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FALL  
SEASON  
PREVIEW

8

BELGIAN  
COLLECTORS  
TO WATCH

Remaking  
the Surrealist  
Landscape

EXPLOSIVE GROWTH:  
Four Decades  
of Auction Action

**Karl Lagerfeld's  
Must-See  
*Paris Biennale***



COMPUTER MODELING, WELDING TOOLS, AND METICULOUS OBSERVATION ALL PLAY A PART IN THE CREATION OF PERCEPTION-BENDING SCULPTURES OF EVERYDAY OBJECTS

BY SCOTT INDRISEK

# ROBERT



*chain-link fence,*  
Lazzarini's largest  
work to date,  
shown in progress  
in the artist's  
Brooklyn studio.

# LAZZARINI

ROBERT LAZZARINI'S studio in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, currently resembles a crime scene lab or a product-safety research facility. In one corner is a full-scale hotel room door in a freestanding frame, ready to be violently kicked in so the artist can take notes on the damage for a forthcoming sculpture. There's also a large windowpane, likewise due to be smashed and studied for a piece that will be included in the artist's November exhibition at Marlborough Chelsea in New York.

Material destruction, attention to the most minute detail, and obsessive research are all hallmarks of Lazzarini's practice, which results in intricately altered sculptures of skulls, violins, pay phones, brass knuckles, guns, and signage. The artist distorts the contours of the original object with computer modeling to arrive at a new form, then fabricates the sculpture using appropriate materials: A sculpture of a hammer, for example, will be made of wood and steel, and a skull cast from actual bone powder.

A boyish-looking 47, Lazzarini has for more than a decade occupied a studio in a large industrial building on the banks of the notoriously polluted Newtown Creek. There he is aided by a team of assistants whose individual expertise ranges from 3-D modeling to welding. In the main studio space there's a partially finished sculpture of a tilted, broken-open safe; a paper mock-up of a shot-up Dead End sign; and, hanging on a wall, an enormous printout of a drooping Liquor sign. For the upcoming exhibition, Lazzarini says he's aiming for "a kind of American landscape, a bit of *Badlands* sensibility," referring to the 1973 Terrence Malick film. "It's not just about 'the street' or 'the home,'" he adds. "It's a collage of spaces and things."

Lazzarini recently took over an additional, lower space in the building in which to construct a monumental sculpture of a chain-link fence, composed of more than 200 individually cast steel pieces and topped by a length of fabricated, curled razor wire. Several dozen constituent elements are arrayed on shelves, waiting to be slotted into a custom-made wooden jig and welded together. This will be the largest piece he's realized, surpassing the nine-foot-tall pay phone sculpture shown in the 2002 Whitney Biennial and subsequently purchased by the Hirshhorn Museum, in



Washington, D.C. In the past, Lazzarini has exhibited sculptures that share a theme—for example, the weaponry in "guns, knives, brass knuckles," a 2010 show presented at Honor Fraser in Los Angeles and the Flag Art Foundation in New York—but the new suite of works has a more subtle cohesion that stops just shy of offering an actual narrative. "Viewers are absolutely going to try to create some sort of story line between the objects," Lazzarini predicts, "and there just isn't one. This is a disjointed, fractured scene."

The artist grew up in northern New Jersey and was introduced to art history early on via family trips to the Metropolitan Museum in New York. He earned an undergraduate degree in sculpture from the School of Visual Arts and later worked for five years at the Met's bookshop, using that opportunity to more deeply immerse himself in the art of the

past. "I would spend six months in Southeast Asia, nine months in front of the Rodins," he recalls.

Lazzarini was always an avid draftsman, and it was his work on paper that led him to create visually complex sculpture: He experimented with projecting his drawings and radically shifting their perspectives. (As many critics have noted, there are various two-dimensional precedents for Lazzarini's three-dimensional distortions, most famously the anamorphic skull in Hans Holbein the Younger's *Ambassadors* of 1533.)

After toying with a process of altering form in a more handmade fashion—"free-form, biomorphic distortions and manipulating molds"—Lazzarini turned to the computer as a means to subject objects to strictly mathematically determined alterations. He began with *violin*, which occupied him from 1995 to 1997 (a period that also included employment in Jeff Koons's studio, with mold-making and finishing among his »

From top: brass knuckles (iii), 2010, one of several pieces by Robert Lazzarini that take weapons as their subject; Lazzarini in his studio in July, with a work from the "brass knuckles" series and a prototype for a chain sculpture.



Above: *payphone*, 2002, made of anodized aluminum, stainless steel, Plexiglas, and silkscreened graphics. Installed in a room of its own at the 2002 Whitney Biennial, *payphone* was a breakout piece for the artist. Right: A studio assistant uses a rotary cutting tool to work on the monumental *chain-link fence*.

responsibilities). Lazzarini's *violin* is based on a 1693 Stradivarius instrument in the Met's collection. "That was the first object in which I eliminated material translation," he says of the straightforwardly titled work, which is made of flame maple wood, ebony, and bone, all materials found in the actual instrument. "It was a 1:1 scale, a compound mathematical distortion, and there was a figure/ground relationship," Lazzarini sums up. "It was the fulfillment of a lot of formal and conceptual concerns in this one sculpture."

Lazzarini was also intrigued by the "life span" of the original object and how to replicate the marks of age and time in his own sculpture. This interest in material decay is distinct from Koons's preoccupation with polish. The 1:1 ratio allowed Lazzarini to avoid what he considers a "facile sculptural device: Make things bigger! Make things smaller!" While computer modeling was integral to the process, materials were no less important. "I was always suspicious of computers and computer art," he says. "I started using the computer only as needed—it was the best way to skin a cat, and only a part of the equation in the initial design phase."



