

## ROBERT LAZZARINI

*Interview by Katie Sonnenborn*

Robert Lazzarini's artwork springs from a desire to understand the perceivable limits of the material world. Conceptually and formally rigorous, he pushes ordinary objects to their limits by mining the twined threads of distortion and material veracity. By fully devoting himself to these indispensable characteristics, Lazzarini negotiates a place between two and three dimensions that challenges his viewers' understanding of the physical world and their visual perception.

Though often mistaken for mere anamorphism, Lazzarini's work is in fact affected by multiple mathematical distortions so that his pieces elude finite conclusions and deny normative reads. The resultant uncertainty is balanced by a truth to materials: *violin* (1997) is composed of wood and bone; *phone* (2000) of plastic, metal, and rubber; *skulls* (2000) of reconstituted bone; and so forth. For Lazzarini, the use of direct materials emphasizes the tension between plausible and implausible.

In Lazzarini's most recent exhibition, "guns and knives" at the Aldrich Museum of Art, he has turned his attention forward in two significant ways. The first is a shift within the sculptures, which for the first time conflate multiple objects to further complicate and abstract the forms. The second is an alteration of the actual gallery itself, whose walls are canted at varying angles to subtly disrupt the viewer's apprehension of the physical space and further offset the distortions of the works themselves. Add to this a new set of prints produced during a visual arts fellowship at the Neiman Center for Print Studies at Columbia University and a forthcoming exhibition at Deitch Projects, it seemed an apposite time to talk with Lazzarini about where his work has come from and what might happen next.



**ROBERT LAZZARINI**  
*gun (iv)*, 2008  
metal, wood

**KATIE SONNENBORN** I'd forgotten how magnetic and disorienting your sculptures are. I felt a bit like I was hallucinating, particularly with the double pair of guns.

**ROBERT LAZZARINI** That's distortion iv.

**KS** I thought those were fantastic and troubling. What's distortion iv?

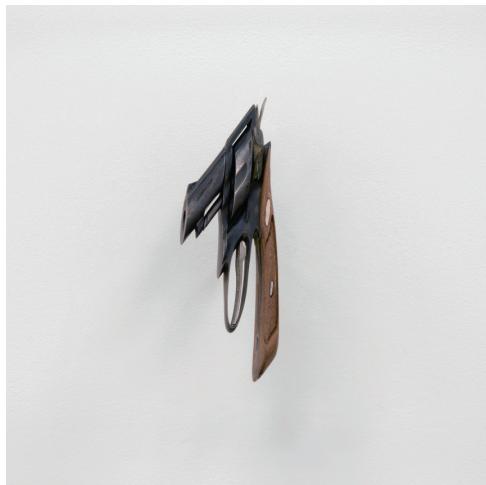
**RL** I like to title the works directly, so they are all in essence "gun." The way that I distinguish each distortion is to identify them numerically one through five.

**KS** So, distortion iv is not just the number of distortions in the sculpture itself, but rather the fourth distortion that you did in the series?

**RL** Yes, but they don't actually correspond chronologically. One way that I think about seriality is that the guns are each part of a larger discussion of variation and repetition within a group of objects, but there is no chronology to the work. It's not a progression in that way.



**ROBERT LAZZARINI**  
*gun (i)*, 2008  
metal, wood



**ROBERT LAZZARINI**  
*gun (ii)*, 2008  
metal, wood

**KS** As a physical object, it seems to include some of the distortions that you used with the single guns.

**RL** They're close. I like friction between points of reference, a back and forth between the guns to identify differences and similarities within the work.

**KS** The thing that strikes me about the double guns, as opposed to the single guns, is their strong relationship with Constructivism. The lines come together and shift along an axis, so from far away the works look like Constructivist drawings, and then getting closer, they move into the third dimension and conjure a small maquette. I've been struck by this connection because you'd mentioned that the inspiration for the distortion of the walls came in part from Vladimir Tatlin's stage sets.

