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Robert Lazzarini's Self-Titled Works

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RICHMOND--Leering skulls.

Flying guns. A violin floating in air. A phone booth stretched all out of whack. You may think this story's left over from Halloween. It's not. This is a sober art review of an exhibition by Robert Lazzarini, a young New York sculptor getting his first-ever solo show here at the venerable Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. Prepare to be spooked. Lazzarini makes some of the strangest, most mind-altering objects you will ever see. Hack surrealists like Salvador Dali gave us pictures of a world gone strange. Big deal. A painting can show us anything its maker wants it to. This contemporary artist seems to actually bend the fabric of the world, so that even our perceptions of it start to crack. Lazzarini begins with photographs of quintessentially normal objects -- the aforementioned skull, gun, violin and booth, as well as a claw hammer, an old school chair and a classic dial phone. He scans them into his computer -- sometimes he has the objects themselves laser-scanned in three dimensions -- and uses software to stretch them, the way you'd stretch a picture on a piece of Silly Putty. Taking the distorted forms that he comes up with, he has them faithfully realized as sculpture, out of the same materials as the originals. In fact, Lazzarini's objects are so perfectly made that they don't read as sculptures, as representations, at all: They read as the objects themselves, reconfigured in a universe where solid objects can be pulled like taffy.

In most ways, for instance, Lazzarini's violin is precisely like the rare 1693 Stradivarius it was modeled after: An instrument maker constructed the facsimile for him, using the fine materials and techniques of his trade. But the images and plans the craftsman had to work from had first been pulled way out of the true on Lazzarini's computer. The bottom of the finished instrument bulges out, as though looming up at you; its neck and bridge are stretched thin, as though zooming away at speed. In its fine detail, everything looks absolutely right: There's lovely burled-wood edging on the fingerboard and tailpiece, the body's varnish has a beautiful orange glow, the scroll that tops off the instrument is perfectly carved. But all these perfect bits come together into a larger object that is so wrong it ought not to exist at all.

Ditto the four guns in Lazzarini's show. They're modeled on a classic Smith & Wesson .38. A gunsmith worked on them for Lazzarini, and made sure everything about them was just right -- that the steel was blued just so, that the walnut grip was perfectly checked.



But the finished objects look as though they were caught on some monstrous planet where gravity got the better of them. Each gun is compressed from front to back into a kind of preposterously snub-nosed version of itself, while also being mashed to half its normal width.

The phone booth, based on a 1980s Bell Atlantic model that is now extinct, was much more complex. To duplicate that booth in all its original materials, with its lighted advertising panels, its phone and coin box made of a mix of metals and colors plastics, with an NYPD crime alert handout still stuck inside, would have been hard in any case. Doing it so it was skewed to lean like a collapsing outhouse proved nearly impossible. It took 45 collaborators and subcontractors to turn out all its different parts, in all their various contortions. (It's the only Lazzarini where tiny imperfections are not difficult to spot.)

But where does all this hard work and high technology leave us? When I first saw Lazzarini's phone booth, at the last Whitney biennial, I was impressed, like everyone else. But I was also worried that it might turn out to be the kind of thing a high-school art student might think up, and never make. ("Hey man, wouldn't it be, like way cool, if we could, like, mash up a phone booth so that it looked like Godzilla had stomped it. It'd be, like . . . wow.")

But seen in quiet contemplation, in the company of Lazzarini's other pieces, it becomes clear there's more at stake than that. The perpetual effects these artworks have are even more peculiar than they seem at first, and in more interesting ways. For all their solid three-dimensionality, the objects never seem quite there at all.

Lazzarini's sculptures are never stretched along just one dimension, so there's no viewpoint from which they end up looking like the normal objects we expect them to be. And that keeps us walking around them, trying to resolve them into some sensible while but never quite able to figure out the spatial relationships among their parts.

When we're dealing with a normal object, our brain knows how to compensate for distance and motion and viewpoint. We can tell that the far edge of a book isn't really "smaller" than its near side, and doesn't "grow" as we approach it. With objects like Lazzarini's violin, distorted along multiple planes, none of our compensation systems works. Our minds can't tell how big each part of it should be, and so can't seem to figure out where they might be in space. And that makes the violin somehow seem to be floating and wobbling in midair, even though we can also tell that the thing sits there unchanged before our eyes.

The whole experience of a Lazzarini feels like a strange, no-quite-there illusion - like the quarter that "floats" above a mirror in the old magic trick -- rather



than the kind of stable experience we expect in a museum. But it gets even stranger. For some reason, when Lazzarini's objects don't read as floating in some alternate dimension, they seem as though they're somehow flat. Even though we know they're fully modeled in the round -- though we can see quite clearly that's the case -- they also look like glossy pictures.

That may be because the only time we're made to sort out weirdly distorted versions of the normal world is when we come across them in distorting pictures. The real world simply doesn't come bent quite as we see it in Lazzarini's works; only pictures of it do. For 500 years we've been seeing stretched or anamorphic pictures like the famous skull in Hans Holbein's "Ambassadors." (Of interest but not an influence, says Lazzarini.) We've not once come across their objects in the flesh. No vise or monster or force of gravity could ever smush an object in the orderly ways that Photoshop or a skilled painter can. Some part of our mind knows that, and so keeps telling us that what we're seeing simply must be made in two dimensions -- even as some other part screams back that this can't be. And that perceptual dissonance translates into powerful emotion in the viewer. Mathematical distortion becomes expressionist effect.

By choosing iconic objects that we know so well, and that mean so much to us, Lazzarini guarantees that our minds will work overtime to come to grips with any sighting of them. Yet his strangely distorted artworks throw that process wildly off balance. That leaves us deeply unsettled, but also eager to get another dose of these strange sensations.