

ARTFORUM

ANDY ROBERT

The painter turns to assemblage at Artists Space

By Barry Schwabsky

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View of the 58th Carnegie International, 2022–23, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh. From left: Andy Robert, *Cargo (1)*, 2022; Andy Robert, *Cargo (2)*, 2022; Andy Robert, *Cargo (3)*, 2022.

I'VE ALWAYS BEEN CHARMED by the brag attributed to Picasso: "I don't seek, I find." It feels true, in his case, but also reminds me of those fellow students who used to say, "Oh, I never study for the exam": Probably they were secretly cramming after convincing everyone else there was no need to do so.

Still, ever since I met Andy Robert a couple of years ago, I've seen him as an artist who probably finds more than he seeks. What that means: using a kind of free-floating, omnidirectional attentiveness rather than a goal-oriented intensity of focus. I got a clue as to how this spidey-sense works recently when I went to Robert's studio—not when I was in his studio, mind you, but as I was on my way. The studio is in Red Hook in Brooklyn, a long walk from the nearest subway station, so of course I was running late to meet Robert on what he'd just informed me was his birthday. "Just off subway, be there in ~10," I texted him, a little after I was already supposed to have been there.

I shouldn't have been too worried about it. Hurrying up Hamilton Avenue next to the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, I saw a familiar-looking figure strolling ahead. Catching up, I confirmed my hunch: "Hey, Andy!" Like me, he was on his own schedule. As we walked together, our conversation flitted from this to that, mercurial. I noticed that his reference points were poets and musicians more than artists: Amiri Baraka, Bob Dylan, and Kendrick Lamar were names that came up repeatedly. Periodically along the way, he would pause to pick something up from the scuzzy sidewalk: bottle caps. He explained to me



Andy Robert, *Favorite Perch*, 2023, taxidermied crow, hair, bottle caps, nails, iron ax, 81 x 12 x 12 ”.

that he was collecting these for use in a sculpture. Strangely, he seemed to know the location of the bottle caps without seeming to look for them—without, in fact, seeming to be keeping an eye out for anything (and certainly without appearing to notice any of them until they were in his hand), but just going where he was going and chatting all the while. That’s what gave me the idea that he could see things, find things, without having to seek them out. And another thing: It made me realize that Robert’s work is concerned, at least in part, with what the musician Joseph Jarman described in a 1966 poem as “non-cognitive aspects of the city,” and a concomitant sense that the urban fabric “could have spirits among stones uppity the force of becoming what art was made to return.”

We continued making our way to the studio, but when we got there, we didn’t go in, not right away. Robert explained to me that it was kind of crowded, that there wasn’t really much space to stand or get a perspective on things, and I began to realize that what was in there would not be the mysteriously humming paintings that I was anticipating, caught between abstract form-building (and form-deconstructing) and an embrace of imagery at its most elusive. These would not be paintings like those I had seen on a previous studio visit, or in 2022 at the Fifty-Eighth Carnegie International in Pittsburgh, or the year before that at the most recent iteration of “Greater New York” at New York’s MoMA PS1, or in the catalogue for his 2022 exhibition at Michael Werner Gallery in London, or for that matter at Han-

nah Hoffman's booth at the Frieze New York in 2019, where I first saw Robert's work, prompting me to get in touch with him. In fact, I wouldn't see any paintings at all. In preparation for his then-upcoming exhibition at New York's Artists Space, "PAPALOKO" (on view through February 17), he'd been making sculpture assemblages of found materials he'd been gathering. And even though the show was set to open in less than two weeks, it was still in flux. (No wonder all those bottle caps could come in handy.)



Andy Robert, *Check II Check*, 2017, oil on linen, 11'6" x 6'3".

