

# ROBERT TERRIEN

RESOURCE PACK



ARTIST  
ROOMS

ON TOUR WITH

TATE

NATIONAL  
GALLERIES  
SCOTLAND



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## ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

Robert Therrien is widely regarded as one of the world's most outstanding artists. The ARTIST ROOMS collection holds several works by Therrien in a range of media including drawing, photography and sculpture made between 1997 and 2010. His work combines a deceptively childish charm and logic that suggests the realm of fairytales where ideas can be translated into reality.

Therrien's work appears in numerous public collections, including The Broad Art Foundation, Santa Monica, California; the Getty Centre, Los Angeles; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; The Museum of Modern Art, New York and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

This resource is designed to aid teachers and educators in the engagement of groups of young people in learning activities and projects using the ARTIST ROOMS Robert Therrien collection and in particular works on paper from *RED ROOM* 2000-7. The resource focuses on specific works and themes and suggests areas of discussion, activities and links to other works on the online ARTIST ROOMS collection pages.

For schools, the work of Robert Therrien presents a good opportunity to explore cross-curricula learning. The themes in Therrien's work can be linked to curricula areas such as English, Expressive Arts, Health and Wellbeing, Social Studies, Citizenship and Science.

**A glossary at the back of the resource provides further information on key words, terms and people associated with Therrien and related themes.**

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## ROBERT THERRIEN

Robert Therrien was born in 1947 in Chicago and has been living and working in Los Angeles since 1971. He completed an MFA at the University of Southern California in 1974 and began making reliefs that operated between painting and sculpture, using simplified forms that were generic and instantly recognisable. These works were placed on the wall and painted monochromatically, yet had enough structure to give them the feeling of an object. He also created freestanding works with the same simple, almost abstracted forms. In this early period, Therrien used a limited vocabulary, often working with the same shape in many different sizes and mediums. The motifs he used were linked by their simplicity and ability to evoke personal associations, marrying together a representational function and abstract form.

Therrien became known during the 1980s when he began to make works with simple, recognisable shapes such as jugs, coffins and doors, transformed through a variety of media including copper, wood and bronze. These works engaged the artist with the notion of the found object, addressed most explicitly

in his brick paper drawings, a version of which, dating from 2003, is included in ARTIST ROOMS. Such works express Therrien's use of a wide range of media.

The photograph *No Title (Scrubbrush panel)* 1997, held in ARTIST ROOMS, is typical of works in which Therrien represents practical implements, but imbues them with a magical aura that transcends their utilitarian function. While some of the objects Therrien uses are found, many are made by and for the artist.

During the 1990s, he began exploring scale, creating oversized objects that draw attention to details usually overlooked in the everyday world. His use of domestic images suggests an interest in the spatial world of the still-life. However, his concern with the interaction between the viewer and their environment has a firm connection to architecture. This is particularly at play in his room-sized table and chair pieces, a major example of which is held in ARTIST ROOMS, and in the single, over-sized objects such as *No Title (Oil Can)* 2004.

The ambition and surrealism of Therrien's practice is expressed in the major installation *RED ROOM* which comprises a closet filled with a vast array of collected objects, all painted red. Each item holds a significant, personal memory for the artist, revealing the hidden narratives and drama of both the ordinary and unnoticed, and the physical and mental relationships which exist in the world. In this way, Therrien

explores the connection between human beings and the objects that help them to live their lives.

His work has been the subject of solo exhibitions at Gagosian Gallery, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, the Kunstmuseum, Basel and Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo.



Robert Therrien *No Title (Scrubbrush panel)* 1997

## RED ROOM

Robert Therrien's *RED ROOM* houses a collection of found items, united by the colour red and their relationship to everyday life. The objects contained in the installation, many of which have been painted red, range from kitchen utensils and building materials to clothing and electrical appliances. The customisation of these mass-produced objects makes them seem unfamiliar or unreal, alluding to the magical or fantastical – a trait found throughout Therrien's oeuvre.

The room contains 888 objects, which are so tightly packed that upon first site they seem to merge together, like a large, monochrome painting. On close inspection it becomes apparent that a practical logic may be at work in the choice and position of each item. Therrien has stated that while creating the room he 'began to imagine that a family might live here: a father, a mother, and two children, all with red hair, of course'. The electrical appliances – which include an organ, a radio, a telephone, a wall clock and a quesadilla grill – are all in working order, perhaps for the convenience of these imagined inhabitants.

