



SKY GLABUSH

WHAT

IS A

SELF?



# OUTER AND INNER SPACE

JON DAVIES

Over the past two decades, London, Ontario-based artist Sky Glabush has followed a peripatetic path through varied forms and styles, his material experimentation a bravura embodiment of a long-standing quest to understand his place in the world and in the history of art. Glabush grapples with questions of identity, history, belief, and the role of the artist through manipulating the materials of painting, sculpture, collage, drawing, ceramics, printmaking, and, most recently, weaving. He has a propensity for mastering one form—for example, figurative oil painting, in which his reputation was established with the series *Renting* (2007–2010)—only to move on and learn another from scratch. Glabush is propelled by curiosity, and his craftsmanship is a kind of thinking-with-his-hands. This somatic push-and-pull mirrors the artist's intellectual wrestling with the question of faith, which he sees as a reflective and active process of inquiry deeply engaged with the physical world.

Glabush's exhibition at Oakville Galleries, *What Is a Self?*, poses a sincere and in many ways impossible question, building on the artist's recent solo shows at MKG127 gallery in Toronto, *Background* (2011) and *Display* (2014). Those bold exhibitions drew on Glabush's tumultuous upbringing: born to hippie artist parents, he grew up all over the globe. When he was a child, his parents split up and each struggled with substance abuse; his father joined the Baha'i faith, which Glabush continues to adhere to. Venturing out on his own at age sixteen, the artist experienced a nomadic and harrowing adolescence.

While Glabush's biography reminds us that a stable home should never be taken for granted, the home symbolically represents a container or

cocoon for nurturing identity and its articulation through the everyday performance of the self. It is a markedly different space from the supposedly neutral “white cube” gallery in which contemporary artists typically present their work. With *What Is a Self?*, the Gairloch estate becomes instead an extension of the private, experimental space of the artist’s studio. Each room is conceived as a distinct vignette, each arrangement designed not to present a selection of finished art objects—or reference specific events and experiences recalled from the artist’s life—but to capture the accumulation of Glabush’s labour in material form: messy, rough and humble. The objects are “moments,” each capturing just one of many possible manifestations of material, craft and time.<sup>1</sup>

As with many of his contemporaries, Glabush is engaged with the history of modernism in art, the push towards innovation—embodied by the concept of the avant-garde—and new modes of expression that characterize the modern era. The history of modern art is animated by debates over the subjectivity of the artist and whether art is properly an expression of the artist’s interiority—feelings, drives and beliefs—or a more detached æsthetic exercise in visual or conceptual experimentation. In his essay “Modernist Painting” of 1961, Clement Greenberg argues that modernist painting follows a line of self-criticism to determine what is essential, inherent and irreducible to the medium in order to achieve a purity of form. (So, for example, modernist painters should be concerned with surface and pigment rather than pictorial content or narrative.) Its ultimate manifestation is a formalism that rejects not just representation and illusion but the intricacies of the artist’s subjectivity as well. Such a pursuit holds reason above faith, the spirit and the unknown, as well as the vicissitudes of desire, emotion and memory.

In the twenty-first century, the pursuit of the truly new seems like a fool’s errand. Wearing one’s influences on one’s sleeve is inescapable; the modern age is over and we are free to each be a patchwork of the precedents that we align ourselves with.<sup>2</sup> For his part Glabush draws on

some of the more eclectic manifestations of modernism in art, whether it be the mysticism evident in the paintings of Russian Suprematist Kazimir Malevich, the pioneering design and craft that emerged from Germany's Bauhaus school, or Robert Rauschenberg's *Combines* (1953–1964)—the American artist's landmark assemblages that fuse sculpture and image. Glabush rejects modernism's pursuit of purity at the expense of interiority; instead his work embraces the impure and provisional use of materials as a path towards meaning and self-understanding. For Glabush the conceptual is always embedded in the material, the embodied work of *making* becoming a conduit for the mind.<sup>3</sup> In an interview with Matthew Ryan Smith, Glabush speaks of his exhibition *Background*: "It explored how the language of modernism had been purged of the idiosyncratic, the personal, the specific in an attempt at a global or universal form. I wanted to relocate abstraction within the specific conditions of my memory."<sup>4</sup> Glabush's question became, does subjectivity remain in the "background" or can it be exposed for what it is—the essential, inherent and irreducible "foreground" of any æsthetic experimentation?

