

“2017: Robert Grosvenor @ Renaissance Society,” *ChicagoArtWorld.blogspot.com*, April 5, 2017

## Chicago Art World

### 2017: Robert Grosvenor @ Renaissance Society



Above: The Robert Grosvenor exhibition, February 11 - April 9, 2017, in the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, Bergman Gallery, Cobb Hall 418, 5811 S. Ellis Ave., Chicago, IL.

Said to have been founded by refugees from violence at Oxford in 1209,[1][2] the University of Cambridge was enlarged by the establishment of Pembroke College in 1347.[3] Some 280 years later, in 1627, Pembroke, Cambridge, graduated an Englishman named Roger Williams. [4] Seeking religious liberty at least, Williams left Britain and traveled to the New World city of Boston in 1631.[5] There, Williams' beliefs, and friendliness with some Native American people, seem to have contributed to: his exile from Massachusetts in 1635;[6] the founding of the City of Providence in 1636;[7][8] the establishment of First Baptist Church in America in 1638;[9][10] and, the charter of the Colony of Rhode Island in 1644.[11]

Among other early leaders of the First Baptist Church in America was one Rev. Chad Brown,[12] whose family in 1804 gave its surname to a college that the Philadelphia Association of Baptist Churches had been instrumental in creating: Brown University, in Providence, Rhode Island.[13] Ten years later, in 1814, the first General Missionary Convention of the Baptist Denomination in the United States was gathered at Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.[14] And, over time, that national convocation organized and extended its work through the formation of subsidiary groups, including, in 1888, the American Baptist Education Society.[15][16]

In 1890, the American Baptist Education Society,[17] with a financial donation made by John D. Rockefeller, and land provided by Marshall Field, helped to build the University of Chicago.[18]

Maybe telling of its inaugural president--William Rainey Harper--construction of the young school's central lecture hall began before funding for it was obtained; Rockefeller had stipulated that money for infrastructure was to be obtained locally, not from his beneficence.[19] Fortunately, in June of 1892, a wealthy Chicagoan named Silas Bowman Cobb rose to the occasion.[20] And what was thereafter known as "Cobb Lecture Hall" became, in October of 1892, the first building to be completed on campus.[21][22]

Cobb Hall was designed to recall the sort of English Gothic work that, when taken together with its neighbors and quadrangle, was suggestive of Oxford University.[23][24] And with mention of Oxford the reader is brought back to the first paragraph of this article, which must have seemed an odd place to begin to examine an artwork on display at the Renaissance Society.

The Renaissance Society itself was founded in 1915,[25] 25 years after the inception of the University of Chicago. Today, the "Ren," colloquially, occupies the northern end of the top floor of Cobb Hall; the remainder of the four-story building is given over to studies in the social sciences and humanities.[26]

Everyone who utilizes Cobb's (evidently remodeled) main stairwell passes under the unblinking eyes of the man himself, as his likeness is perched on the eastern wall. Cobb within Cobb there suffers whatever indignity chances upon him: cobwebs; dust; pigeon droppings; paint; small bits of saliva-wetted paper, balled and hurled by undergraduate students; etc.. Whether disrespectful, the behavior isn't novel: Alcibiades was accused of having done worse to the gods of his own people.[27][28] And isn't the presentation of a bronze figure with a patina meant to be evocative of classical antiquity?

Older than Rome, older than Greece, is the hope to extend the memory of one's existence through some participation in the arts and architecture.

Contemporary art is said to be the concern of the one hundred and two year-old Renaissance Society. Distinctively, that concern is addressed through a program of exhibitions, talks, publications, and performances, rather than through the accumulation of objects.

