

Art By Edward J. Sozanski

# A swing through some galleries

*Off the "Silk Road" and into architectural sculpture, post-Mao art, and more.*



Stephen Robin's "Tondo," 1982, gypsum cement, at Rosenfeld: Putto self-portraits, references to Renaissance sculpture.

Architectural ornament isn't something one often sees exhibited as contemporary art, but then Stephen Robin's distinctively complex approach to the subject demands to be seen in that context.

Rosenfeld Gallery's retrospective through Robin's career reveals how he integrates rich layering of historical references and sly humor with voluptuous modeling and meticulous finish.

It's hard to take the full measure of this work in a gallery setting because we can't see how Robin's sculptures interact with architectural environments, as they do in the federal building in Newark, N.J., and the Ronald Reagan building in Washington.

Yet we can appreciate his references to Renaissance and baroque sculpture, particularly when he inserts putto self-portraits in pieces such as *Tondo*. And we can also admire his fastidious attention to detail and surface in works created from a variety of materials, from bronze and cement to plaster, resin, cast iron, and aluminum.

Horticultural motifs such as flowers, leaves, grass, and even fruits abound; Robin describes some works so composed as "parodies" of traditional garden sculpture. This quality is evident primarily in the heroic scale and muscularity of a huge cast-iron rose or a *Bowl of Rosettes*.

Yet even these pieces from the 1990s communicate a hint of delicacy, a quality that becomes more pronounced in more abstract works from the last decade — a monumental wall relief called *Rhododendron*, large cast-iron grills, and the six-panel *Below the Surface*, a burnished aluminum relief that evokes sea grasses undulating gently under water.

Robin's aesthetic emphatically refutes the modernist idea that decoration is by nature frivolous and extraneous. His sculptures not only are modern in sensibility, they don't require architectural support to assert their conceptual and material integrity.