**RL** It's interesting to see how that may have played out in the object because it was the impetus for the way that I was thinking about the ground. I was looking at Tatlin's stage sets for *Zangezi*, which are basically enlargements of the reliefs he was making at the time. I started with the notion of how the wall/ground could function as a projection and as its own dislocating element. It took me a long time to work through [this idea] because I kept coming up against the ground becoming far too sculptural. Having this relationship between the figure/ground and the competing muscularity of the guns with this strongly sculptural wall element was too much. I needed to homogenize the ground surface. What started as separate wall elements eventually became continuous canted grounds.

**KS** Or one might think of it as the reduction of the idea of projection in the same way that your sculptures are objects reduced to their essential form.

**RL** Yes, that's typical of the way that I work. I start out with a notion of something, and go through a process of peeling away until it's completely reduced, whatever that particular object is. A fairly diminutive object can therefore have a certain weight and muscularity on an expansive ground.

**KS** But ultimately, the relationship between Constructivist sculptures and your guns is, in this case, unintentional?

**RL** I think it was inevitable. Constructivism raises its head in the guns as an emphasis on geometric angularity. With the double distortions, I think it's the nature of conjoined surfaces and conjoined forms that relates to Constructivist collage and constructions. So, while it wasn't a true starting point for thinking about the objects, it managed to work itself in.



**ROBERT LAZZARINI**  
"guns and knives" (installation), 2008

**KS** Let's talk about conjoined forms because that also happens in your knives, and that's something I hadn't seen in your sculpture before. Your studies for conflated skeletal groups in the studio are starting to move in that direction as well, and I thought it was particularly exciting because it introduces a level of ambiguity about what the object is. I like that disorientation and the process of unpacking the objects visually, piece by piece.

**RL** I think the conjoined works are more visually complex and consequently more abstract. They create a specific dynamic of seeing the part in relation to the whole. Within a series of objects, I'm always contending with the gap between the recognition of what that original object is and how the new object relates back to it. With guns, I knew that I would be working with this notion through five objects. So, going from the normative gun to something that reads more abstractly stretches that distance a bit.

**KS** You've previously said that you're more interested in questions of form than in making conceptual objects. Does this move toward abstraction make this distinction clearer for your viewer?

**RL** I'm not sure. The type of work that I'm looking at tends to be abstract now, for example Richard Serra or Ellsworth Kelly among other artists who are involved in a largely formal investigation.



**ROBERT LAZZARINI**  
*violin, 1997*  
flame maple, spruce, ebony, bone

**KS** And what about the subject matter? You've mentioned Andy Warhol; in addition to repetition, there are the issues of death and disaster in your work. A dark thread moves through the œuvre, from guns and knives to the wallpaper pieces you are making with blood stains. Where is this coming from?

**RL** They're things that I'm thinking about and drawn to. I think that there may be some connection between the way I'm thinking about embodied vision and the physicality of violence, maybe relating the corporeal to the visual. I think there's something overwhelmingly tactile about the sculptures. As a direct extension of the hand, guns and knives solicit the grasp. Yet they simultaneously refuse vision. They occupy our physical space but are indeterminate. I think there are some interesting correlations between what's occurring visually—the subject of violence—and the interplay between the rational and irrational. I'm also thinking about it as a [symbolic] tool of violence, which relates to my depiction of the artist's studio.

**KS** Particularly having known your first mature sculpture, the Stradivarius violin, and your interest in and knowledge of art history, my instinct was to approach your "violent subjects" through a historical lens, vanitas pictures in particular were a point of reference. But we had a conversation last week in which you were emphatic about the absence of morality in the work. You said you weren't trying to teach any lessons.

**RL** As soon as you pick a subject to work with, there is the element of commentary. That being said, it's important that the work maintains a kind of neutral stance, neither for nor against violence. I try to make the works as matter-of-fact as possible. These guns address the idea of the archetype of ubiquity. For me, this handgun is a signifier of all guns.

**KS** In the same way that the rotary phone is the ultimate signifier of telephonic communication?

**RL** Yes, of course now it could be the cell phone. The rotary phone is invisible and easy to look past. This particular gun is easy to look past.

