

CHICAGO

Robert Grosvenor

THE RENAISSANCE SOCIETY

In a gutsy move for both artist and institution, Robert Grosvenor's first museum exhibition in more than a decade consisted of a single work—and one created almost thirty years ago. Entering the exhibition space through a small vestibule, one immediately came face-to-face with *Untitled*, 1989–90, an enigmatic construction sitting, sphinxlike, in the Renaissance Society's dramatically vaulted gallery. Two parallel walls of silver-painted cinder blocks, each six units high, were positioned directly on the gallery's mottled gray linoleum floor. Extending from the leftward end of each wall was a single row of three similarly painted blocks laid end-to-end, their interior cavities filled with cement. A large sheet of weathered corrugated steel rested atop the walls, spanning the approximately twelve feet between them. A rectangular opening in the makeshift roof was covered by a piece of Plexiglas, raised slightly from the corrugation by the metal frame on which it sat, giving it the appearance of a skylight; and indeed, light from above shone through it onto the floor below. As one moved slowly around the sculpture, subtle variations in surface quality and masonry gave clues to the work's facture but stubbornly refused to offer anything resembling a motive.

Located on the neo-Gothic central quadrangle of the University of Chicago, the Renaissance Society's gallery is notable for the turreted alcoves in each of its four corners, its abundance of windows, and its soaring thirty-foot ceiling. In consultation with the society's director, Solveig Øvstebø, who curated the exhibition, Grosvenor arranged for a twelve-foot-high perimeter wall to be erected in front of three gallery walls, transforming the symmetrical but highly irregular contours of the space into a slightly off-center rectangle. Beyond obscuring the room's turrets and low windows and redirecting attention to the sculpture itself, the perimeter wall produced two simultaneous but seemingly oppositional effects. On the one hand, it accentuated the gallery's cathedral-like verticality. On the other, it additionally imposed on the space a strong sense of horizontality—a horizon, even—a central and abiding concern for the artist since he first came to prominence in the 1960s, and one that is also reflected in the low-slung quality of *Untitled*.

Grosvenor's most powerful works have always emphasized a productive tension between artwork, viewer, and the architectural space they both occupy. At the Renaissance Society, Grosvenor added a fourth element to this equation. Off to one side of the sculpture, leaning against the gallery's east wall, an antique motor scooter (a Cushman model dating from the late 1940s) perhaps added a narrative dimension to the installation. Painted a deep-blue hue, the vehicle was—importantly—

we see that some of these colored planes appear to consist of opaque surfaces, while others are perhaps a function of lighting. Take *Things as They Are #42*, 2017, an intimately scaled, portrait-format configuration of elements that centers upon a jagged, mirrored form nestling into a convergence of flat planes suggestive of a three-dimensional corner space. On noting the thin line extending beyond the point at which the wall-like surfaces meet the supposed floor, one might surmise that we are looking, end-on, at a sawtooth-shaped piece of tinted, translucent Plexiglas pressed into a right-angled fold of solid material. If so, it would seem that the jagged form is lit in such a way that differently colored shadows or reflections are cast or projected left and right, in perfect symmetry. Warm, harmonious tones of red, pink, burgundy, and ochre quell and consolidate the jittery, angular formation, while the unreality effect sparked by the uncertain material status of each of the elements is cemented in the picture's resistance to tenable depth perception.

As is the case with most abstract photography, be it historical or contemporary, these works place willful obfuscation in dynamic tension with objective disclosure. Once identified as photographs (and despite our diminished faith in representational veracity in an era of pervasive digital image editing), O'Keefe's works draw the viewer into a conscious examination of components as an instinctual effort to wrest meaning and purpose from equivocal information. It is this sense of quandary, in combination with the artist's mastery of technical and formal principles—her ability to extract such a remarkable concinnity from the collapse of painterly, sculptural, and photographic effects—that makes these works so exceptional.

—Jeff Gibson

View of "Robert Grosvenor," 2017. From left: *Untitled*, 1989–90; untitled adjunct. Photo: Tom Van Eynde.

