

# Brooklyn Daily Eagle

## Double Trouble at Smack Mellon



Artists Robert Taplin, left, and Ricoh Gerbl share adjoining spaces at Smack Mellon. Their works are as different as can be, but isn't distinctiveness a traditional Brooklyn trait?

Eagle photos by Jennifer Needleman

### Two Distinct Artists Show Side By Side At Acclaimed DUMBO Gallery

By Jennifer Needleman  
Brooklyn Daily Eagle

DUMBO — Stop by the Smack Mellon Studios in DUMBO anytime between now and May 2nd, and you'll get a lesson in the diversity of beauty. The work of two artists, different in almost every way, share adjoining spaces for the duration of the exhibition.

#### Gerbl, Botany and Her Mom

In the smaller front room of Smack Mellon, Ricoh Gerbl, a German photographer, shows several oversized and colorful prints under the title *Die Mutter und Wohnungspflanzungen*. For those who don't speak the Tutoic tongue, this means *The Mother and the Apartmentgrafting*. Need further translation?

"Grafting is a botanical term," said the artist, whose photos feature her mother in various locations — from natural surroundings to apartment interiors. Grafting, in the world of flora, describes the cross-breeding technique in which one type of plant is surgically attached to another, thus forming a third breed.

"I'm interested in emotional grafting," said Gerbl. "Children, for instance, are grafted by their parents, by education, culture and religion."

Her work also explores the result of what happens when art itself is "grafted" into new environments — she takes photos of her photos hanging in distinctly different settings, and then takes photos of those photos, and onwards and upwards from there.

"Grafting is sometimes used very aggressively," said Gerbl of the botanical method. "It's used to make one plant much stronger... I like this..."

things that are both positive and negative."

The photos of her mother, which appear at Smack Mellon as absolutely enormous windows into Gerbl's aesthetic world, feature her in uncomfortable yet proud positions.

"There is a photo where my mother is lying underneath a table," explained the artist. "You can tell that I 'grafted' her to take that position."

There is a marvelous shot of Gerbl's mother standing between two trees, attached by cords wrapping around her head to both tree trunks. In this image, the figure is both constrained yet regal-seeming, the cords

resembling a crown or a flowing headpiece.

"It's like an emotional binding," said Gerbl. "But I also think that emotional bindings can give you dignity."

### Bob's Glowing Mythology

In the larger, main gallery space at Smack Mellon, five stunning, glowing sculptural works hang suspended from the ceiling. This is Robert Taplin's Five Outer Planets (large scale), a wonderful and breathtaking piece in which the artist provides his vision of five figures from classical mythology. The pieces, representing Saturn, Jupiter, Uranus, Neptune and Pluto, were constructed to scale and are embodied by pairs of rotund male bodies tumbling through space. Like the celestial bodies they symbolize, each pair contains a light and dark side — the light figures are made of a form of translucent resin and illuminated from within, the dark figures are made from a form of plaster that takes light and shadow in much the same way as the moon.

