

Reviews/Art

Sculpture Shows at 2 Branches of the Whitney

By MICHAEL BRENSON

"Out of Wood: Recent Sculpture," at the Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris, underlines the continuing vitality of American wood sculpture. Raoul Hague, Jene Highstein, Mel Kendrick, Michael Lekakis and Ursula von Rydingsvard have different roots and different approaches, and they represent several generations. Yet all five sculptors work in a direct and highly physical manner, and they all want to offer an experience of fullness and enchantment.

"The Experience of Landscape: Three Decades of Sculpture," at the Whitney's downtown branch, at Federal Reserve Plaza, approaches nature from a distance. The 17 works on display by 12 artists — including stars like Carl Andre, Louise Nevelson and Robert Smithson and younger artists like Jennifer Bolande and Vikky Alexander — present a highly selective survey of the recent American sculptural interest in nature. Here, art and nature seem split,

A natural material and an interest in nature.

and a growing sense of the exploitation, loss and vulnerability of nature is a major concern.

The exhibitions reflect two very different curatorial approaches and two sides of contemporary art. "Out of Wood" was organized by Josephine Gear, the director of the Whitney's Philip Morris branch, who encourages sustained contact with individual works. Not all the wood sculptures can be appropriately seen in the huge sculpture court, and Ms. von Rydingsvard's "Lace Mountains," with its walls undulating like ancient Near Eastern reliefs, should have enough space behind it so that it can be viewed from all sides, but there is a real sensitivity to sculpture here and a real feeling for each work.

"The Experience of Landscape" is ruled by the post-modern gods of consciousness, context and appropriation. Organized by Karl Emil Willers, the director of the downtown branch, it is less an exhibition of artworks that have to be respected and revealed than an attempt to make the show itself an artwork in which everything is appropriated. The way

the objects are installed, they seem little more than ideas, or specimens. Visitors are almost obliged to consider each work in the context of many others.

For example, standing in the middle of the rectangular space and looking at Mr. Andre's sequence of eight small concrete blocks, each with a round and smooth river stone on top of it (there is no sense whatever of the sweep or time succession of the original installation, which has 144 parts), you are aware of Michelle Stuart's pigmented scrolls on one side, Nancy Graves's handmade bones on the other, and works by Robert Lobe, Bryan Hunt, Alan Saret, Meg Webster and Ms. Bolande farther along.

The exhibition levels everything. All the works, even those as meditative as Ms. Stuart's or as sculptural as Mr. Lobe's, seem equal and conceptual. The particular experience that each work has to offer does not matter. There is no sense that three-dimensional objects have to be treated differently from paintings or photographs. The clash between the white wood platform base of the Graves, the black wood platform base of the Nevelsons and the gray wood strip of floor supporting the Andre is horrible.

Yet the show has its strengths. It calls attention to the substantial involvement of American sculptors with landscape during the last 30 years and reminds us that before 1960 landscape was largely the domain of painting. It brings together works representing distinct approaches to nature, like Smithson's "Gravel Mirrors With Cracks and Dust," Mr. Saret's "Black Falls" and Mr. Lobe's "Facial Structure." And it suggests that a tradition has developed of an analytical sculptural approach to nature that could be the subject of a large exhibition. But these strengths are almost totally undermined by a disheartening presentation.

On one level, the show is silly. The checklist in the brochure includes works around New York City that have nothing to do with this show or the Whitney. One is the sculpture-architecture-design project by Mary Miss, Stanton Ekstut and Susan Child at the South Cove of Battery Park City. The only way this attempt to appropriate art outside the exhibition can succeed is if the show specifically addresses that art, which "The Experience of Landscape" does not.

The midtown show is coherent. All five sculptors are seriously involved with issues of volume and mass and the effect of the object on the space around it. All are fascinated by the expressive possibilities of wood, by



"Open Cedar" by Mel Kendrick.

its connection with the processes of nature and by its ability to provide a link with the history of magic and ritual.

Almost all of them feel that each tree has a particular identity that dictates what the work will be. Mr. Hague, born in Constantinople and at the age of 84 the dean of American wood sculptors, finds personalities in tree trunks and presents them as wrinkled torsos or decayed, ancient heads. Sometimes he almost seems to plumb the unconscious of a tree, ripping it open and exposing its interior life.

There are three works by each sculptor. Those of Mr. Lekakis (who died in 1987) hang from ropes from the ceiling of the sculpture court and suggest ribbons, snakes or the suspended bird and spine in Giacometti's "Palace at 4 A.M." Ms. von Rydingsvard cuts and assembles pieces of wood into architectural environments that seem both charmed and demonic.

Mr. Highstein's "Large Temple," a 14-foot-tall cedar cylinder, is the largest architectural sculpture in the show and an attempt to make a work that can be looked at, touched and

lived in. But it has a literalness that Mr. Highstein's smaller 1989 temple (at Wave Hill last summer), which could not be entered except by a child, did not have.

Mr. Kendrick takes trees, cuts them up and reassembles them. The process is exposed; the sculptures refer to the histories of modern and wood sculpture. Mr. Kendrick's two main sculptural problems — how to deal with the base, and how to avoid being so self-referential and artistically self-conscious that the work becomes academic — belong to the past. While he continues to insist upon consciousness, sculptures like "Mulberry on Oak Wedge" and "Open Cedar" have a quirky, shaggy, druidic power.

"The Experience of Landscape: Three Decades of Sculpture" remains at the Whitney Museum of American Art, Downtown, at Federal Reserve Plaza, 33 Maiden Lane, through March 2. The works in the gallery of the Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris, 120 Park Avenue, at 42d Street, remain on display through Feb. 20; the works in the sculpture court are on display through December 1990.