The collection, which was developed in the artist's home and studio over a period of seven years, began when Therrien was sent samples of red plastics. A hand-

written inventory inside the room records each item and the custom-made closet in which they are displayed has the same dimensions as the original storage space in the artist's studio. Many of the objects hold a particular significance to Therrien, either in relation to his own past, to his friends and relations, or to his art practice. Therrien often uses the word narrative in relation to his work, perhaps because he blends the personnel with the magical and the everyday with the unreal.

Throughout the twentieth century artists as diverse as Marcel Duchamp, Joseph Beuys and Jeff Koons have integrated found objects into their work. *RED ROOM* derives from this tradition, in which hundreds of different kitchen utensils, building materials, clothing and fabrics are tightly organised into a small closet. Items that hold private significance to the artist, such as his brother's summer-camp sweatshirt, are placed alongside more generic pieces, but all are ultimately linked by the same monochromatic red. Saturating the space with intense colour, Therrien provokes an uncanny experience reminiscent of the encounters with his earlier large-scale sculptures.



Robert Therrien *RED ROOM* 2000-2007

# SCRUBBRUSH BIRD BOOK

*Scrubbrush Bird Book* is one of the 888 items contained within *RED ROOM* and features a series of thirty drawings, photographs and prints, many of which reference motifs that reoccur throughout the artist's sculptures and works on paper. The book's cover is red with the outline of a black frame containing five panels, reminiscent of the fittings of a door or a window. The top and bottom panels contain words such as 'SORE-NOSE' and 'ODDFELLOWS'. These words reference some of the works inside the book and Therrien's reoccurring motifs. The image in the central panel is a black outline of a stack of plates, a motif which also occurs in his sculptures such as *No Title (Stacked Plates)* 2010.



Robert Therrien *No Title (Stacked Plates)* 2010

Therrien's sculptures often evolve from drawings, are inspired by everyday life include motifs of utilitarian objects such as chairs, tables, saucepans and other kitchenware. Like many of the reoccurring motifs throughout Therrien's work the stacked plates, are based on a mass produced item. Such items recall an era, particularly in the USA, following the Second World War when there was significant economic growth. During the 1950s, the USA became associated with conformity and home comfort, and the motifs employed by Therrien have the ability to evoke collective memory and personal childhood experiences.

Like many of his sculptures the stacked plates are identical to the original model yet gigantic in size. The spectator is invited to walk around the sculpture, which has a disorientating effect, as a result of its enlarged scale and there precarious stacking. The experience of walking around his enlarged sculptures prompts a childlike nostalgia; one which perhaps recalls Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* 1726 or Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* 1865.

As *Scrubbrush Bird Book* is normally contained on a shelf within the installation *RED ROOM*, it is not normally seen. The drawings, prints and photographs in the book include the figurative, architectural and still life.

SCRUBBRUSH BIRDS  
PLATES SORE-NOSE  
BLUE DIAMOND MELITA

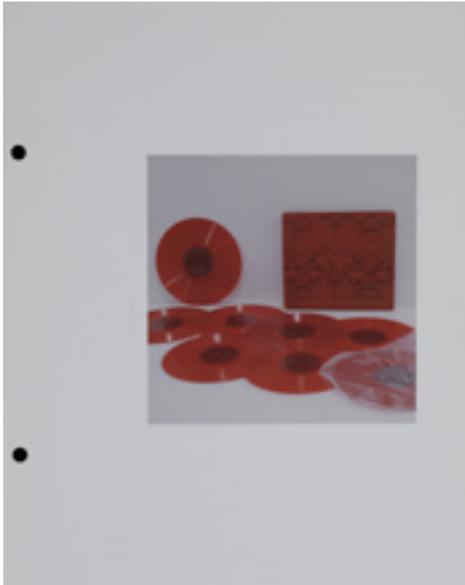


ODDFELLOWS CLOROX

Robert Therrien Cover of *Scrubbrush Bird Book*, RED ROOM 2000-7

## DANCING COUPLE

*Dancing Couple* is one of the pages from *Scrubbrush Bird Book*, which references celebration through dance and music. This page of the book illustrates a partial hand drawing of a dancing couple in profile. The couple could be on a first date, perhaps attending a high school prom but the emotions and context of the couple are removed through their isolation and their headless bodies. The awkward nature of their dance is highlighted though the couple's feet, where the male dancer appears to be standing on the foot of his female partner.