**KS** Can you speak about the guns in relationship to your wallpaper? These new prints include traces of death.

**RL** Yes, the horrific deed. The wallpaper becomes a bit more abject. The guns-and-knives installation is more contemplative, almost like violence that's been mediated by the mind, whereas the blood-on-wallpaper works are clean rectilinear spaces that contain these aggressive acts. The deathly object is something that I think about quite a lot.

**KS** Are there touchstones that trigger these thoughts?

**RL** Like a tragic event?

**KS** Maybe, but not necessarily. Can you identify what made you gravitate towards this morbidity?

**RL** Not really. It's something that preoccupies me, and I felt like I needed to work through it formally and re-represent it.

**KS** Because the work is so reductive, subject is an essential component around which the practice revolves, like an axis.

**RL** I think the subject matter is at once specific and ubiquitous. The .38 Smith and Wesson model 10 marks a particular make and model revolver. Yet it describes the most common handgun of the 20th century. Reducing it to this one gun in some way lets me represent all guns. The knives are even more commonplace.

**KS** Yes, and the knives are also even more abstracted.

**RL** Yes, it's a complicated sculpture. For me, it was important to offset variation and repetition in a different way from how I had handled it in the guns. So I decided to make a composition that implied stabbing. I started with a unified composition with a distortion applied on top of it, as opposed to distorting each element and composing it post-manipulation as I had done with the guns and double guns.

**KS** It seems like within the composition some of the knives appear multiple times.

**RL** Exactly, so that the similarities and differences bounce back and forth within the work. It was important for me to stay away from the kind of narrative that would occur with one knife re-appearing in succession. That would be a very Duchamp-*Nude Descending a Staircase* kind of thing. I wanted it to be a non-event that still had a corporeal sensation. I positioned the knives slightly lower on the wall because I really wanted it to be the body—your core area—that was being stabbed, not a head stabbing.

**KS** Yes, I noticed the height of each sculpture. The guns were a bit higher than I expected them to be.

**RL** I basically use my eye level as a gauge for where I put them.

**KS** Is it important to hit them head-on?

**RL** That's one of the strongest vantage points of resistance, where the artwork oscillates more intensely between being an image and an object. You lose that and regain it as you move around the object. It's not an illusion, it's something that is physically occurring.

**KS** With respect to perception, the environmental elements—placement of the works, lighting, wall color—are all highly considered. For me, part of understanding the work is experiencing one's own perception of each piece unfold, and therefore, to see elements like the mounts that support the objects doesn't undercut the experience. Additionally, the wall distortion heightened my awareness of what was happening in the rest of the space. I thought that was very successful.

**RL** That speaks to reducing things down and allowing all these reduced elements to work together, heightening perceptual experience.

**KS** Should we talk about seriality and repetition a bit?

**RL** When discussing the idea of making a variation based on distortion, there is an implied trajectory of infinite variations. How are things going to expand and contract in relation to one another and on their own, and how do variation and repetition reside within each work?

**KS** And the repetition creates awareness about difference. Through the multiple, one learns to distinguish the singular.

**RL** Exactly. That goes back to an artist like Frank Stella using variation and repetition: for Stella, the disparity among the different elements in the series, that threshold of difference, is enough so that each work functions in a singular capacity, contrasted with the practice of someone like Larry Bell, where the subtleties of difference are so small that they are almost unperceivable. With regards to perception and seriality, I'm also thinking about Claude Monet's haystacks, where these tools are ways of thinking about the changing of time and the changing of light. I like the idea that seriality can track perceptual changes. To me, notions of time are implied in the work.



