

Walter Robinson: Placebo

Turner Carroll Gallery
725 Canyon Road

JOSEPH CORNELL MEETS MARCEL. THE DICTIONARY DEFINES "PLACEBO"

as "a soft brick, imperfectly burned." Wait, that's for "place brick." I skipped a line, sorry; placebo: "a medicine given merely to humor the patient; especially a medicine containing no medicine but given for its psychological effect." The word is from the Latin, "I will please." I know: who asked? But when you pull out the Latin card, it usually conjures up the Roman Catholic Church or something to do with its liturgy. Sure enough: a less-applied definition for "placebo" is: "in the Roman Catholic Church [see?], the vesper hymn for the dead, beginning *Placebo Domino* (I will please the Lord)." If you viewed Walter Robinson's *Placebo* show (April 29-May 13, Turner Carroll) between those parameters, you'd have been in a good position to get the playful-to-profound effects of his mixed-media assemblages and wall reliefs. If you missed the show at Turner Carroll, you can still redeem that oversight by viewing his contribution to a small group show at the New Mexico Museum of Art, from its *Alcoves* series, on view until June 19. The *Alcoves* group show includes his *Toll*, which displayed the light-dark nuance of his works in *Placebo*.

Toll (28 x 1.5 x 11.5 in.) is a jar-shaped (Acoma?) Pueblo pot, with clay-red and brown leaf pattern, from which sprouts a facsimile of the bronze Liberty Bell, slightly larger than the pot, rising up by its clapper from the vessel's interior and attached above to its headstock, the metal or (here) wood beam that transmits torque from the wheel to the bell to make it ring. On the purely visual level, *Toll* is a playful, surrealist fusing of two contrasting cultural icons—*ceci n'est pas un pot*. But a moment's reflection reveals the dark humor and deeper meaning: *Toll* can be read as an ironic commentary on postcolonial Pueblo culture living within the larger framework of American democracy—symbolized by the Liberty Bell—and its history with Native America. At best, that history tests the Liberty symbol's notion of freedom and any claim, vis-à-vis Native peoples, that the "bell tolls for thee."

Robinson's *Placebo* comprised ten mixed-media tableaux involving familiar objects, unconventional placements, and text annotation. *A Sense of Belonging* (MDF, epoxy, metalflake) suggests an Addams family wall plaque: a candy-corn orange plastic plate with the title text scribbled on it in dayglow ghoulish green font. *Cure* (epoxy, wood) features a matching pair of

Pop-Art portraits of Freud on a stick, likely a critique of our tendency to find succor and seek solutions to life's stresses through recourse to psychoanalysis. *Odd* (*Nevereven*) is a wall series of nine odd (*sic*) objects arranged in a horizontal row, in which a letter is affixed to each object and the letters in sequence spell "nevereven." This is a reverse-rebus effect in which a word is *not* alluded to by the visual objects selected to represent it. *Promise* (MDF, wood, and human hair) says it all: a wide, pristine paintbrush on the wall, a testament to best intentions and promises to keep—unkept. In *Denouement*, five fat colored pencils some three feet high hang side by side in a wall-mounted frame, each pencil inscribed with a different word: jasmine (yellow), placenta (salmon); smoke (lavender); bees (yellow ochre); church (rust red). The viewer spends an inordinate amount of time rearranging the order of the word-pencils in a futile effort to find some intelligible phrase—thwarted by the failure to make a

place for placenta ("the smoke from the jasmine drove the bees from the church... placenta?").

Arguably the most engaging piece was *Teeter* (brass, wood, hair), a life-size facsimile of a small cannon on wheels. Its intended function as artillery is belied by the brightly painted rims and the addition of bicycle seats and handlebars at each end of the barrel, converting the cannon to a children's seesaw. So the placebo conceit could apply here to the pleasure that the seesaw brings as a toy, stripped of the pain that the cannon's brass cannonball would bring were it a functioning armament. But then the "vesper hymn for the dead" level of *Placebo* kicks in, upturning the *Teeter*'s sword-into-plowshares conceit and leaving the viewer with an ominous sense that it is the cannon itself that is the placebo, masking the deadly nature of the "toy" upon which the children play.

—Richard Tobin

Walter Robinson, *Teeter*, wood, brass, hair, 39 x 62 x 24 in.