Robert Therrien *Red Records (RED ROOM item)*,  
*RED ROOM 2000-7*

Like much of Therrien's work this image appears to reference a particular time or era. Here the image alludes to the 1950s through the couples clothing and style of their dance, which is reminiscent of a jive or jitterbug. The couple are predominantly dressed in red; a colour which associated with danger, passion and sacrifice. In *Red Hot (Shirt) Couple* – another page from *Scrubbrush Bird Book* – a second dancing couple is depicted, but here we can see the couples faces, other dancers and the venue space itself. The venue appears to be a multi-purpose function space rather than a night club alluding to a family or social function. Both *Dancing Couple* and *Red Hot (Shirt) Couple* have a sense of play. Humour is expressed through the awkward dance, prompting the viewer to reflect on their own personal memories while interpreting the pages from *Scrubbrush Bird Book*.

*Red Records (RED ROOM item)* is a photographic image of several vinyl records arranged against a white background. Records were the primary storage device for sound until the late twentieth century but retain something of a niche market. Here again, Therrien references an earlier era, particularly the mid-twentieth century with the advent of youth culture and explosion of rock and roll music.



Robert Therrien *Dancing Couple*, RED ROOM 2000-7



Robert Therrien *Red Hot (Shirt) Couple, RED ROOM 2000-7*

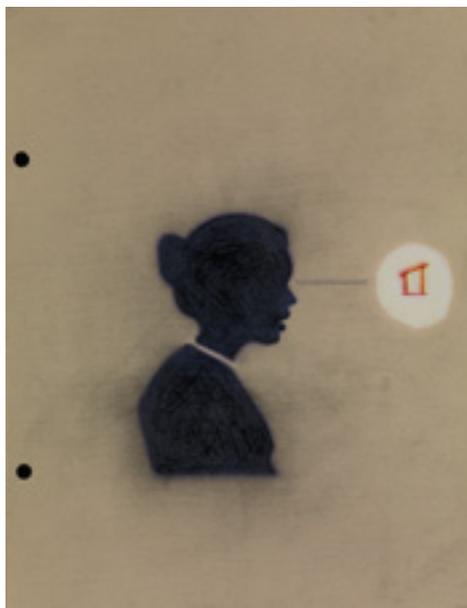
## AN EYE FOR REAL ESTATE

Robert Therrien often uses stencils to create his works on paper; a method, which allows for reproduction and creating editions. Therrien, however, doesn't do this to create editions, but to reinforce his visual language through repetition. Each motif has slight alterations and a fixed meaning is rendered elusive. The artist once said, 'As a child I had a stencil kit which might explain my attraction to linear edge and flat silhouettes. I still have it, as well as a collection of architectural templates; and I still use it as well as a collection of various other templates.'

In *Eye for Real Estate* the solid black image recalls the profile silhouettes, that became popular in the eighteenth century prior to the advent of photography. Therrien has also included one of his signature red, architectural graphic motifs in this work, where a dotted line projects from the female figure's eyes towards the architectural form. This visual device is often employed in cartoons and comic strips to emphasise and illustrate what a character might be thinking about outwith the screen and picture plane.

The female figure in silhouette is isolated in the centre of the page, the sepia-like colour of which gives the work a vintage quality recalling an earlier time. Therrien uses silhouette in the page *An Image of Scolding Hand*, where

a cartoon-like head in profile is set against a dense plane of red. A hand with a finger pointing towards the face and mouth of the cartoon figure adds a sense of surreal humour to the work. The same cartoon-like head motif reoccurs throughout Therrien's works on paper. In *Sore Nose* the same motif occurs as an outline, appearing almost as if it was an etching. There are slight alterations in the motif here: the mouth of the head is open and the nose is red, which along with the lines emanating, emphasise the sore nose. A second, more detailed, cartoon-like portrait in the centre of the work recalls Velma Dinkley from *Scooby-Doo*.