**ROBERT LAZZARINI**  
*blood on wallpaper (stripes)*, 2008  
ink and blood offset lithograph and silkscreen  
on paper

**KS** Let's talk a bit about the blood-on-wallpaper work you're doing at Columbia now.

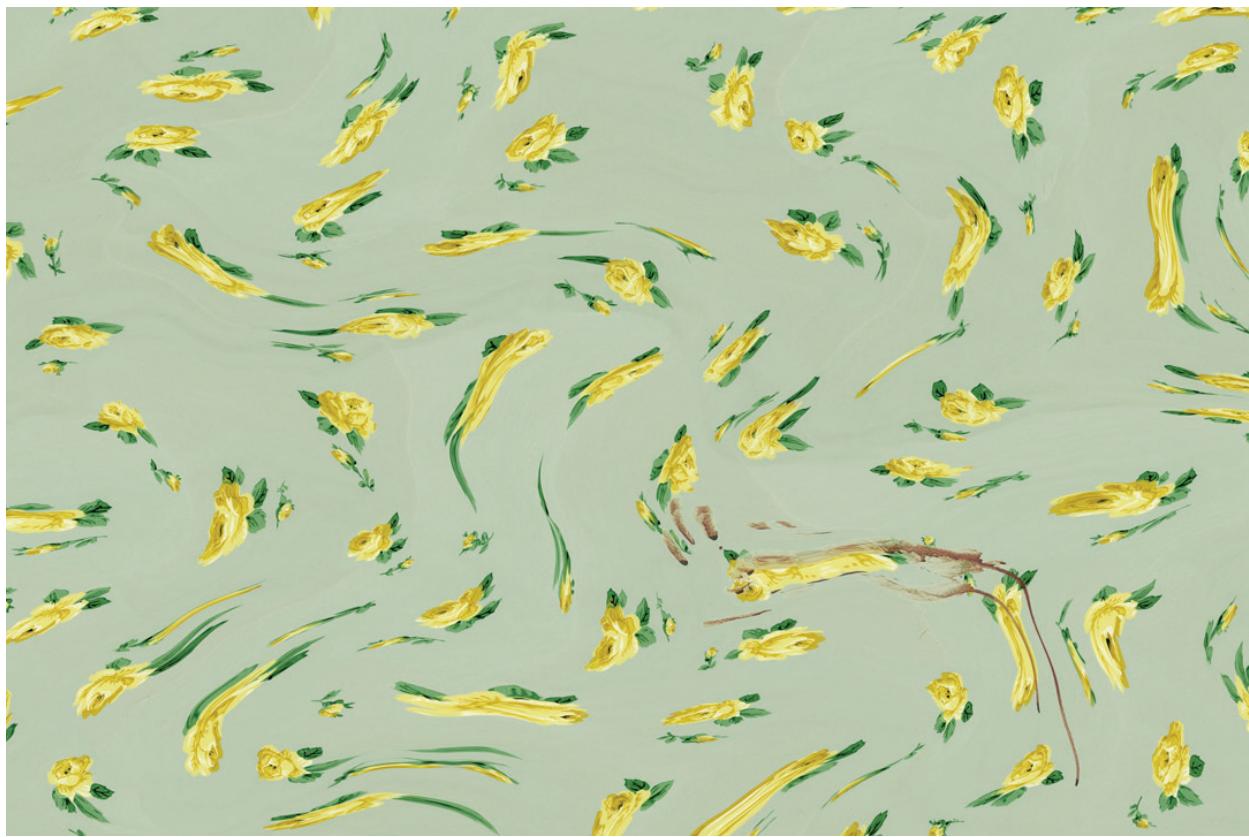
**RL** I'm trying to create more parallels between my works on paper and my sculptural practice. Like the sculptures, the prints attempt to negate materiality. Yes, they are prints, but they are wallpaper. I'm literally printing wallpaper with seams and then printing blood in blood. This truth to materials is consistent with my sculptural practice.

**KS** There are seven or eight different wallpapers?

**RL** Yes, there are eight designs that I'm hoping to realize.

**KS** And they vary dramatically, from a baroque pattern to a nursery print.

**RL** I wanted a range of places, mostly domestic interiors except the one restaurant piece that depicts a gold grill. I wanted slightly indeterminate settings. Wallpapers can have strong, idiosyncratic patterns, and I wanted something that backed off a bit from that, something that describes a range of times and places without being too specific or having too much personality.