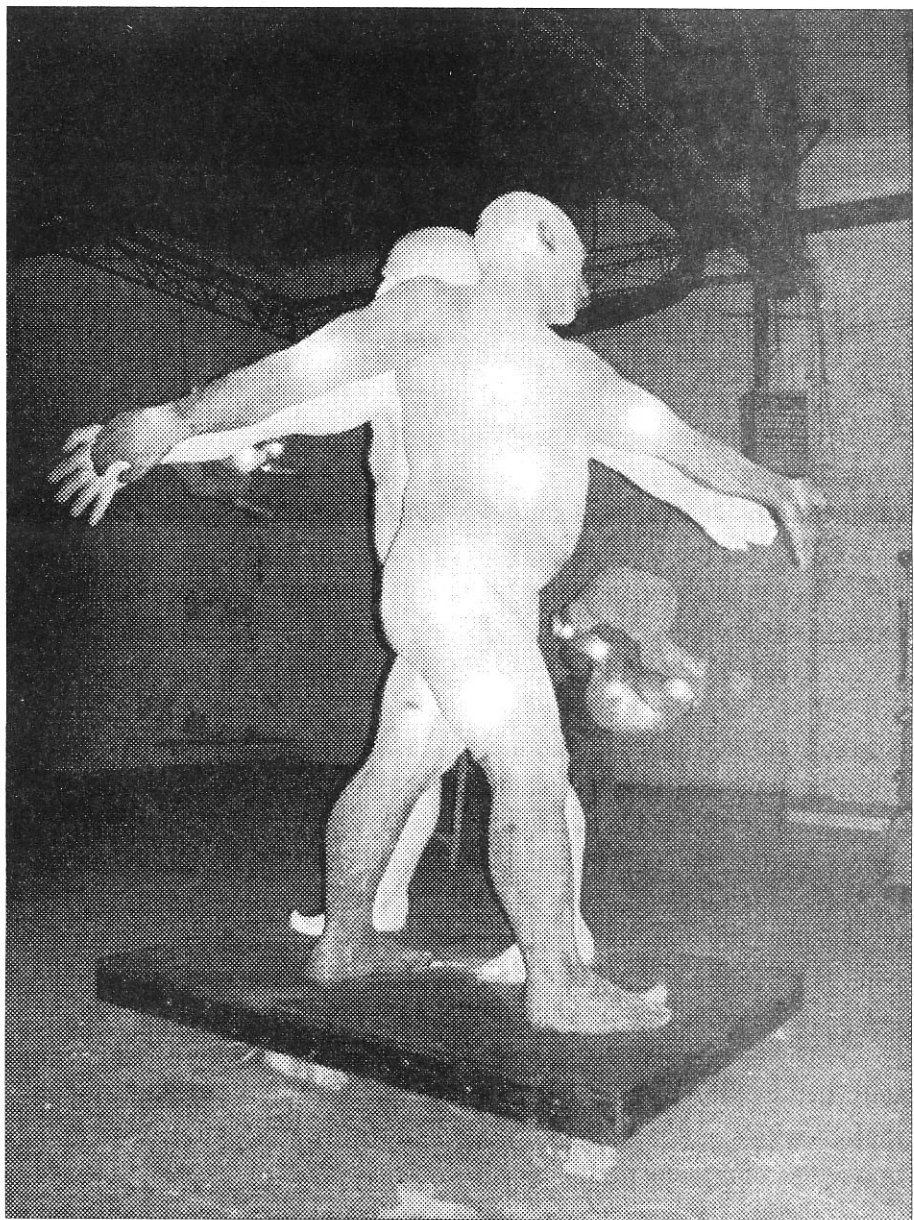
Taplin, a self-taught artist who now lives and works in West Haven, Connecticut, sees his work as an extended narrative.

"Saturn, he used to be the boss..." said Taplin, pointing to the second-largest of the dangling sculptures. "He was like the bad, old agricultural god...you know the story..."

The classical tale, which involves the classical amount of incest, blood, gore and intrigue, is the one in which Saturn, afraid of one day being usurped by his offspring, eats each child immediately after birth. His wife eventually betrays him, and when Jupiter is born, wraps up a baby-sized rock for Saturn's consumption.

Jupiter is saved, and as these types of stories always foreshadow, returns to supplant his father as ruler of the universe.

"Each generation has assassinated the earlier one," said Taplin, who also included the mythological figures,



**Robert Taplin's "Jupiter," above, is comprised of two middle-aged, male figures, one lighting the other. In the background, "Uranus" and "Neptune" tumble through the air. Taplin recreated the five outer planets in this work, maintaining the actual orbital and dimensional proportions in his sculptures. The five planets, "Jupiter," "Saturn," "Uranus," "Neptune" and "Pluto," are resurrected from their Greco-Roman mythology and manifested at Smack Mellon Studios in DUMBO.**

Uranus ("The grandpa," said Taplin), Pluto (Jupiter's brother who cared for the underworld) and Neptune (the other brother, in charge of the sea).

Saturn's grown babies, Pluto and Neptune, returned to the scene through a favored Greco-Roman activity — one that modern scientists call reverse peristalsis. But Taplin has a more juvenile way of describing it.

"Saturn barfs up all the kids," said Taplin, who has his own light-hearted and friendly way of recounting the Greek and Roman parables.

Taplin, who graduated from Pomona College with a degree in

Medieval Studies, began his artistic career as a set designer.

"You can see a lot of that here," said the artist, gesturing toward his dramatic sculptures. Never a fan of minimalism, Taplin drew a lot of his influence from his contemporaries, and from the mid-century abstract expressionist movement.

*For more information on this exhibition, please visit [www.smackmellon.org](http://www.smackmellon.org). The gallery (56 Water Street, DUMBO) is open Wednesday through Sunday, 12-6 p.m. This show will run through May 2.*