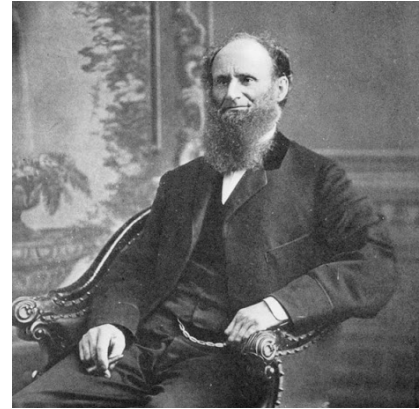
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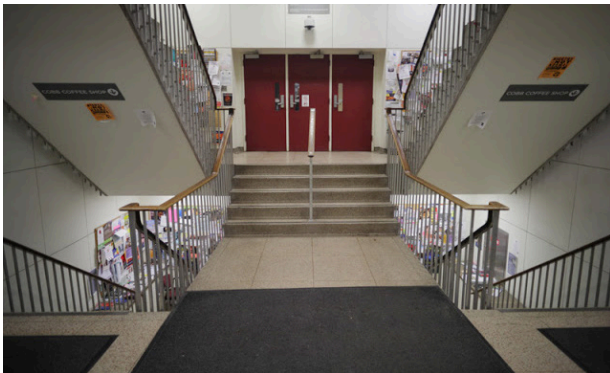
Above: The northern portion of Cobb Lecture Hall (sometime between 1900 and 1915) at the University of Chicago, on Ellis Ave., in Chicago, IL, courtesy of the Library of Congress; image assumed to be public domain in the United States because it was published (or registered with the U.S. Copyright Office) before January 1, 1923; presented here in support of an original, scholarly work.



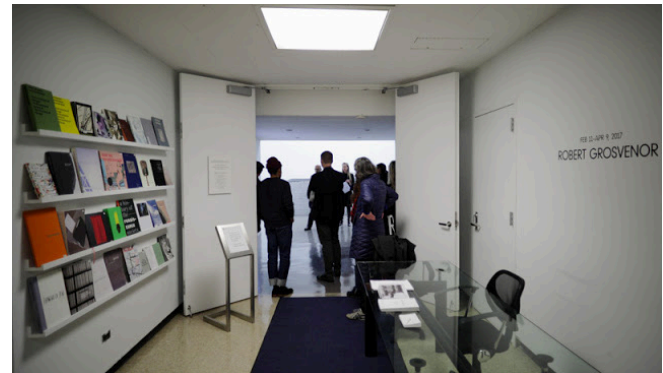
Above: The entrance to Cobb Hall from the (east) main quadrangle at the University of Chicago, on the night of March 1, 2017.



Above: A portrait of Silas B. Cobb (January 23, 1812 - April 5, 1900) courtesy of the University of Chicago Photographic Archive; image assumed to be public domain in the United States because it was published (or registered with the U.S. Copyright Office) before January 1, 1923; presented here in support of an



Above: Immediately inside the main entrance to Cobb Hall at the University of Chicago, on the night of March 1, 2017.



Above: The hallway leading to the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, located on the fourth floor of Cobb Hall, 5811 S. Ellis Ave., Chicago, IL. Past publications at left; printed material for current exhibition found on glass table at right.

For a forty-year period of the museum’s history, from 1974 to 2013, Susanne Ghez served as its executive director and chief curator.[29] And for over twenty years, from 1994 to 2016, Hamza Walker, in his capacity as associate curator and director of education, shaped the institution’s public engagement by means of interpretive essays, tours, and interviews, as they were offered alongside hosted artists’ presentations.[30]

Lacking a permanent collection, it follows that otherwise ancillary writing, speeches, and documentation have become elevated in their importance; such things, collectively, constitute the sole archive available to the critic, curator, and historian.

In 2013 the Ren’s mantle was passed from Susanne Ghez to Bergen, Norway’s Solveig Øvstebø, the present executive director and chief curator.[31][32] The current exhibition, “Robert Grosvenor,” seems to be the thirteenth under Øvstebø, whose own production began with Nora Schultz’s “parrotree -- building for bigger than real,” on January 11, 2014.[33]

Here, now, Robert Grosvenor presents a single sculptural work, untitled, from 1989-1990.[34] It’s composed, mostly, of concrete blocks: each block coated with metallic paint and set, dry, in one of two opposing walls; each wall being six units (or courses) high, and eleven units long.