**ROBERT LAZZARINI**  
*blood on wallpaper (yellow floral)*, 2008  
ink and blood offset lithograph and silkscreen on paper

**KS** In the same way that a *gun*, *telephone*, or *phone booth* is anonymous?

**RL** Certainly, it's something you could walk past 100 times. It's interesting to think about things that disappear and what needs to happen for them to be brought back into view for us. With the wallpaper, there is this range, but what brings it back into view is the murderous deed.

**KS** And for each of the blood stains, you've conceived of a specific occurrence?

**RL** Yes, for instance an arterial spurt or a gun shot to the head.



**ROBERT LAZZARINI**  
*blood on wallpaper (blue gingham)*, 2008  
ink and blood offset lithograph and silkscreen on paper

**KS** So, I imagine you've studied what these marks would look like?

**RL** Yes, but maybe even more importantly, because these are actually fictitious scenes, they need to have total veracity and be totally believable. The starting point needs to be something completely convincing.

**KS** I'm struck by your commitment to rendering blood on the print exactly the way blood would spurt, or in the case of the vinyl floor piece, as if a body has been dragged across it. And in fact, a body will be literally dragged across it.

**RL** Yes, in order to create that initial normative pattern, I'll recreate whatever the original situation would be. It's about verisimilitude. Any accidental things that happen in the normative scenario need to be replicated in the distortion. I should note that I am disrupting both the repeatable pattern of the wallpaper and the organic pattern of the blood with another pattern—the compound sine wave.

**KS** Have you ever thought about...

**RL** Killing somebody? Yes.

**KS** No, worse—not distorting an object.

**RL** Of course. Although, I've never offered up the normative before because I've always been interested in the new object and its relationship in the viewer's mind to the mental image of an existing object. To take an object and re-represent it in a way that's never been seen before is a fairly challenging task.

**KS** Yes, and it's a task that has to be seen to be believed because it's a very hard thing to capture your work photographically.

**RL** That's one of the problems with my work. It's strongly experiential—you could make that claim for any artwork of course—but because physical perception is a key aspect to the experience of my work, it's something you are not able to capture photographically. But back to the idea of offering up the normative, one of the next steps for the work may be to present elements of the normative as a displacement for what is occurring right next to it.

**KS** There is one other thing I'd like to talk about. The work seems to be moving into a new phase where you're approaching the entire environment, as opposed to discrete sculptures. And I see that with the distortion of the wall and the large blood-on-floor pieces.

**RL** Well, actually not with the large floor pieces. I think that what I'm doing is tracking two ideas at the same time. One is installation-as-environment and ways I can control and displace elements within that. The blood on the floor or the wall goes back to my studio objects. It's basically the idea of object-as-place. What are the fewest elements I can take from the studio that still represent the studio? It becomes shorthand representation for a specific place.

**KS** I see that, but I still think the newer projects are operating differently than earlier sculptures. As entities they imply an expanded environment.

**RL** But that's shorthand of place, the implication of the expanded environment. It's not the full place; it's only a section of the place. For me, it goes back to thinking about an artist like Gordon Matta-Clark and his works like *Bingo* or *Bronx Floors*. There's a kind of transformation by which an entire place has been reduced to a single sculptural object. In the blood-on-wall and blood-on-floor pieces, I make a distinction between an image of a thing and the actual thing, in that there are seams in the wallpaper, or there are separate floor tiles, and the blood is blood. It is physically that thing, as opposed to an image of it. And I think that's what moves it towards being a part of a larger space, or having the suggestion of a larger place. And in doing so, it eliminates one of the things that distinguishes it as a work of art, which is art-specific material. Additionally, I think that making an abbreviation for a larger space reflects the way that memory functions. We all have a limited capacity for recall—we can never fully conjure up a scene in all its details. With the blood on the wall and floor, the parts of the room that materialize are the ones that are charged with death.