Following this creative breakthrough, Lazzarini had a series of pivotal exhibitions: at Pierogi Gallery, in Brooklyn, in 2000, where he showed distorted sculptures of a chair, a telephone, and hammers; in the 2000 digital and tech-art "Bitstreams" exhibition at the Whitney, where he debuted sculptures of skulls; a 2003 exhibition at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, in Richmond; and solo shows at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, in Ridgefield, Connecticut; Deitch Projects and Paul Kasmin, in New York; and Honor Fraser, in Los Angeles. In 2011 he joined the roster of Marlborough Chelsea under the leadership of Max Levai. "The challenge with Robert's market is creating a supply to meet the demand," says Levai. "We get a phone call a week at the gallery asking about the possibility of purchasing one of Robert's skull or gun sculptures."

In response, Lazzarini has expanded his studio operations, trying to manage his self-confessed OCD tendencies and comfortably outsource more elements of the process. "My output four years ago was maybe eight sculptures per year," he says. "We'll probably produce over 100 things this year, and one of those is *chain-link fence*. That's a big shift." Most of Lazzarini's sculptures are made in editions of three or six; the fence will be his first one-off piece.

The relationship with Marlborough provides new financial support. "This could be a paradigm shift," acknowledges Lazzarini, "allowing me to do much more ambitious things." In almost every case, the studio needs to enlist outside specialists to finalize the sculptures. "It

doesn't get done A to Z here," he explains. "You do a portion, it gets sent out, it comes back, it gets sent out—then everything's assembled and finished. It's pretty much equal parts digital, industrial, and handmade." Every new sculpture presents new hurdles. Plans for a series of broken liquor bottle sculptures to be cast in glass were set aside after proving too difficult to realize, even though the studio sought technical advice from both MIT experts and Dale Chihuly's team. Because each sculpture requires a unique set of materials, the studio never settles into a production-line routine.

For the November show, the studio is working with multiple foundries for various works as well as a neon fabricator for a recession-era-worthy Cash for Gold sign. Is there a part of Lazzarini that thrives on this stream of logistical challenges and material obstacles? "No," he says firmly. "It's hell. It keeps me up at night. I'm obsessive-compulsive, so these things haunt me. Until they're figured out and done, there's no sleep."

Lazzarini shies away from detailing the technical minutiae of how the works are produced. He'd prefer not to talk about specific software, for instance, and is more interested in »



One of Lazzarini's latest works, *window*, in progress on a worktable in his studio.

100

discussing how his sculptures are perceived within the exhibition space. "I'm specifically dealing with mathematical distortions, wherein if you augment one part, you affect the whole," he explained to Aldrich director Harry Philbrick in a 2009 interview. "I start off with a nonverbal sense of what it should be, and then I slowly shape it, and it becomes more verbal and more numerical until it becomes the final design, which is made up of extremely specific numbers."

Despite its complex algorithmic basis, however, Lazzarini's work is immediately accessible. "In terms of subject matter, it's representational, so people think it's a type of Pop art. In some ways it is, but I think it really hinges more profoundly on the aftermath of Minimalism. Phenomenology is a really big part of my work. The object expanding and contracting—it's not dissimilar to Tony Smith's *Amaryllis*. You walk around that and it almost unfolds as four separate and distinct sculptures." For Lazzarini, shaping the viewer's physical experience of each piece extends to the gallery space itself, which is typically altered by the addition of canted or fragmented walls that disrupt the right-angled white cube and give the overall installation what the artist considers a collage effect. The idea harks back to Gordon Matta-Clark, an artist Lazzarini admires, although in this case the sense of spatial disorientation is achieved through a fabricated environment.

The result is a kind of mobilization of perception, whether it arises from distorted signage (which Lazzarini compares to Richard Tuttle's alphabetic experiments) or from the mathematically altered form of a recognizable object whose appearance shifts, stretches, and flattens as a viewer moves around the piece. "One of the main problems of sculpture for me is its static nature," he says. "This kind of animation, for lack of a better word, [gives] the sensation that there's

activity where there really isn't. It relates back to corporeally navigating something to understand it."

Even in the throes of preparing for the November show, Lazzarini is looking ahead to his next project. He is brainstorming about a body of work that will expand the ideas he's working through now with the busted safe, broken door, and shot-up signs, and it will arise from the conceit of the junkyard. "Waste and usage will be some of the springboards for that work, along with the notion of rust as the blood of the object," he says. No doubt this work will present a fresh set of fabrication challenges—not to mention the opportunity for research trips to the junkyards of New Jersey.

Lazzarini is also returning to one of his earliest inspirations: a pair of ancient Greek funerary lions in the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut, which he first saw in a publication at the Metropolitan Museum shop nearly two decades ago. The life-size marble statues became an enduring obsession. The artist initially tried to sculpt them, going so far as to adopt a boxer from a dog pound because the lions, says Lazzarini, "looked like large dogs with tucked waists." In 2005 he presented drawings of the statues in an exhibition at Davidson College in North Carolina. (Drawing has since largely disappeared from Lazzarini's practice, though he says that his use of signage partly fills the role once played by drawing.) Now he's ready to take on the leonine subject with the full Lazzarinian process, employing three-dimensional scans of the original statues to create distorted cousins via digital modeling. His sculptural creatures will be on view at the Wadsworth Atheneum in fall 2013, displayed in the same building as the originals but ideally, he says, located as far away as possible from their forebears. "I'm excited to revisit them," Lazzarini admits. "It's bittersweet, though—delayed gratification." ■