*What Is a Self?* presents a doubling of sorts, considering the concept of interiority both in terms of how we understand it in the domestic realm and as the construction of the innermost self, staging a mirrored outer and inner space.<sup>5</sup> Glabush shows both as works in progress: the spaces we occupy always changing and provisional—building materials and household goods doomed to obsolescence, entropy and decay—just as our various identities and self-images are always shifting, unresolved and fragile. Glabush was drawn to the Gairloch estate house as a space that is marked, used and particular; such a space exposes neutrality and wholeness as fallacies. Writer and artist Kim Neudorf suggests, "Ultimately, the meaning of [Glabush's] work is not fixed in time, but is a working process."<sup>6</sup> The traditional gallery environment can be seen as a mausoleum for finished—dead—artworks to rest; the home-cum-studio that Glabush has created in the four rooms of *What Is a Self?* resembles instead a living

space of inquiry and production, change and growth. This “domestication” of the works’ display exposes the circumstances of production, lifting the veil to reveal the materials and labour of its very construction. Its vulnerability and existential precariousness resemble our own.

One strong connection between Glabush’s work and modernism is the resistance of illusionism in favour of allowing materials to express their essential nature.<sup>7</sup> Even when Glabush works with figurative—as opposed to abstract—content, any apparent illusion is double-edged, as he exposes the seams of how the work came together. A prime example is the seemingly virtuosic drawing *Display* (2013), which took Glabush and three assistants nine months to produce as the centrepiece of his exhibition of the same name. The drawing initially registers as a photo-realistic representation of a display booth presenting the Baha’i faith at the Canadian National Exhibition in Toronto in 1963; at the same time, it is revealed to be an elaborate 2mm-by-2mm grid with five graphite dots in each square, regimenting and organizing the time-consuming labour that went into the stunning pictorial feat. When Glabush speaks of his desire to communicate a system of belief and its simultaneous impossibility with the *Display* exhibition,<sup>8</sup> he is referring equally to metaphysics and to modernism; despite the fact that they are often taken to be “incommensurable,” both are, in their way, ineffable—a leap of faith.

*What Is a Self?* highlights Glabush’s material-driven experiments with an array of sculptural assemblage as well as casting and carving techniques. The resulting works capture what critic Mira Berlin calls a pendulum swing between “resolution and dissolution.”<sup>9</sup> Confronting visitors as they first walk into the Central Gallery, *Euclid* acts as a kind of (anti-)monumental index for all the transformations and juxtapositions of materials to come.<sup>10</sup> The work combines the interplay of positive and negative space; vertical, horizontal and diagonal lines and planes; varied surface treatments and textures; and sharp juxtapositions of scale and material, creating a dynamic composite that reaches for the ceiling.





Glabush's art production is closely tied to the everyday. The works in *What Is a Self?* contain elements of the domestic sphere, casting the home's interior architecture as the dwelling for psychological interiority.

Installation view of *Sky Glabush: What Is a Self?* at Oakville Galleries in Gairloch Gardens, 17 January–13 March 2016. Foreground: *Euclid*, 2015, concrete, foam, MDF, tile, wood, weaving, plaster, wax, and unfired clay. Background: *endlesssummer*, 2015, cotton and wool weaving with acrylic and ink. Courtesy of the artist and MKG127, Toronto. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid.





The objects are modular, unprecious and scrappy like a well-loved piece of furniture. In a nod to the domestic setting, Glabush's sculptures are often intertwined with the plinths and shelves on and in which they are displayed. This is most apparent in *Storage Unit*, a large warren-like structure of planes resembling a labyrinthine bookshelf or home entertainment system, its myriad cubbies occupied by small sculptures. These more diminutive works are distinct in material and texture yet almost seem to be outgrowths of their containing device rather than add-ons to it. The maze-like structure of *Storage Unit* reappears in the exhibition's central relief sculpture, titled simply *Relief*, which hangs above the fireplace. Its scale gives it the appearance of a Cubist mask or an alien face mounted like a trophy.

