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ROBERT LOBE

Nature

BY CAROLEE THEA



The New York City Department of Parks and Recreation's public art program has consistently fostered the creation and installation of temporary public art throughout the five boroughs. Robert Lobe recently joined a long list of distinguished artists who have exhibited in Brooklyn's Prospect Park, among them, Roxy Paine and Mark di Suvero. But, how many of these artists have told a story so valuable?

In the 19th century, Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux gained widespread acclaim for co-designing many well-known urban parks, among them Central Park and Prospect Park. Olmsted arrived at his practice after working as a reporter in the Antebellum South, where he witnessed war's devastating effect on nature. His design criteria aimed to uphold natural conditions rather than to appease the cultural will to control and, ultimately, to destroy. Lobe's three-part sculptural series, "Nature in Nature," reinforced the ideas of Olmsted's natural landscape.

Lobe has been working as a sculptor since the 1960s, when in an effort to disrupt Minimalism, he scattered shards of metal, rubber, wood, and rope on the floor. The Whitney Museum featured one of these scatter pieces in the 1969 exhibition "Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials," along with works by Carl Andre, Lynda Benglis, Robert Morris, Bruce Nauman, Richard Serra, and Keith Sonnier, among others. According to Lobe, "Organizing the scatter pieces...permitted variability and implied motion. Today I realize how closely these assemblies resemble the detritus where I forage for ideas in nature."

In the early '70s, Lobe began looking directly to nature, first in the "Stone Clones," a series of large-scale, extrapolated portraits of stones in hollow, laminated wood structures. He then moved to hammering aluminum around construction materials from the World Trade Center, found in the Battery Park landfill. Lobe chose aluminum "because of its artificial and industrial association, distinctly opposite that of weathered wood." Both bodies of work were exhibited at Dag Hammarskjöld Plaza in 1977.

Subsequently, the process of *repoussé* allowed him to work outdoors. In the solitude of the Adirondacks and on the Appa-



Opposite: *Nature's Clock*, 2005. Heat-treated hammered aluminum, 11 x 9 x 14 ft. Above: *Stone Clones*, 1976. Aluminum, view of installation at the Battery Park landfill.

lachian Trail, along the coast of Nova Scotia, he found new freedom and a personal transcendence. Since then, he has worked in a number of natural environments: "It was possibly my memory coupled with those wild landscapes that made my connection to nature more profound."

Lobe describes his process as first wandering around in the woods, then choosing the trees that he will trace. He hammers the sheet metal around trunk and branches with fasteners that leave the joints exposed; seams and bolts remain visible so that viewers can peer inside and see that the object is hollow. So, what might appear excessively heavy is relatively light, and by drawing attention to the gap between the real thing and the image, the artifice is exposed. The sculptor transforms nature into a facsimile, a death mask or an effigy of the natural form.

Lobe's works mimic the natural, while their industrial materiality brings to mind something out of George Miller's post-apocalyptic film *Road Warrior*, a world where nature has been poisoned by humanity's ravaging abuses. As such, the sculptures act as a memento mori, part of a tradition

in art dating back to antiquity and always sharing the same purpose, to remind man of his mortality.

In "Inside/Outside: Treelines," a group show at Abington Art Center in 2006, Lobe's large, outdoor work *Metamorphosis* and the indoor *Angel* created a profound scenario focusing on artifice and how nature has been altered. Lobe's aesthetic is low-key; his work doesn't try to muscle its way into our field of vision. It looks at home in a natural setting, but it also sets up a situation in which you detect its harmony, as well as its departure from the place in which you find it. Libby Rosof, writing on [theartblog.org](http://theartblog.org), says, "Robert Lobe's beaten aluminum tree sheaths look like body armor for the trees. His pieces are also a reminder of the gargantuan scale of trees while the surfaces and shapes evoke elephant skin."

Lobe belongs to an American tradition of artists whose work attempts to mirror the beauty of nature and human impact on the land. While 19th-century painters such as Thomas Cole, Albert Bierstadt, and Thomas Moran depicted nature in its pristine grandeur, photographers of the same era, including A.J. Russell, Carleton





Watkins, and W.H. Jackson, not only captured the beauty of the wilderness frontier, but, in documenting human progress, also recorded the damage caused by mass migrations to the West. By the middle of the 20th century, with countless remnants of destruction apparent in and out of American cities, artists like Robert Smithson and photojournalist Eugene Smith attempted to highlight the urgent necessity to restore balance to and understand the ecological relations conjoining humanity, industry, and the natural environment.

When I visited Prospect Park with Lobe, a man was fishing in the lake, where *Invisible Earth* was installed. The fisherman, who defined his sport as catch and release, said that bass are best found near a sheltering object such as the sculpture. In order to install this work, Lobe donned a wetsuit and dove into the Lullwater to make the footings—but the finished work appeared to float.

Just south of Prospect Park's 19th-century boathouse, on a grassy triangular intersection near a massive and ancient Camperdown elm (a variety immune to the Dutch elm disease that wiped out nearly all elms in North America), stood another of Lobe's hammered aluminum sculptures—*Antique Jenny*. The close proximity of the elm (nature) and the aluminum effigy (culture) made the contrast particularly strong. According to Lobe, "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 third and largest of Lobe's three sculptures, *Nature's Clock*, perched on a hillock mimicking the sloped terrain.

The stylized forms of these works evoke the idea of archaic monuments ravaged by time. Their distinct location in the present, or even in some imaginary dystopian future, restructures the eternal dialectic of "man and nature" through artifacts made of reconstructed materials.

Recently, the Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art in Peekskill, New York, hosted an exhibition of three works on

*Metamorphosis*, 2005. Heat-treated aluminum, 116 x 86 x 40 in.





Above: *Invisible Earth*, 2007. Heat-treated hammered aluminum, 9 x 5.5 x 13.5 ft. Below: *Antique Jenny*, 2011. Heat-treated hammered aluminum, 11 x 5 x 14 ft.

which Lobe collaborated with his wife, painter Kathleen Gilje. In *Kindred Spirits* (2009), *Appalachian Forest* (2010), and *Woodbury Quarry* (2011), Lobe's photographic documentation of his sites is transformed by Gilje into grisaille paintings and framed within a sculptural relief hammered out on rocks and trees from the places where the photographs were made. Lobe says, "We chose grisaille because its richness of grays is enhanced by the play of light in the monochromatic luster of hammered aluminum. But primarily, we wanted to interpret the exact same elements of the same place seen through the eyes of a painter and a sculptor." Lobe's work began as an effort to go past formal issues but migrated into another, more personal and spiritual realm based on a love of nature and a need to memorialize it in the face of inevitable destruction.



*Carolee Thea is a writer and curator living in New York. Her most recent book is On Curating: Interviews with Ten International Curators, published by D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers.*

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