Robert Therrien *An Eye for Real Estate*, RED ROOM 2000-7



Robert Therrien *Sore Nose*, *RED ROOM* 2000-7



Robert Therrien *An Image of Scolding Hand, RED ROOM 2000-7*

## RED SHOES

In *Photographs of Red Shoes* (some of them RED items), from *Scrubbrush Bird Book*, three different images of red shoes appear on the page, each photographic image increasing in size as they cascade down from top to bottom. Some of the shoes photographed here are included in the installation *RED ROOM* which combines a wide range of objects selected for their shape, fabrication, era, function and associations. Red shoes sometimes have associations with the magical in popular culture because of the famous Hans Christian Anderson fairy tale *The Red Shoe 1845* and the children's novel *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz 1902*. In Hans Christian Anderson's fairytale, the ballerina Karen can't stop dancing when she wears the red shoes and in the *Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy needs to retrieve her ruby slippers before she can return home.

Here the shoes are photographed as still lifes, a long established artistic subject involving the arrangement of everyday objects. Early still lifes were often arrangements of food, flowers, dishes and vases, reflecting wealth and pleasure. In the 1960s still life became an important vehicle of expression in capturing themes of contemporary life reflective of a post-war consumerist society. The use of everyday objects and appropriation of imagery relates back to Marcel Duchamp's notion of the ready-made. Robert Therrien's work has a correlation to both pop art and Duchamp, while revealing an interest

in the modest subject matter of normal, American, homespun life.

Other still life photographs in *Scrubbrush Bird Book* include domestic items such as a coffee pot and a scrubbing brush. His interest in such items is in contrast to the overtly masculine work of a previous generation of minimalist artists including Dan Flavin and Donald Judd. Minimalism, like pop art, is a movement with which Therrien's work is associated. The book also includes a the page *Photograph of Red Bench Room, Sculpture 1991*, which like *RED ROOM* is an installation work recalling a domestic or social setting.



