

Ira Joel Haber
SCULPTURE 1969-1980

September 21 - October 15 • 1981



THE FINE ARTS CENTER

art gallery

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK AT STONY BROOK

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INTRODUCTION

Ira Joel Haber describes all his sculpture as mixed media and the mix has often included building toys or trees, as in the collection of 10 works called *Floor Pieces*, 1969-1970. These bear the traces of fire, so that their cheerful, pre-known, ready-made contours reveal an unexpected range of buckling and melting form. Haber uses fire, the most volatile of means, as an artistic process. These works are assigned absolute distance, or at any rate preferred distance, by being set on the floor. Thus we look down on the warped *ROADSIDE INN* sign or glimpse the emptiness of gabled or flat-roofed houses. Haber makes us aware, even in these scenes of devastation, of the sense of play and system that are involved in both toys and war games. He arouses the pleasures of simulation. The toy is a symbol of the artificiality of art in Haber's sculpture.

Haber's art is linked to a contraction of vision, not in the sense of reduction but in terms of the density of detail. Contraction is the form of solidification in these works that belong in the tradition of art that miniaturizes the world. As the work of art shrinks the world becomes impacted. The tightly clustered objects demand close viewing, both for their detail and for the inventive handling of materials; but the works have an expansive aspect, the result of the pile-up of numerous small elements. The large areas of the present gallery, for example, are clearly defined by the small sculptures, like an expanse of water by buoys.

The power of the small is reinforced by general references, much as we refer to Long Island as *The Beach* and New Jersey as *The Shore*. Some of Haber's smallest works evoke as Sylvia Sleight has observed "'early nothing', to quote Gloria Grahame in *The Big Heat*" (1). The reference is to the architecture of a non-descript hotel room and Haber has demonstrated brilliantly his affection for and understanding of this commonplace zone. This sensibility was paralleled by Robert Smithson's appreciation of urban sprawl as it generated superhighways and discount centers: their "very vapidness and dullness is what inspires many of the more gifted artists" (2). Unique to Haber however is the sense of a scenario that runs through each work: it is not a question of narrative but of situations with latent or retrospective potential. Either something has happened or is about to, an evocation of time that enlarges the work's concrete presence.

The Fine Arts Center thanks the artist for making this selection of his sculpture. The majority of the works are available by courtesy of the Pam Adler Gallery, New York City.

Haber assigns precise distances and hence degrees of visibility to his sculpture by several means. It is an effect achieved by siting, as in the works placed on the floor, or by containment and masking, as in his boxes, the earliest of which in this exhibition is *New York Box No. 4*, 1970. In *Brown Landscape*, 1972, there is an adobe-style house set in an equivocal container, among photo-images of real trees and a real, in the sense of three-dimensional, model of trees. In *June Box*, 1972, there is a boarded-up colonial house on one side, criss-crossed with cheerful-looking barriers, and on the other side an encroaching rock-form or blob studded with a variation of the spots on the barriers. In both works the images of houses are withheld from us in some degree, even while candidly presented as objects.

In several floor and wall sculptures we can follow Haber's interest in an expanded space as a property of sculpture, an interaction between the object of art and the viewer's perception. In *42 Airviews of Land and Water*, 1971-1972, and *Combination of the Two - Airviews of Lakes and Foliage*, 1972, the architectural aspect of the work is removed. It is as if the chunks and fragments of a rock collection had taken the place of a doll's house or architectural model. Haber keeps the grid but uses rough, schematic forms and textures that resemble earth formations, scooped, squeezed, modelled. Such forms also characterize the *Tondos*, 1973, in which gritty specificity is combined with sweet and sour color and fuzzy or glittering surfaces. The *tondos* are conceived as a group, which gives them a literal sculptural presence, in addition to the relief modelling of each piece.

Whether or not Haber is content with the literature on his art, and what artist is, there are several illuminating texts to be found in his bibliography. Art critics tend to ignore one another's writing, in which respect they are unlike art historians, but without sinking in footnotes it is worth recording some of the writing on Haber. (If this were done more often it would help to build a texture of intercommunication in a profession that badly needs it.) It is in 1977 that criticism of him grew beyond short-term reviews. In this year Corinne Robins recorded in an article that "Haber cites Max Ernst's *Two Children Are Menaced by a Night-Ingale* as the single art work that most influenced his thinking" (3). This relief of 1924 in the Museum of Modern Art has a heavy wooden frame, overlapped by a little wooden gate, and a beach-hut kind of building, with a painted landscape and figures. Haber has dropped the figures, the weakest part of Ernst's work, and stressed the architectural components, which has the effect of giving a typically American rectangularity to his source.



