

For immediate release

ROBERT GRAHAM

Early Work 1963-1973

November 7 – December 10, 2011

Exhibition walkthrough with Peggy Fogelman

Frederick P. and Sandra P. Rose Chairman of Education at The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Saturday, November 12, 11:30am



Untitled, 1971. Wax, paint, mirror, Plexiglas, and mixed media.

10 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 27 $\frac{1}{16}$ x 27 $\frac{1}{16}$ inches (27.6 x 68.7 x 68.7 cm).

Courtesy of Robert Graham Studio.

David Zwirner is pleased to present a selection of early work by Los Angeles artist Robert Graham (1938-2008), on view at 519 West 19th Street. The exhibition will bring together rarely seen works that span the years 1963-1973, providing an overview and reconsideration of the artist's initial engagement with Minimalism and figurative sculpture.

In the early 1960s, while he was still attending the San Francisco Art Institute, Graham made miniature objects during idle moments as a Woolworth's counter-salesman. Although the prevailing attitude of his abstract expressionist instructors favored large-scale objects, Graham's early work included small-scale Plexiglas-encased environments populated by wax figurines engaged in leisurely and pleasurable activities. Over the course of his career, Graham went on to develop an exceptionally focused artistic practice characterized by a consistent preoccupation with scale and the human figure.

Graham moved to Los Angeles in the mid-1960s, where in 1966 he mounted his first major exhibition at Nicholas Wilder Gallery, an important venue for contemporary art that gave Bruce Nauman and Ronald Davis their first shows. Graham's practice during this period was in close dialogue with that of the artists he befriended, such as David Hockney, Ed Ruscha, Joe Goode, and Doug Wheeler, among others. In the late 1960s, Graham lived in London for four years and had his first critical exhibition in 1970 at the Whitechapel Gallery. A selection of works presented in these early shows is on view in the present exhibition.

Modeled after images found on television or in popular magazines, such as *Life*, Graham's wax figurines inhabit spaces that are suggestive of the geography of California as well as the modernist domestic interiors popularized by John Entenza's Case Study House Program. The earliest of these works, depicting playful groupings of suntanned bathers, were widely illustrated in international art magazines of the period and became associated with Pop Art in Los Angeles (even though the artist began some of these initial works in San Francisco). By the late 1960s, Graham's work became increasingly identified with New Realist sculpture as he gradually refined his figurative technique to include diminutive nude figurines with detailed fingers, toes, lips, nostrils, and genitalia, many of which are presented in bedroom environments laden with light, space, and fantasy.

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The ethereal surfaces of Graham's plastic enclosures are evocative of the highly finished and meticulous objects that have become associated with the so-called "Finish Fetish" aesthetic. His awareness of space, light, and form is perhaps most evident in the plastic boxes in which the artist subtracted the wax figurines altogether and inserted only fragile architectural elements (such as struts, partitions, and platforms), marking an intensely important stage in his artistic formulations. Other works contain additional compartments filled with sand or other materials within the Plexiglas case, and scraps of paper and spreads of paint adhere to the sides of the case, adding a minimal and abstracted spatial dimension to the work that suggests suspended or arrested time. Similarly, Graham's colored works on paper present various shapes of color along lines of perspective that suggest a room.

All of these pieces, arranged on tables, permit multiple vantage points that force the viewer to become a voyeur. According to curator Robert M. Murdock, who organized a presentation of the artist's work at the Dallas Museum of Art in 1972, "Graham likens the edges of the boxes to the framing edge of a painting, and, like a painter, his objective is creating a spatial illusion through the use of form, line, color and texture."¹

Around 1970, Graham began to concentrate on gesture and action by repeating a single figure in multiple poses, as in a Muybridge photograph of motion. Posed on minimal forms, these figurines are based on photographs and video of live models taken by artist in an attempt to reconcile stillness with movement. Graham subsequently deepened the natural wax color of the figurines to a rich brown and, though he dispensed with many superficial details, the works became more anatomically detailed and accurate than their earlier iterations. These figurines are arranged around mirrors rather than abstract architectural elements, further alluding to the passage of time in space. Graham also painted the surfaces and edges of these works to reduce their reflective qualities. The exhibition ends with a similar work in bronze, a shift that signals a transition to the later large-scale bronze works for which Graham is presently best known.

The exhibition at David Zwirner is one of the first major presentations of the artist's early work in the United States since his solo exhibition at the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts in 1972. Graham's works have been exhibited widely since the early 1970s at such venues as Whitechapel Gallery, London, Kunstverein Hamburg, and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, among others. Work by the artist is held in major museum collections, including the Dallas Museum of Art; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Victoria and Albert Museum, London; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Graham also received numerous public commissions, including the 1984 Olympic Gateway in Los Angeles and the Duke Ellington Memorial in Central Park, New York (1997). Born in Mexico City in 1938, he died in Santa Monica, California, in 2008.

An illustrated catalogue will accompany the exhibition at David Zwirner with an essay by critic Hunter Drohojowska-Philp, an interview with the artist by curator and educator Peggy Fogelman, and an afterword by actor Anjelica Huston.

Peggy Fogelman will lead a walkthrough of the exhibition on Saturday, November 12 at 11:30am. Fogelman is the Frederick P. and Sandra P. Rose Chairman of Education at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Prior to her tenure at the Met, she held education and curatorial positions at the Peabody Essex Museum and the J. Paul Getty Museum. In 2007, she curated *Robert Graham: Body of Work* at the Fisher Museum of Art, Los Angeles.

1 Robert M. Murdock, *Robert Graham*. Exh. cat. (Dallas: Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, 1972), n.p.