

# BRIDGETTE **MAYER** GALLERY

## Paul Oberst: Conceiving a Civilization

Since 1981, Paul Oberst has explored the idea of the temple, playing spirited variations on its iconic shape while tapping into its fertile thematic meanings. As he stated in 2008, "The temple is a soul, a journey, a doorway, a map or a marker." Along the way, his imagery has borne the impress of both art history and anthropology—as if a conceptual artist with an in-depth knowledge of modern aesthetics had set out to create a new civilization.

Oberst's latest work reveals the "ceremonial array" one might find inside one of those temples—"items for the next realm," he calls them. There are shields and masks, a musical instrument and a bed. There are new temples, too, richly imagined, among them, *Tower for Uxmal* with its mix of Mayan and Art Deco design. Oberst also incorporates the temple into several pieces, such as the rakish headpiece of a medicine man with Russian Constructivist tendencies.

The artist draws on humble materials to create his resonant objects. Like Calder, he loves the poetry of wire, how it can be braided into a beard or left to its own cascading and wriggling devices. Small blocks of wood, sometimes sanded and painted, are another favorite element. In the maypole-like *Ceremonial Array*, they dangle like minimalist ornaments.

Oberst is fearless yet focused in his appropriations. Cutouts from an illustrated life of Christ add a touch of Max Ernst to the extraordinary *Dialogue with the Mind of a Child*. This piece, like many in the show, features bits of language, words that add layers of meaning and mystery: "emptiness—form—spirit—soul."

In contrast to this complex piece, *Ceremonial Escape/Deus ex Machina* offers a beautifully simple section of ladder made from painted copper wire and wood. Its spiral shape, suspended in the air, conjures DNA, but also Jacob's stairway to heaven. It is at once lyric and poignant—and, in its imperfections, relevant to our time.

Part of the pleasure of Oberst's new work lies in his range of reference. Whether nodding to Jasper Johns in the painting *Temple Elevation/Drum and Base* or evoking a fairytale in the bronze *Ceremonial Mask/Rapunzel*, the artist embraces a cross-cultural world while merging his own distinctive voice and vision to the plenteous mix.

*A poet and critic, Carl Little lives and writes on Mount Desert Island. Among his books are Ocean Drinker: New & Selected Poems and The Watercolors of John Singer Sargent.*