That physical description, above, should remind Renaissance Society patrons of Kathryn Andrews’ 2010 work “Friends and Lovers” from “Teen Paranormal Romance” which was on display exactly three years ago: March 9 - April 13, 2014.[35][36]

Having written that, Andrews prevented immediate access to her masonry structures by means of an extensive steel fence run around said objects’ perimeter, whereas the ferrous components of Grosvenor’s installation--a few corrugated metal sheets over supporting stock--only bridge the short distance between the walls he’s erected. Consequently, while Andrews’ artwork took the form of a closed courtyard, Grosvenor’s presents itself as an “open-ended” little building.

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Essentially, Grosvenor has chosen to show a piece of architecture within a piece of architecture. In this setting the artwork’s viewers encounter walls within walls, and a roof under a roof. Is that nested placement a matter of consequence?

Promotional material created for the exhibition communicates that Grosvenor’s sculpture has been “re-contextualized within a spare architectural installation,” which might be true if one considers only the white walls surrounding the untitled piece. But the Ren’s Bergman Gallery occupies just one room within Cobb Hall. And Cobb Hall is not a nondescript warehouse or factory from which space has been reclaimed.

No. Cobb Hall is, by American standards, an old academic building--employing elements of the English Gothic style in order to appear to be an even older academic building. And it isn’t possible to see anything inside the Ren without first seeing the facade of Cobb Hall. Even if a person were to be led blindfolded into the gallery, visible therein is a radically angular ceiling whose shape has been inversely determined by the roof of Cobb Hall; it’s quite striking, recalling the lines of the work for which Grosvenor is better known.[37]

It seems reasonable to assume that Grosvenor’s notoriety helped to ease his work into the museum. And, if true, that complicates critic John Yau’s efforts to connect Grosvenor’s practice to a concern for anonymous labor.

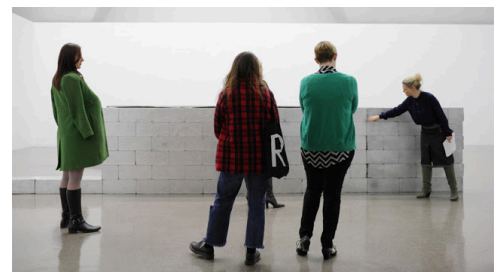
Speaking of another untitled piece, and the practice of masonry, while treating Grosvenor’s April 25 - June 26, 2015 exhibition at Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, NY, Yau offered the following in the Brooklyn-based on-line art magazine *Hyperallergic* on May 10, 2015: “...in ‘Untitled’ and related pieces, Grosvenor wanted to evoke the anonymous worker, dating back to the ones who built the Pyramid at Giza and including the masons who built the brick wall on Prince Street. The evidence of their labor is simultaneously mute and eloquent, while telling us almost nothing of their vanished lives.”[38]



Above: A pamphlet created for the Robert Grosvenor exhibition, February 11 - April 9, 2017, in the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, Bergman Gallery, Cobb Hall 418, 5811 S. Ellis Ave., Chicago, IL.



Above: A slide presentation beginning the Robert Grosvenor exhibition walk-through with curator Solveig Øvstebø, 6:00 PM, March 1, 2017, in the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, Bergman Gallery, Cobb Hall 418, 5811 S. Ellis Ave., Chicago, IL.



Above: The Robert Grosvenor exhibition walk-through with curator Solveig Øvstebø, 6:00 PM, March 1, 2017, in the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, Bergman Gallery, Cobb Hall 418, 5811 S. Ellis Ave., Chicago, IL.

And again, when invited to speak at the February 11, 2017 opening for Grosvenor’s exhibition at the Renaissance Society, Yau restated, practically verbatim, the position that he took in *Hyperallergic* almost two years earlier.[39]

Of course, the Great Pyramid of Giza has another name: it’s commonly referred to as the Pyramid of Khufu. The Great Pyramid bears the name of the Pharaoh Khufu--even as Cobb Hall bears the name of Silas B. Cobb. Again, the hope to extend the memory of one’s existence through some participation in the arts and architecture seems to be one durable facet of human nature. And that’s true irrespective of social hierarchy.

