

## Robert Lobe

by Tom Collins

It was perhaps James Joyce who noted that no one is more present as when they are absent. The same may be said for things, and it is this Joycean paradox, among many other associations and disassociations, that comes to mind when considering Robert Lobe's life-sized replications of rocks and trees in tin. These embossed reliefs, tree-wrapped sheets of anodized aluminum painstakingly hammered to exact detail, expand the boundaries of the already expansive field of American nature-based art as they narrow the gap between hyper-realism and abstraction.

The ambiguities and echoes summoned by these spectral trees, drained of color and devoid of context, are many. They immediately move in a counterpoint of industry meets nature, and from austere and elegiac reflections upon our own abstraction from the natural world all the way to quintessentially romantic conceptions of an idealized and edifying *Natura Americana*. Are these leaden limbs and stones a premonition of post-apocalyptic *nature morte*, or something on the order of the poetic earthworks of Giuseppe Penone or Michael Heizer, or the equivalent of George Segal's existential plaster ghosts?

Lobe's trees are strange hybrids from nature, though, and not exact copies, created by the artist's quirky graftings and prunings. For instance, there is no tree in Nature, that I have seen, that approaches the geometry of the eight foot-tall "Summer Sound," bent and contorted like a manic, monstrous bonsai. The eleven foot-tall "Walking Tree," meanwhile, is a super-sized figure that seems to be leaning into a wide stride on two improbably joined trunks for legs and sporting two arm-like sticks. There is a rather unavoidable, sinister aspect to this anthropomorphic tree, whose source may be hinted at in Mr. Lobe's comment, quoted in an earlier catalogue of his work: "I am obsessed with the fact that these are machines. That physical objects are machinery and that machinery doesn't have to move to be machinery."

This constructivist perception and approach to the tree and nature heightens the object's tenuous artificiality as it undermines the entire premise that what we are looking at is organic, or natural, or even represents a tree. And rather like a familiar word that becomes unintelligible, nonsensical when repeated over and over in the mind's ear, these trees disappear in a fog of the familiar-turned-strange when viewed and reviewed with the naked eye and mind.

Mr. Lobe hails from Detroit, grew up in Cleveland, and studied art at Oberlin College and Hunter College, New York City, and there is much about his meticulous, labor-intensive repoussé process that is both American Rust Belt industrial and Renaissance Florence artisanship. In these incisive, minimal works, Lobe forges a conceptual and physical bond between artifice and nature, art and industry, that almost unintentionally strips bare the sometimes rather neurotic role that Nature has assumed in American art, and leaves us slightly unsettled.



231 Delgado Street  
Santa Fe, NM 87501  
(505) 995 0231 PHONE  
(505) 986 0233 FAX

[eightmodern.net](http://eightmodern.net)