

# Still Life with Phone and Gun

*Using computer-aided design programs, Robert Lazzarini sculpts today's totems into tangible reminders of mortality*

BY NICOLE KRAUSS



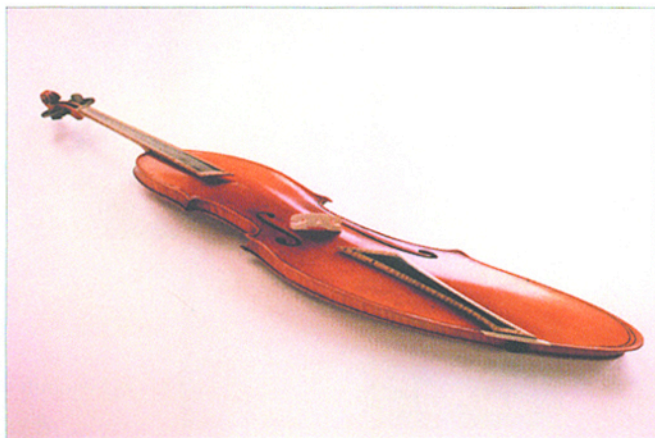
**R**obert Lazzarini's Manhattan studio is sunny, quiet, and surprisingly spare. A few sculptures lie in various stages of completion on the floor. They are like still lifes taken from the canvas and, while keeping their painted proportions, given volume. A skull, a telephone, and a chair appear suspended between two and three dimensions: they have been digitally distorted on a computer and then painstakingly re-created in their original materials (cast bone for the skull; plastic, stainless steel, and urethane rubber for the phone; maple wood for the chair). Tacked above the desk is a series of studies for future works—such as a 38-caliber Smith and Wesson pistol and a blown-out Goodyear tire—but otherwise, the room is almost empty. Lazzarini, 35, is preparing to participate in his first major exhibition, as part of the Whitney Museum of American Art's "BitStreams," after working steadily at the fringes of the art world for the past decade, with three solo shows at alternative venues in the past five years.

The Whitney exhibition, which runs through the 10th of this month, brings together artists using digital technology. While Lazzarini fits in this group—laser-scanning objects into his computer, using animation and industrial-design programs to rework the scans, and then relying on these prototypes to create three-dimensional models—technology has facilitated rather than inspired his work. After earning a B.F.A. from New York's School of Visual Arts in 1990 and while studying restoration at the Institute of Fine Arts at New York University, Lazzarini began working in the bookstore at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. During his lunch hours, he sat in the galleries with an armful of clay, sculpting imitations of anything from Rodins to medieval figures to ancient Greek bas-reliefs. At home, he made molds from these maquettes, then distorted the molds and recast them in plaster. As these free-form distortions advanced, Lazzarini became interested in remaking the altered sculptures in their original materials. Around 1995, he began looking into computer programs to help him, just as the technology that would make this task possible was taking off.

Lazzarini grew up in Parsippany, New Jersey, and has a charming boy-next-door quality, offering this visitor to his studio cookies and milk. "Since I was a kid, I've been interested in the emotional capacity of objects," Lazzarini explains, referring to the complex attachments people have to everyday objects, which can serve as reminders of passing time. The items he chose to recast for his last show at his gallery, Pierogi, in Williamsburg, Brooklyn—a telephone, a hammer, a chair, and a boot—all came from his studio. Lazzarini has also created pointed reminders of mortality, such as his elongated *Skull* (2000)—included in "BitStreams"—which comes in an edition of six and sells for \$10,000. He wanted the distorted objects to impart some of the anxiety of traditional memento mori. Lawrence Rinder, curator of "BitStreams," describes Lazzarini's sculptures as "powerful expressions of psychological tension transformed into physical form" that "seem to have one foot in the lost world of Mannerism and another in a digital future we have only barely begun to understand."

While part of Lazzarini's process takes place in a virtual space, the other part is intensely physical. For example, he reproduces scratches, nicks, and dents from the original objects in the surfaces of the computer-generated models. This realism contrasts sharply with the objects' sliding dimensions. "You see, what I'm trying to create," Lazzarini explains, his face bathed in the blue glow of his computer screen as he toys with an image of a revolver, distorting and spinning it around until we are staring down its barrel, "is an impossible object." ■

*Nicole Krauss is a New York-based writer whose first novel will be published by Doubleday next spring.*



**Phone, 2000, of plastic, metal, and rubber, and *Violin*, 1998, of maple, ebony, bone, and spruce, two digitally distorted sculptures by Robert Lazzarini (top).**