested, stacked, and radically simplified pieces, such as his 1970 *Homage to Joseph Albers*, a concentric configuration of "grass" squares and white picket fences.

Paradoxically, the elemental character of Ira Joel Haber's art (one might be tempted to call it naive if it weren't so obviously sophisticated) is coming more clearly into focus in his recent works, despite their evident multi-associational links with practically every major modern art movement. Those links were hazier before, when content dominated form. Now Surrealist Magrittean touches such as the spearmint leaf wallpaper in *Whitmanesque* (1979) look Matissean in such a formal setting. Constructivism, which has long been one of the crucial underpinnings of Haber's art, is now dominant, and the work seems more abstract than representational even though the basic vocabulary remains unchanged. With ten years of mature work behind him, where these elements have been used so often that we can read their spatial and iconographical import at a glance, Haber's right of eminent domain over a large emotional territory can be established with only a few familiar architectural fragments and an abstract symbol or two—simple devices creating so much magic.

1. All quotations except otherwise noted have their source in excerpts from Haber's notebooks.
2. Albert Pinkham Ryder to Marsden Hartley, *Albert P. Ryder*, by Lloyd Goodrich, George Braziller, New York, 1959.