Sky Glabush, *Storage Unit*, 2015, wood, plaster, tile, unfired clay, MDF, wax, and weaving. Courtesy of the artist and MKG127, Toronto. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid.

Overleaf: Sky Glabush, *Relief*, 2015, wood, gesso and canvas. Courtesy of the artist and MKG127, Toronto. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid.









The installation in the North Gallery presents four sculptures produced from found wooden chairs, which become embedded—and heavily shrouded—in concrete and plaster. Despite the significant manipulation that they have each undergone, the chairs maintain their human scale and their original footprints. Glabush’s sculptures have a pronounced gravitas; one feels their literal—and metaphorically, their historical—weight pulling them down toward the floor. Speaking of his earlier solo exhibition, *Background*, Glabush suggested that the gallery “operate as a crucible in which the works are locked in a conversation that has a certain tension that I don’t want to be resolved; I want them to be asking questions of each

Installation view of *Sky Glabush: What Is a Self?* at Oakville Galleries in Gairloch Gardens, 17 January–13 March 2016. From left to right: *Entertainment*, 2015, chair, concrete, plaster, wood and weaving; *Occupied*, 2015, chair, concrete, plaster, wood and weaving; *Fountain*, 2015, chair, concrete, wood and MDF; *Step*, 2015, chair, concrete, plaster, wood and weaving. Courtesy of the artist and MKG127, Toronto. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid.





Installation view of *Sky Glabush: What Is a Self?* at Oakville Galleries in Gairloch Gardens, 17 January–13 March 2016. Foreground: *Plan*, 2016, desk, concrete, wood, plaster, sand, drywall, MDF, and wax. Background: *Absolute Dating*, 2014, clay, plaster and cardboard mounted on board. Courtesy of the artist and MKG127, Toronto. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid.



other.”<sup>11</sup> Looking at these heavy “figures” that the chairs have mutated into, one imagines a family gathering, frozen in time as if by Medusa.

Structurally, Glabush’s sculptures are typically stacked, composites of multiple elements; similarly each is highly layered, suggesting the depths that reside beneath any surface. Critic Kristin Campbell notes, “Glabush may be implying that each kind of surface and composition has the capacity to encapsulate profound, and potentially transformative, content.”<sup>12</sup> They are rough-hewn, treated with paint as well as carved lines and other details, none of which obscure the material’s origin or masquerade as a different substance than what they are. Other exteriors include fragments of woven textile whose fraying edges add a visceral tactility as they rub up against the harder planes. Glabush revels in the haptic ways that different materials come into contact and abut one another: wax against plaster, plywood against shower tile, concrete against foam. The sculptures have an archeological quality, made up from the same matter as the house that contains them. In the Salah Bachir Room, *Plan* seems to congeal process and product in a single entity, as if the sculpture sitting atop has emerged from its very site of conception: a desk.

*What Is a Self?* is the first exhibition to present a selection of Glabush’s weavings, his latest sphere of experimentation. The textiles adorn the white walls in a kind of drag. The work of weaving is typically time-consuming and meditative in its repetition; each work therefore stands in for the arduous process of its own fabrication and as an index of Glabush’s education in the weavings’ production. Viewed together, they trace his learning of the craft and his increasing proficiency over time.<sup>13</sup> As with the sculptures, there is a palpable tension between parts and whole, with each thread visible to the eye while also accumulating, become one of many, to make up larger geometric forms. This interplay is also evident in the distinctive colour bleeding between the different sections of pigmented cotton, produced when Glabush hand-dyes the threads with acrylic and ink and passes them through the loom while still wet. The weavings’ subdued colour palette





and geometric shapes share a visual vocabulary with the sculptures; the preponderance of triangles and rectangles recall the building blocks we used in childhood to comprehend reality.

Through Glabush's design, *What Is a Self?* becomes a home for experimentation and soul-searching, for the artist's intrepid questioning of the structures of belief that surround and shape us. Within these walls the makeshift, the impure and the risk of failure are welcome and even cultivated. In the delicate weft and warp of the weavings and in the precarious material arrangements that form his modular sculptural assemblages, Glabush has crafted a contemplative *mise en scène* that conjures the risks and anxieties that animate an artist's complex interior world.