*Photograph of Red Bench Room, Sculpture 1991, RED ROOM 2000-07*



*Photograph of Red Bench Room, Sculpture 1991, RED ROOM 2000-7*

# CHAPEL

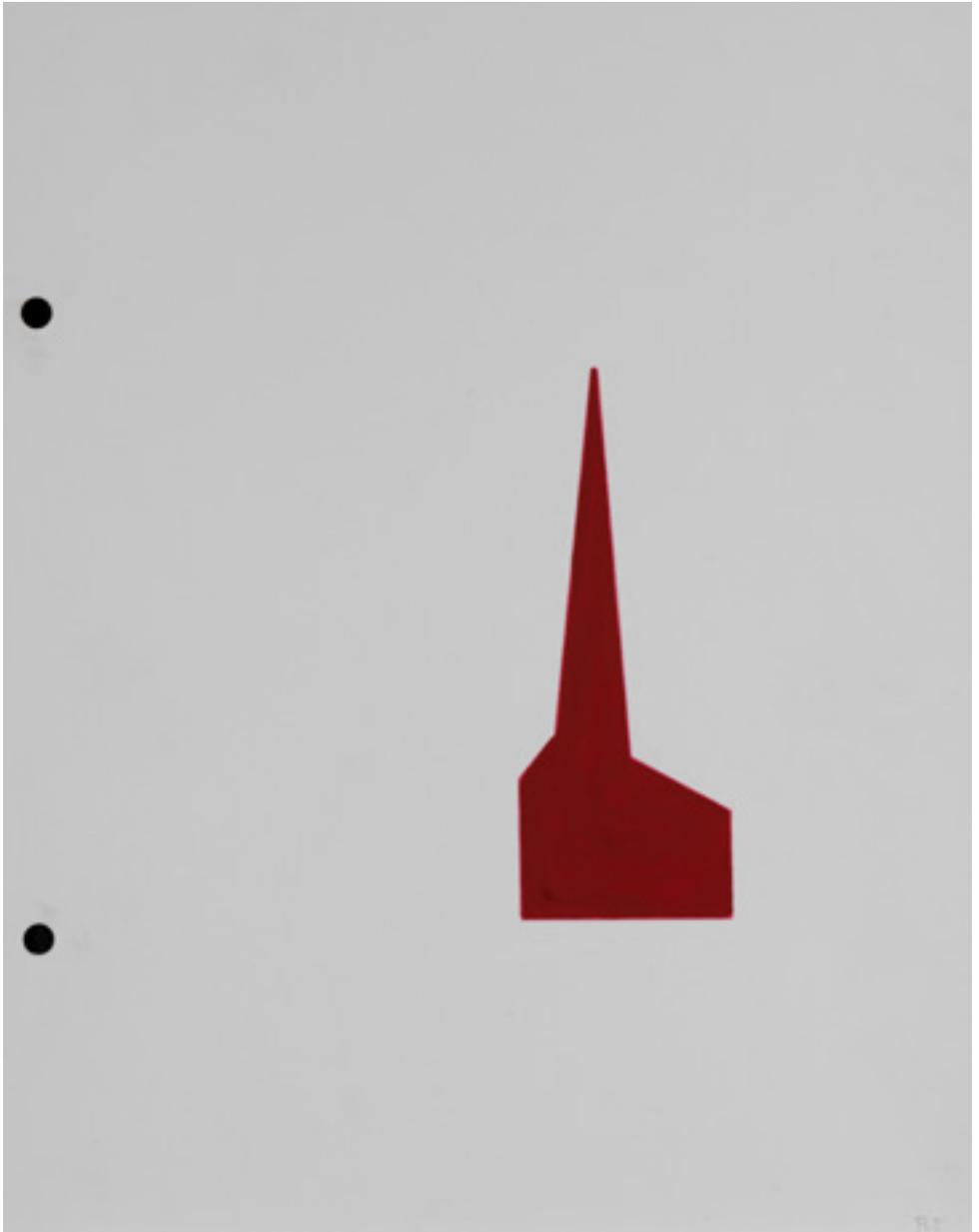
It could be said that Robert Therrien's work is difficult to pinpoint chronologically because he continuously builds upon ideas and motifs. Many of the shapes that reoccur in his work are not confined by their reference to a single item and potentially relate to multiple objects. This creates an interaction between his sculptures, shapes and the objects they relate to. In works such as *Chapel* he references architectural motifs. While the title explicitly references a religious building the shape references sculptures by Therrien such as his oil cans and bent cones. Other works reference doors, windows, keystones or beam-like structures. *Chapel* recalls a typical American West church like those depicted in Dorothy Lange's photographs during the second third of the twentieth century.

In the sculpture *Untitled (Oil Can)* 2004 Therrien employs the device of monumental scale for a mass-produced oil can. The highly polished surface captures the viewer's own reflection in front of the sculpture. Dwarfed by the oversized structure, the artist seems to question the function of such a simple utilitarian object and how we perceive ourselves in relation to it. The oil can is an object which references the American automobile industry and perhaps an earlier time when American production of automobiles was the largest in the world.



Robert Therrien *Red Hang Man*, RED ROOM 2000-7

In *Red Hang Man* a beam-like construction resembles a wooden frame, known as gallows, used for execution by hanging, or as a means of torture before execution, as was used when being hanged, drawn and quartered. The motif is also used for the paper and pencil guessing game Hangman where one player thinks of a word, phrase or sentence and the other tries to guess it by suggesting letters or numbers. Hangman originated in the Victorian times. Traditionally the completed word would always be the name of an animal. The association of a guessing game seems apt because of the playful and elusive nature of Therrien's work.



Robert Therrien *Chapel*, RED ROOM 2000-7

# ACTIVITIES, DISCUSSION AND ARTIST LINKS

## Discussion

- The colour red has many different meanings and associations. In some cultures it represents happiness while others associate it with aggression because it is also the colour of blood. Discuss all the different associations the colour has for you and why you think Therrien has employed the colour for *RED ROOM*.
- One of the characteristics of readymade art is that by cancelling its function it becomes art. A number of the electrical devices contained within *RED ROOM* are fully functional. Why do think it is important for the artist to use fully functional objects?
- The installation *RED ROOM* has 888 items within it. Many of them have personal memories and associations for the artist. If you were going to create a *RED ROOM*, what items would you collect for it?
- Using the background information about the artist, Robert Therrien, explain why you think he changes ordinary objects into new and unexpected sculptures by altering their size, colour, etc.
- What object or image could be used to represent a story or memory from your childhood? Would you use the object or image as it is to represent the memory or would you alter it in some way? Would you change the scale of the object and what implications would this have for its meaning?
- Do Robert Therrien's drawings make you think of your own childhood? What kind of memories and ideas do the drawings generate?

