

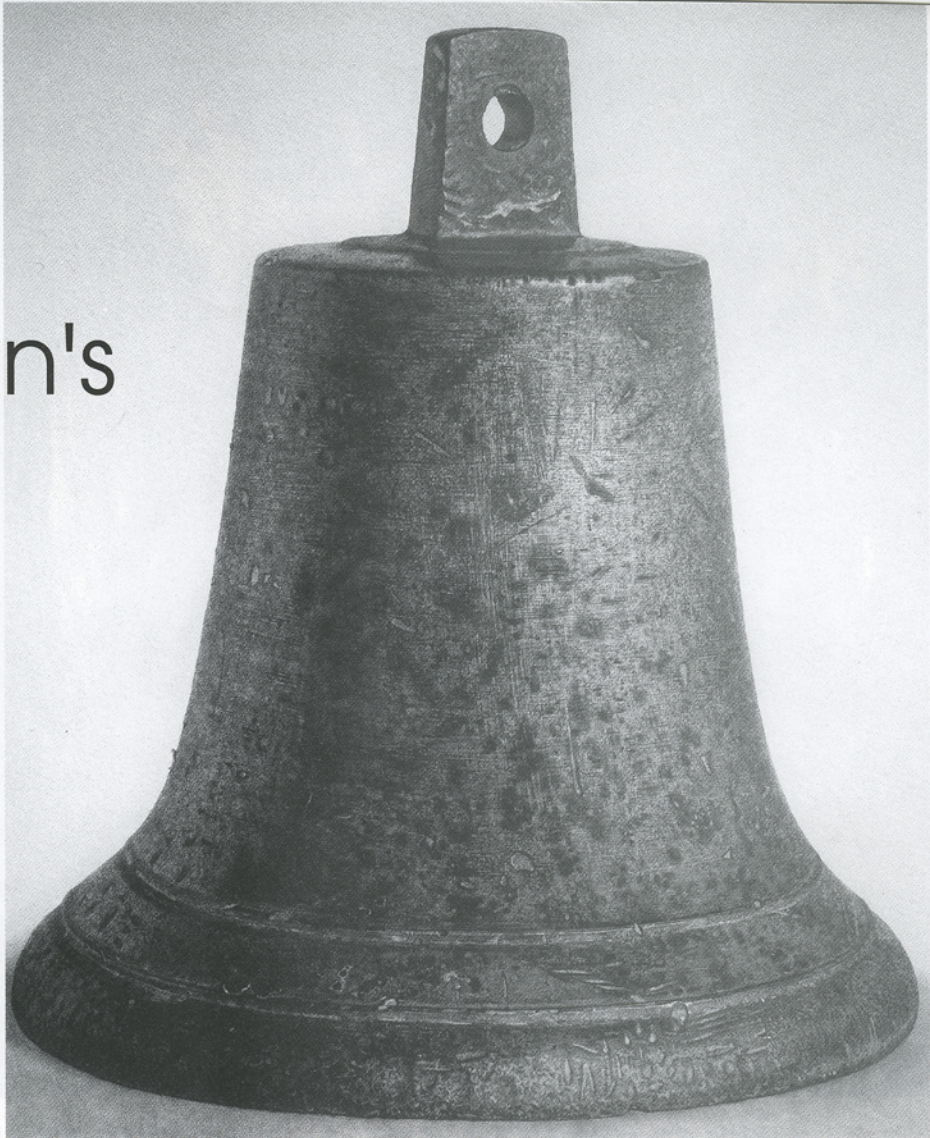
Shimon Okshteyn's

Hypnotic Objects

Donald Kuspit

Shimon Okshteyn's new graphite works are bigger than ever: his bell, suitcase, can--all battered by time, melancholy with patina, if still recognizable, still holding their own--loom over us, all but overwhelming us with their monumental presence. His painted comb and clock (two versions of each) are also enormous, the gutsy painterliness with which they are rendered making them all the more momentous. It also gives them a tangible presence, making them more physically disturbing-terrifying. Perhaps the most awesome and troubling of Okshteyn's objects is his thimble, much larger than life size with its 84 inch height and 76 inch girth. It is a truly gigantic, intimidating presence, outstripped only by his 19 foot by 8 foot shoe last. All these enlargements of ordinary, small objects--even the suitcase is a kind of humble miniature--suggests their extraordinary importance for him. (Okshteyn found them in his wanderings in the lower depths of Manhattan; it still has them, for all its upscale glossiness.)

Okshteyn, a Russian immigrant, has vivid memories of his father wearing a thimble, sewing furs with bloody fingers. He notes that he was drawn to the suitcase because it was wooden; one did not go into exile with a leather suitcase. The bell, dated 1767, also belongs to the past: all the objects, worn out and no longer used--discards--are saturated with loss. Time has stopped in them. Indeed, one can no longer tell the time in Okshteyn's pictures. His clock has missing hands, and he doesn't seem



to be in a hurry to replace them. There is no possibility of repairing the irreparable. Okshteyn's time-worn, time-troubled, time-contaminated, time-ruined objects are Proustian: his representation of them is his remembrance of his things past--of things that evoke his past and whose remembrance, by way of his art, restores them to their emotional place in his life. They are outsize because they anchor his inner world. Okshteyn extracts the emotional significance from objects he is spontaneously drawn to much the way the Surrealists were spontaneously drawn to what they called the "poetic objects" they found in the junk shops of Paris. To find poetry in the prosaic dregs of life--to find personal meaning and personal history in what has become socially meaningless and been abandoned by world history--is a time-honored task of art, especially modern art, which tends to find social history beside the human point, or else reduce it to the suffering of individuals.

The all too human hovers in Okshteyn's allegorical objects: they are majestic personages in their own right. Indeed, they have a totemic, magical, demiurgic presence. They are sacred batteries waiting to discharge the energy of life with which Okshteyn's touch has charged them. That touch does not simply represent them, but distills their essence, giving them an abstract aura that heightens their individuality, making it seem all the more

unique and resonant. Okshteyn's works, whatever their medium, tread a fine line between representation and abstraction, veering more to the latter the closer one looks. The luminous, agitated gestures that mark the dark indentation in the middle of the can; the finely shaded detail of the rows of dots in the small paintings of the thimble; the strands of paint that hang from one comb like sticky hair, all the more startling because of the thick black field on which the comb rests like a mirage; the pinkness of the other comb, also startling because of the surrounding gray, as dense as the black, if differently textured; the obscured stencil lettering on the suitcase--all of this is the result of the emotional pressure that Okshteyn's touch puts on the physical object, transforming it into an abstract idol. The complications of his touch make it at once more particular--more physically miraculous--and more potently symbolic.

It is what makes his objects hypnotic--fascinating abysses into which we fall as though into a dangerous wishing well. Okshteyn's paintings are dreams, in which reality is charged with hope as well as despair--charged with an emotional depth and complexity we never truly experience except when we dream. It is the turbulent dreamy surface of Okshteyn's paintings that show how much his battered objects belong to painful memory. □