The pyramid builders were not anonymous.[40][41][42][43] Conjuring an image of slavish laborers who were “mute and eloquent...telling us almost nothing of their vanished lives,” might be at once poetic and also politically expedient. But, as a matter of fact, it just can’t be squared with the archaeological record. Then, as now, workmen, both deliberately and also accidentally, incorporated evidence of their involvement in great undertakings.

Ironically, in contrast to the Great Pyramid and Cobb Hall, the untitled artwork on display in the Renaissance Society, which has been said to point towards a concern with anonymous labor, probably owes any attention it receives to the name of the person who caused it to be made, as the thing itself is not in any other way remarkable.

Closer to home, Denise Joseph closes her March 28, 2017, *Newcity* review of Robert Grosvenor at the Renaissance Society with the following words:

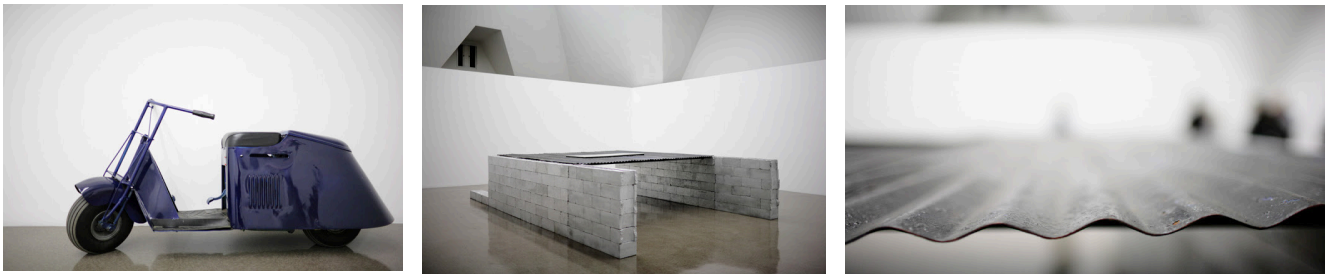
“Can the work once again rise to the occasion of absorbing the numerous anxieties reflected in today’s refugee crisis, border debates involving the United States and Mexico, and workers’ rights violations of those responsible for the construction of iconic architecture worldwide? Let

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the anonymous hands of those involved in these struggles be revealed within Grosvenor’s concrete blocks, and may shelter be sought under the steel roof and within the space between these two walls.”[44]

Joseph doesn’t cite Yau, but she does echo his concerns for class and labor: Yau’s “anonymous workers” building the “Pyramid at Giza,” have become Joseph’s “anonymous hands” constructing “iconic architecture,” and so on.

And so it bears repeating that Grosvenor could, but does not, conduct his practice anonymously. He is known for his work; his works are known for their connection to his person. And being a part of the historical record because of what he’s built, it’s easier to tease out a relationship between Grosvenor, Cobb, and Khufu, than between Grosvenor and any unknown worker.



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Considering the earlier comparison of Robert Grosvenor to Kathryn Andrews, it seems noteworthy that Andrews’ sculpture had no political message imputed to it by a critic. Why? Andrews literally ran a fence around concrete block walls imprinted with cartoon renditions of happiness, and there was no suggestion in the press that such a thing might be interpreted as representing: (a) the inaccessibility of what was imagined to be desirable; or, (b) the purposeful delimiting of a worldview; etc..

Maybe, the exhibition of Grosvenor’s untitled sculpture is a reminder of the “bunker mentality” that now possesses the nation. Politically, much has passed since “Teen Paranormal Romance” was on display at the Ren three years ago. So much so, that, as if dwelling in one of the walled cities of the Medieval Period, many present-day Americans complain they live under siege.[45] Within federal, state, county, and municipal boundaries, the people have the appearance of being increasingly divided by race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and such, their capacity to speak and listen to one another, in a polite manner, proportionally diminished. Walls within walls have been, and are still being, erected.

Opposite the aforementioned cement hut there stands a scooter, the best possible purpose for which is movement beyond the delimitation suggested by its static counterpart. In the end, the piece offers two choices to its viewer: (1) to hunker down; or, (2) to move and see. Not surprisingly, the scooter tends to be neglected.



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