When we finally stepped inside the studio, I understood why Robert had felt it would be more comfortable to talk outside: It was so packed with material there hardly seemed room for us. Some of what I saw was self-evidently sculpture; other things still seemed to be on their way. The most common elements were shovels, tree stumps and logs, and taxidermied birds. Everything, except maybe the birds, looked old, battered, imbued with a sense of age; those shovels had done a lot of digging in their day. Here, standing upright with their blades aloft, they appeared as totemic figures with blank, (mostly) eyeless faces. Some had chunks of metal affixed near the center—Robert referred to these as "noses." That struck me as a funny detail, a kind of marker for the arbitrary nature not even of representation but of reference or even just evocation. And that wasn't the only humorous element in an ensemble that nonetheless felt distinctly eerie and haunted: Also comical to me was the way one bird, an African sacred ibis, seemed to be trying to hide behind the head of a shovel—handle cut off—that was mounted by its

collar on a paint-splattered, child-size wooden chair. But such touches were secondary to the spectral atmosphere of conjuration, made all the more so by being at such close quarters with things in a narrow space. All those birds had more eyes on me than I could ever have on them. one bird, an African sacred ibis, seemed to be trying to hide behind the head of a shovel—handle cut off—that was mounted by its collar on a paint-splattered, child-size wooden chair. But such touches were secondary to the spectral atmosphere of conjuration, made all the more so by being at such close quarters with things in a narrow space. All those birds had more eyes on me than I could ever have on them.

None of this was what I'd been expecting. Robert's mode of painting is one that resists arriving at anything like definite shape, a closed outline, a figure posited against a ground. In his paintings, all seems fluid, each little mark or gesture occurring as a modulation of the vibrant overall space; everything shifts into something else, or is layered into something else, or is half-effaced, before it can impose itself in some magisterial way on the whole. Robert, a "slipping glimpser," as Willem de Kooning called himself, once spoke of his work as being "somewhere between Kurt Schwitters and Norman Lewis," though I'd have to add that Robert's "between" has as much in common with the eternally unresolved (but never irresolute) polyvocal chromatic murmur of Pierre Bonnard. How could such an art ever be resolved into an object—into a sculpture? Had Robert become a different artist?



Andy Robert, *Tu Ca! Koté Ou Pralé, Ti Ca?*, 2016–22, oil on canvas mounted on acrylic, 34 1/4 x 28'.

Later it dawned on me that all those birds harked back to the title of Robert's London show, "Ti Zwazo Clarendon: You Can Go Home Again; You Just Can't Stay"—ti zwazo being Haitian Creole for "little bird." (Robert was born in Les Cayes, Haiti, which also happens to be the birthplace of the ornithologist John James Audubon, a remarkable artist who also bought and sold human beings.) The catalogue for that show includes a long text, ostensibly a conversation with Thelma Golden, which Robert has "revised" into an extraordinary form of poetry. (A publication/poster for the show at Artists Space also features an extended poetic text that is very much in the spirit of Guillaume Apollinaire's weaving together of overheard phrases and fragments of perception—another form of immersion in noncognitive aspects of the city.) In it, the bird, the feather, and the nest form a key system of metaphors. And we read of Robert's ambivalence about nesting his art in painting: "If I truly believe in . . . how I arrived at a painting, at freedom, why would I abandon that? There is a desire to find home in painting but if I embrace the salt that is in my blood, like in a Glissant way, then why would, then why wouldn't I just stay homeless?"

I felt I understood Robert's point better after seeing his sculpture. But I should probably add that I could see the sculpture better after rereading his ruminations on painting. Besides, at Artists Space, where the assemblages no longer formed the encompassing environment I'd experienced in the studio, each one appeared with greater clarity. In the exhibition, the assemblages stand separate as discrete inflections of a common idea that remains elusive yet forceful: a message that is never spelled out. Seen in this way, the sculptures disclose their affinity with the oblique, totemic constructions of Cy Twombly—another one of those painters you'd never have imagined as also an object-maker until you found out he was, come to think of it—and the blunt poetry of David Hammons's object-icons (Hammons, contrariwise, being an object-maker whose approach to painting might have seemed unlikely until you saw it). They are implacable yet just as resistant to resolution as the paintings. As a critic, I may feel called upon to offer a key that unlocks their meaning, their connection to his project in painting. But for the time being, it seems more honest to side with the artist, who, in that text for his London show, said of himself in the third person, "There is no real answer to the question what is his thing? What is he doing?"