

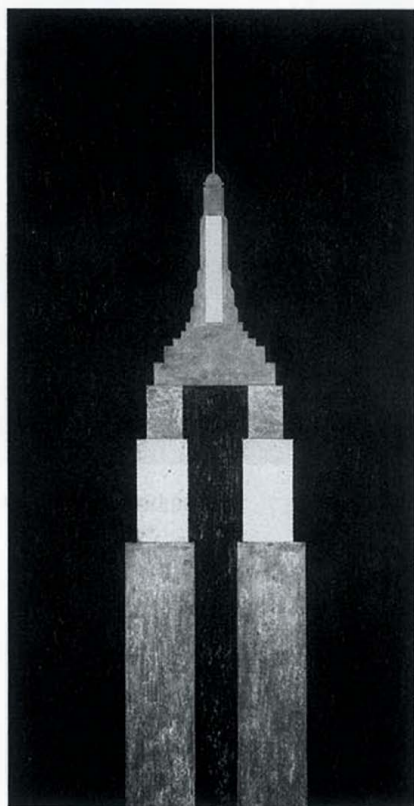
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ROBERT MOSKOWITZ

Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden

The image as idea is the keynote of this retrospective, which spans Robert Moskowitz's career from the late 1950s to the present. He starts with the image. In *Cadillac/Chopsticks*, for example, Moskowitz began with the Cadillac—a silhouette of the elongated fins of the 1960 model, cut off at the picture edge to convey motion. Realizing the painting needed something else, he added the crossed chopsticks, another image that had haunted him. Brought together, the images imply an East/West dialectic. As an abstract composition, the palpable tension between the



Robert Moskowitz, *Untitled*, 1980, graphite and pastel on paper, 53 by 31¼ inches. Hirshhorn Museum.

black, sleek, mechanistic shape in motion and the red X shape, stable and finite, suggests the antitheses of speed and stasis, aggression and passivity.

Moskowitz's images, though sometimes humorous and quirky, tend to be ambiguous, unsettling, ominous. His Duchampian collage of a window shade opening onto a museum wall elicits a sense of claustrophobic enclosure and nothingness. Is the so-called *Swimmer* of the 1977 painting sinking or swimming? The whiteness of the iceberg in the painting of that title evokes the whiteness of Melville's whale.

These deeper associative, emotional, and psychological meanings, as well as the almost imperceptible illusionist space, require patient, contemplative viewing. As Ned Rifkin, organizer of this exhibition, observes in his illuminating catalogue essay, many of Moskowitz's works are "slow . . . to activate." The least successful pictures by this intensely private artist are those in which images are literal and easy to grasp, such as the JFK rocking chair in his 1964 memorial piece, or the smile button, the duck, and the swastika—little white emblems superimposed on the dark transitional paintings of the early 1970s.

By contrast, *Red Mill* and *Red Cross* typify the larger, bolder forms of Moskowitz's mature style in which—as in the impressive skyscraper series of the late 1970s—foreground and background alternately dissolve. They also illustrate his increasingly sensuous use of color and his consistent combination of hard-edged silhouetted shapes with subtle painterly surfaces. In a fresh departure, these works exemplify his deconstruction of public symbols, divesting them of traditional associations and meanings.

Moskowitz has been called a painter's painter, recognized for his experimentation in the gamut of styles through which he expresses his deeply personal vision. This overdue retrospective—generous in its inclusions and spatial display—should gain for him the wider public recognition he deserves. It is traveling to the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art in California and to the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

—Viola Hopkins Winner