## Activity

- *Scrubbrush Bird Book* is one of the items contained within *RED ROOM*. The book has thirty pages and includes drawings and photographs. Many of the drawings and photographs inspired his sculptures. Choose one of Robert Therrien's drawings as a starting point to create your sculpture.
- Create your own readymade sculpture using an everyday object – the object could be domestic or industrial. Think about whether the object has any significance for you and if that matters. Think about ways you could present the object to elevate its status.
- Choose an image of yourself or create a new image in profile. Copy or print as large as possible and tape the photo page and another piece of paper back-to-back then cut out around the shape. Glue the silhouettes onto white card and frame them.

## Activity

- Write a story based on one or more of Therrien's drawings and think about the characters, setting, and plot of the story. Consider where you will set the story. Would it be in the gallery, at school, at home or in an imaginary place?
- Create an artwork representing your own interpretation of a contemporary cartoon figure or character from a book or fairytale. Collect and choose source images to make a collage. Source materials can be photocopied. If a computer is available use Photoshop to manipulate images.
- Think about an object or shape you like and how it can be related to other shapes and objects. Draw or photograph these objects and shapes to develop a motif that you can use throughout your work.

## Artist Link

- Dan Flavin (1933–96) challenged the viewer's idea of art as dependent on an 'original' object. His choice of banal, mass-produced objects has parallels with the use of material from everyday life. Find out more about Dan Flavin: [www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/dan-flavin-1101](http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/dan-flavin-1101)
- Ron Mueck (born 1958) creates astonishingly life-like sculptures where his manipulation of scale adds a deep psychological dimension to his work. Find out more about Ron Mueck: [www.nationalgalleries.org/collection/artistrooms](http://www.nationalgalleries.org/collection/artistrooms)
- Charles Ray (born 1953) works with film, photography, sculpture and installations to explore the notion of representation and to conflate reality with the surreal. Find out more about Charles Ray: [www.tate.org.uk/artistrooms](http://www.tate.org.uk/artistrooms)
- Jeff Koons (born 1955) sometimes creates colossal sculptures such as *Caterpillar (with Chains)* 2002 which often make the viewer feel small and childlike because of their scale. Find out more about Jeff Koons: [www.nationalgalleries.org/collection/artistrooms](http://www.nationalgalleries.org/collection/artistrooms)

# SUMMARY

## **Key things to think about:**

### *Key Words:*

Everyday • Memory • Narratives  
Domestic • Motif • Childhood • Taste  
Utilitarian • Society • Scale • Sculpture  
Balance • Magical • Artifice  
Humour • Readymade

### *Process:*

Sculpture • Photography • Drawing

### *Formal Qualities:*

Silhouette • Scale • Illusion • Graphic  
Monochromatic

### *Links to other artists in National collections at National Galleries of Scotland and Tate:*

Rene Magritte, Marcel Duchamp, Louise  
Bourgeois, Dan Flavin, Vija Celmins, Jeff  
Koons, Ron Mueck, Martin Boyce

### *Links to Art Movements*

Surrealism, minimalism, pop, conceptual

# FIND OUT MORE

## Websites

ARTIST ROOMS: [www.tate.org.uk/collection/artistrooms/](http://www.tate.org.uk/collection/artistrooms/) and [www.nationalgalleries.org/collection/artistrooms](http://www.nationalgalleries.org/collection/artistrooms)

ARTIST ROOMS On Tour with the Art Fund: [www.artfund.org/artistrooms](http://www.artfund.org/artistrooms)

Gagosian: [www.gagosian.com/artists/robert-therrien](http://www.gagosian.com/artists/robert-therrien)

The Broad Art Foundation: [www.broadartfoundation.org](http://www.broadartfoundation.org)

Los Angeles County Museum of Art: [www.lacma.org/](http://www.lacma.org/)

Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles: [www.moca.org/](http://www.moca.org/)

Pompidou Centre: [www.centrepompidou.fr/en](http://www.centrepompidou.fr/en)