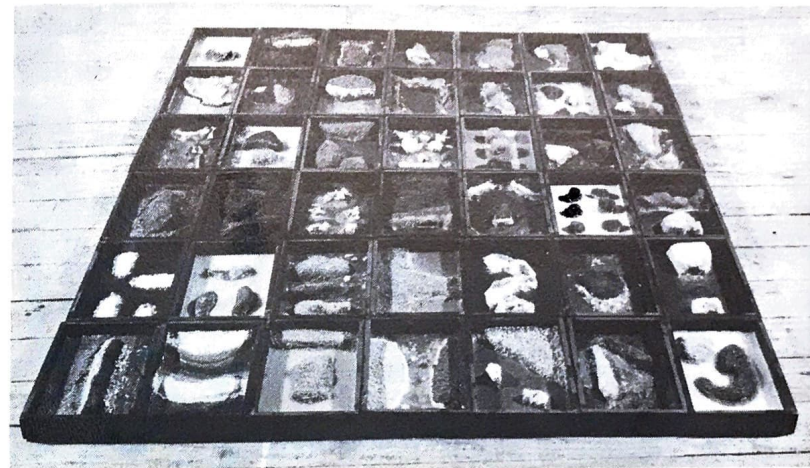
Floor Pieces (10)
1969-70
various sizes



June Box
1972
11½ x 5⅝ x 7¼ in.

In the following year 1978 John Perreault wrote about Haber's "houses that seem to be under attack" and observed of a work in the present exhibition: "In *Rich and Famous* an acid green house is attacked by peculiar animal/mineral growths while simultaneously its paint, its skin is dissolving into a blue pool". In 1980 April Kingsley stressed that "Haber adores films, and there are few worth viewing that he hasn't seen at least once". (Is there a touch of Universal-International about some of his houses?) She goes on to make the point: "Haber plans his sculptures the way a director plans a film". Here, then, is an artist who has been fortunate in his commentators: the quotations are examples of the way in which art criticism can orient viewers towards work while it is new. We can take as established: the conversion of Dada menace into architecture; nature as an antagonistic rather than a cooperative force; and the presence of idiom narrative elements, derived from the movies, within this subtle sculpture.

LAWRENCE ALLOWAY



42 Airviews of Land and Water

1971-72

42½ × 46 in.

Notes

1. Sylvia Sligh. Statements about Ira Joel Haber by Other Artists, "Retrospective Exhibition 1969-1977", The Gallery, Kent State University, Ohio, 1977.
2. *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, edited by Nancy Holt, New York University Press, 1979, p. 12. (Smithson owned a *Red and White Gas Station*, 1969, by Haber.)
3. Corinne Robins, "Nature Is a Mother with a Knife: the Malevolent Landscapes of Ira Joel Haber", *Arts Magazine*, November 1977, pp. 96-98. The other references are: John Perreault, "Art", *The Soho Weekly News*, October 19, 1978, p. 40, and April Kingsley, "The Bigness of Small: Ira Joel Haber's Art", *Arts Magazine*, September 1980, pp. 154-155.



Tondos, 1-10

1973

each unit 20" in diameter

CHECKLIST

1. <i>Forest Floor Piece</i>	1969	28 × 30 × 3
2. <i>Floor Pieces (10)</i>	1969-70	various sizes
3. <i>New York Box No. 4</i>	1970	15 × 3 ³ / ₈ × 3
4. <i>Small Box With White House</i> (Collection of Ed Shostack, New York City)	1970	5 ¹ / ₈ × 2 ¹ / ₈ × 6 ³ / ₄
5. <i>Rectangular Landscape</i>	1971	48 × 29 × 31
6. <i>White House and Forest in a Box</i>	1971	7 × 4 ¹ / ₈ × 5
7. <i>Open Box No. 8</i>	1971	19 × 5 ¹ / ₄ × 7
8. <i>Brown Brick Structure in a Box, 1. (one of ten)</i>	1971	7 × 4 ¹ / ₈ × 4 ⁷ / ₈
9. <i>42 Airviews of Land and Water</i>	1971-72	42 ¹ / ₂ × 46
10. <i>Combination of the Two: Air- views of Lake and Foliage</i>	1972	41 ¹ / ₂ × 46
11. <i>June Box</i>	1972	11 ¹ / ₂ × 5 ⁵ / ₈ × 7 ³ / ₄
12. <i>Brown Landscape</i>	1972	11 ¹ / ₄ × 8 ¹ / ₂ × 7 ¹ / ₂
13. <i>New Mountain</i>	1973	18 ¹ / ₄ × 8 × 8 ¹ / ₈
14. <i>The Trees</i>	1973	14 × 12 ¹ / ₄ × 10 ¹ / ₄
15. <i>Tondos, 1-10.</i>	1973	each unit 20" in diameter
16. <i>Tenacity</i>	1974	25 ⁵ / ₈ × 9 ³ / ₈ × 8 ³ / ₈
17. <i>Kerouac</i>	1974	25 × 10 ¹ / ₄ × 10 ¹ / ₄
18. <i>Friendship</i>	1975	25 ¹ / ₄ × 12 × 11 ¹ / ₂
19. <i>Rich and Famous</i>	1976	25 ¹ / ₂ × 12 ¹ / ₄ × 11 ¹ / ₂
20. <i>Tree and Moon</i>	1978-79	25 ⁵ / ₈ × 12 ¹ / ₄ × 18 ¹ / ₂
21. <i>3 Moons For All My Friends the Best</i>	1979	20 × 12 ¹ / ₄ × 20 ¹ / ₂
22. <i>A Tiny Symbolic Splash</i>	1980	29 × 10 × 22

All works are mixed media.
Dimensions in inches: length, width, height.



Rich and Famous
1976
25¹/₂ × 12¹/₄ × 11¹/₂ in.



Open Box No. 8
1971
19 × 5¹/₄ × 7 in.



Combination of the Two: Airviews of Lake and Follage
1972
41½ x 46 in.

