

A Step Beyond: Navigating the World of Stephen Talasnik

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[See table of contents](#)

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A Step Beyond: Navigating the World of Stephen TALASNIK

Stefan ZEBROWSKI-RUBIN

The visually complex work of Stephen Talasnik, ranging from painting to drawing to sculpture, bridges notions of past and future, craft and design, science and art. This rich confluence of ideas creates an art that is broad ranging and hard to define. From September 7 to October 23, Talasnik will exhibit his work for the first time in Canada at Battat Contemporary Gallery in Montreal. In the show *Panorama – Monolithe Intime*, viewers will be able to see Talasnik's drawn panoramas as well as experience a sculpture created specifically for the gallery space.

Over his 30-year career, Talasnik's work has travelled the world. His art has been exhibited across the US, as well as in England, Japan, The Netherlands, Austria, Germany, Spain and France.¹ Most recently, the artist was commissioned to create an installation for the 50th anniversary of the Storm King Art Center in Mountainville, New York. In this last iteration of his sculptural work, called *Stream*, Talasnik brings his sculpture to monumental proportions. The abstract form made of 3,000 bamboo poles bridges engineering and art; Talasnik extrapolates a rigid structural unit into a larger fluid shape. This sculpture represents the culmination of Talasnik's earlier work, a fascinating journey orbiting the ideas of futuristic architecture, framework and craft.

To view his work is to witness a modern-day Da Vinci taking structures into the imaginary; Talasnik explores architectural and engineered forms with the same virtuosity and the same wonder. However, instead

of conceptualizing flying machines, Talasnik draws inspiration from the built world to imagine structures that could never exist in reality. The artist's drawn panoramas, such as *Elusive Landscape* (2005), present multiple structures: parts of constructions, latticed diagrams, complex systems and fading remnants. These works on paper seem to unfurl like scrolls, revealing their layered complexity. The paper is so intensely worked that it starts to mimic the texture of time-weathered manuscripts.

Talasnik invents, using his instinct for both engineering and poetry; his works are unplanned, yet their details and execution reveal his ability to both abide by and disobey the laws of gravity and construction. The drawn structures mix scales and light sources, at times three dimensional, at other times diagrammatic. Similar to the works of Piranesi and Escher, Talasnik's drawings create the fantastically impossible. His structures defy logic. They connote an inner world and drift into a dream-like space beyond. When witnessing the graphite panoramas, the viewer enters the artist's imagined realm.

The American artist's sculptures expand upon the language created within his drawings. At first, Talasnik's sculptures seem to echo the rigid geometries of Sol LeWitt's modular structures and Buckminster Fuller's optimistic geodesic domes, yet Talasnik does not plan his sculptures using math or engineering. Instead, he adopts a more fluid and organic genesis of form, allowing the sculpture to take shape as they are made.

Talasnik, as he says in his own words, "is interested in the gestural capacity of the straight line and all structures are dependent on intuitive decision making rather than hard math... an individual construct expands from a single point,

addressing the repetitive sensuality of the variable grid." A single sculpture by Talasnik, such as *Iceberg* (2002-2008) or *Angular Momentum* (2007-2008), can reference structures of plants and sea creatures, long practiced traditions of crafts such as basketry and weaving, as well as scaffolds from construction sites and skeletons of architectural projects. Even though he builds his shapes out of wood, bronze and other visceral material, the artist manages to escape traditional forms of the known world and create an unreal reality.

From a young age, the Philadelphia native has had a natural affinity for engineering, architecture and infrastructure, and throughout his life his references to the built world have only grown. His encounter with futuristic designs at the Worlds Fair in NYC in 1964 fueled an already active fascination and inspired him to start drawing. Trained at the Rhode Island School of Design and the Tyler School of Art in Rome, Talasnik informed his artistic style with the visionary architecture of Hugh Ferriss and Frank Lloyd Wright, the industrial design of Raymond Loewy and Norman Bel Geddes as well as the black and white photography of Harry Callahan and Aaron Siskind. In Rome, he was surrounded by the *prima materia* of ancient society, as well as the works of Da Vinci, Michelangelo, Brunelleschi and Piranesi, and that of the Italian Futurists. In the late 1980s, Talasnik spent three years in Japan teaching drawing, as well as studying contemporary Japanese architecture and design. It is only within the last ten years that the New York-based artist has begun making sculpture. The artist works without computer aid and creates complex 3D matrices. It is a wonder that Talasnik has had no training in architecture, for his draftsmanship is

impeccable. Talasnik's innate passion for built structures resonates throughout his work.

Over his career, Stephen Talasnik has revealed his artistic and intellectual mind, repeatedly orbiting the same themes to dig deeper to the core of his fixation. He has created a world, created a language, created a way of working and thinking. Within the exhibition at Battat, the juxtaposition of drawings and sculpture that share the same formal language - the same intellectual core - allows the viewer to navigate the intellectual space between drawn conception and three-dimensional reality. While the sculpture does not represent the drawings (or vice versa), a dialogue, both scientific and poetic, does exist. It is this dialogue that reveals the unique vision of Stephen Talasnik. ←

Stephen Talasnik,
Panorama – Monolithe Intime
Battat Contemporary Gallery, Montreal
September 7 – October 23, 2010

Stefan ZEBROWSKI-RUBIN graduated from Harvard College in History of Art and Architecture and Italian Studies in 2008. Ever since he has been working in Montreal at the Canadian Centre for Architecture and writing freelance for *The Art Blog* and for *Canadian Art* Magazine. In the fall, he will be a guest blogger for the PBS show *Art:21* and will also pursue his MA in History of Art at The Courtauld Institute in London.

Note

1. Stephen Talasnik's drawings and sculpture are in major international collections such as the Art Institute of Chicago, Albertina in Vienna; the British Museum, London, England; the Brooklyn Museum; Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montreal, Canada; Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, MA; Kupferstichkabinett Sammlung der Zeichnungen und Druckgraphik, Berlin, Germany; New School University, New York, NY; Rhode Island School of Design, Museum of Art, Providence, RI.; Philadelphia Museum of Art, PA.; the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and National Museum of American Art Smithsonian in Washington DC.

Stephen TALASNIK,
Elusive Landscape,
2005. Pencil. 40,6 x
182,9 cm. Photo: D.
Jame Dee. Courtesy of
Battat Contemporary.