Installation view of *Sky Glabush: What Is a Self?* at Oakville Galleries in Gairloch Gardens, 17 January–13 March 2016. From left to right: *Local Colour*, 2015, cotton weaving with acrylic and ink; *Workshop*, 2015, cotton and wool weaving with acrylic and ink; *Completion*, 2015, cotton weaving with acrylic and ink, enamel and sand. Courtesy of the artist and MKG127, Toronto. Photo: Toni Hafkenscheid.



## ESSAY NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Discussing the exhibition *Background* with critic EC Woodley, Glabush commented, “The question was, what would be the best way to get at the particular moment I wanted to depict? It was a move away from the intrinsic or internalized logic of a painting into the more expanded network of the gallery.” EC Woodley, “Sky Glabush: Facing the Mysterious,” *Border Crossings* 126 (2013), 108. Writer Kim Neudorf also invokes the term “moments” for Glabush’s work in her *Sky Glabush: The Kingdom of Names* (Chatham, ON: Thames Art Gallery, 2012), unpaginated.

<sup>2</sup> Glabush claims, “As for painting and modernist history: I think that everything is up for grabs. There is no longer the deep suspicion of grand narratives. People pick and choose from anywhere and everywhere. The history of modernism is as relevant as any other history. Competing and contradictory movements are cast into a work at the same time. The teleology of modernism has certainly lapsed, but modernism as a language situated historically seems totally available.” Quoted in Matthew Ryan Smith, “On ‘Display’: A Conversation with Sky Glabush,” *WhitehotMagazine.com*, 3 March 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Glabush claims, “I feel that art should be the result of both a kind of accidental, intuitive collaboration with materials; but I also feel that just as a novelist or film director would be working with a cast of characters, a narrative arc, a plot, tension, ideas, that visual art should also be more than just revelling in materials and novelty. It is the balance between allowing these intuitive processes to gather momentum, while also coordinating and refining specific ideas.” “Artist of the Week: Sky Glabush,” *LVL3media.com*, 1 September 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Smith, “On ‘Display’: A Conversation with Sky Glabush.”

<sup>5</sup> *Outer and Inner Space* is the title of a 1965 dual-screen Andy Warhol film featuring Edie Sedgwick interacting with her own videotaped image. Its Janus-faced title reflects how Warhol quadrupled Sedgwick’s larger-than-life on-screen image while simultaneously multiplying and refracting her volatile psychological state.

<sup>6</sup> Neudorf, *Sky Glabush: The Kingdom of Names*, unpaginated.

<sup>7</sup> A general example would be how Glabush often uses construction materials like plywood in standard sizes, which impact the resulting work’s dimensions.

<sup>8</sup> “This work highlights the incommensurable languages of modernity and religion. By placing these disparate modes of representation together I am looking for slips and missteps, spillover and cross-contamination.” Quoted in Smith, “On ‘Display’: A Conversation with Sky Glabush.”

<sup>9</sup> Mira Berlin, “Sky Glabush,” *Border Crossings* 131 (2014), 119.

<sup>10</sup> The title refers both to the ancient Greek father of geometry and to a 1945 painting by the German Surrealist Max Ernst.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Woodley, “Sky Glabush: Facing the Mysterious,” 108.

<sup>12</sup> Kristin Campbell, “Sky Glabush: Background,” *C Magazine* 113 (2012), 59.

<sup>13</sup> In the interview with Smith, “On ‘Display’: A Conversation with Sky Glabush,” Glabush describes his process: “Adopting a position of learning and taking myself out of the familiarity of accumulated knowledge was helpful. It made me more aware and sensitive to the actions of making something with your hands [...] I try hard to allow the material processes to assist in determining the subject and the final result. I am more conscious of my body; if I’m making work that feels tight or already predetermined I try to adjust things. This usually involves a lot of destroyed work.”



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Cover: Sky Glabush, *endlessummer* (detail), 2015, cotton and wool weaving with acrylic and ink. Courtesy of the artist and MKG127, Toronto. Photo: Toni Hafkenschied.

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