The Museum of Modern Art, New York: <http://www.moma.org/>

## Online Films

[www.nationalgalleries.org/collection/artists/robert-therrien](http://www.nationalgalleries.org/collection/artists/robert-therrien)

[www.youtube.com/user/GagosianGallery](http://www.youtube.com/user/GagosianGallery)

[www.youtube.com/user/walkerartcenter?feature=watch](http://www.youtube.com/user/walkerartcenter?feature=watch)

## Further Reading

Julia Brown, *Robert Therrien*, Los Angeles, 1984

Margit Rowell, *Robert Therrien*, Madrid, 1991

Margit Rowell and Norman Bryson, *Robert Therrien*, Los Angeles, 2000

Lynn Zelevansky, *Robert Therrien*, Los Angeles, 2000

Gregory Salzman, *Robert Therrien: Polaroids, Drawings*, Santa Fe, 2000

Christian Müller, *Robert Therrien: Works on Paper*, Chicago, 2013

# GLOSSARY

## **ALICE IN WONDERLAND**

A novel written by Lewis Carroll in 1865 about a girl named Alice who falls down a rabbit hole into a fantasy world populated by peculiar creatures. The tale plays with logic, giving the story lasting popularity with adults as well as children.

## **CONCEPTUAL ART**

A term which came into use in the 1960s, referring to a movement from the same period. Conceptual artists think beyond the limits of traditional media (such as painting or sculpture), instead they use whatever material is appropriate for their concept or idea.

## **MARCEL DUCHAMP**

French artist (1887-1968), associated with dada, who was a major influence on twentieth century art.

## **DAN FLAVIN**

American artist (1933–96) who has worked mainly with fluorescent light and associated with minimalism and conceptualism.

## **GULLIVER'S TRAVELS**

A novel by Anglo-Irish writer and clergyman Jonathan Swift in 1726 that is both a satire on human nature and a parody of the "travellers' tales" literary sub-genre.

## **INSTALLATION**

Installation art describes an artistic genre of three-dimensional works that is often site-specific and designed to transform the perception of a space.

## **JITTERBUG**

A fast dance popular in the 1940s, performed chiefly to swing music.

## **DONALD JUDD**

An American artist (1928-94) associated with minimalism. His earliest sculptures were mainly in wood, but in 1963-4 he began to have his pieces fabricated from his designs in metal and sometimes coloured perspex.

## **JEFF KOONS**

An American artist (born 1955) known for his reproductions of banal objects – such as Balloon animals produced in stainless steel with mirror finish surfaces.

## **DOROTHY LANGE**

An influential American documentary photographer (1895-1965), best known for her Depression-era work for the Farm Security Administration (FSA).

## **MINIMAL ART**

An art movement from the late 1960s. Minimalist artists typically made works in simple geometric shapes based on the square and the rectangle. Many minimal works explore the properties of their materials; which were often industrial.

## **MOTIF**

A reoccurring element forming a theme in a work of art or literature.

## **POP ART**

Name given to British and American versions of art that drew inspiration from sources in popular and commercial culture.

## **READYMADE**

The term used by French artist Marcel Duchamp to describe works of art he made from manufactured objects.

## **THE RED SHOES**

A fairy-tale by the Danish writer Hans Christian Anderson (1805-75) in 1845, which tells the story of a young dancer called Karen who wears a pair of magical red shoes. It was turned into a classic film in 1948 by the duo Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger.

## **SCOOBY-DOO**

An animated American television series produced from 1969 to the present day. The series featured four teenagers and their talking brown Great Dane dog named Scooby-Doo, who solved mysteries involving supposedly supernatural creatures through a series of antics and missteps.

## **SILHOUETTE**

A silhouette is the image of a person, an object or scene represented as a solid shape of a single colour, usually black, its edges matching the outline of the subject.

## **SURREALISM**

An avant-garde art movement that began in the early 1920s, and aimed to resolve the previously contradictory conditions of dream and reality.

## **UTILITARIAN**

Something designed for practical use rather than beautiful appearance.

## **THE WONDERFUL WIZARD OF OZ**

A children's book by L. Frank Baum (1856-1919) from 1902, which chronicles the adventures of a young girl named Dorothy in the Land of Oz, after being swept away from her Kansas farm home in a tornado. It was later made into a hugely successful Hollywood film in 1939.

