

SCULPTURE

May/June 1990, Vol. 9 No. 3

NEW YORK

"Out of Wood"

The Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris, New York

This exhibition seamlessly features the work of two artists born in the first decade of this century (Raoul Hague and Michael Lekakis) and three who were born a generation later, in the 1940s (Jene Highstein, Ursula von Rydingsvard and Mel Kendrick). All of the work dates from the 1980s. The show, curated by Philip Morris branch director Josephine Gear, does not focus on the art history represented by these artists as individuals or as a group, but rather on displaying and contrasting individual approaches to a particular material—wood.

With the Whitney fighting for credibility right now, one can't resist using the occasion of such a colorful and balanced show at one of the Whitney's branch museums to point out the benefits of exhibitions that are about art and not purely about analysis. The branch museums have had a significant role in launching many of the Whitney's most exciting and knowledgeable recent exhibitions.

The experience of walking into the Philip Morris building's lobby exhibition space on 42nd Street, with street people sitting and mingling around the sculptures, is incongruous yet bracing. The only sculptures truly separated from onlookers are Michael Lekakis's three hanging pieces, which hold their own at quite a distance, given the height of the ceiling. *Dyskelon* (1965-84) in particular, a rangy, snaking wood form, balances control and gestural abandon. As he did in this piece, Lekakis often enlisted wood during its for-

mation by training it to grow into various configurations while it was still alive. He would later add finishing touches to the surface that tended to comment on the growth process.

Raoul Hague dramatizes the dichotomy between control and abandon through the dialogue of art and nature. His immense tree stumps appear to be almost untouched, but they have in fact been carefully sawn and carved into areas of mass and fragility. Within his heavy structures, there are walls that seem paper-thin. *Feather Farm Cherry* (1983) has areas that literally seem feathery. Interestingly, Hague's titles for these natural-looking objects tend to refer obliquely to social events: for example, *Willy's Bride* (1981-82) and *Bökens Satire* (1986).

Mel Kendrick has, until recently, been the artist least mesmerized by wood in its natural state, though this may be changing. He builds up and cuts into masses of laminated kiln-dried wood, and he often peppers the surfaces with holes or other marks made with dowel cutters and other tools. *Black Dots* (1989), an immense and hefty new work, allows Kendrick to dispense with considerations about bases and to literally go off in a new direction, namely horizontally. A large, rudderlike

section on the floor provides an interesting counterbalance to the tall superstructure of this almost boatlike sculpture. Large steel bolts and drips of glue are plainly revealed.

By contrast, Kendrick's *Mulberry on Oak Wedge* (1989) is almost a paean to rusticity. Made from a bark-covered log that has been cut and reassembled, and with its inner areas exposed here and there, it is reminiscent of 19th-century tombstones in the form of tree trunks. It constitutes an intriguing new direction for the artist as well as a cogent element in this exhibition's conversation among sculptors.

Jene Highstein's sculptures seem perhaps the most benign of the group, preserving the natural look and forms of wood while revealing how humans adapt this material to their own needs. *Large Temple* (1989) is a standout. It is the flared lower trunk of a monstrous cedar that has been hollowed-out so that viewers can enter the piece through a tall opening at its base. A mass of regular carving covers the surface of this simple but riveting vertical form. Openings at the top and side allow light to penetrate, giving the viewer the feeling of being in a forest even while standing within this partial shelter. The



Ursula von Rydingsvard, *Lace Mountain*, 1989. Cedar and graphite, 95 x 98 x 35 in. Photo: David Allison, courtesy Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris, New York City, and Lorence-Monk Gallery, New York City.

work echoes the more industry-derived sculptures of both Richard Serra and Nancy Holt, in which one can stand and look up at the sky. But the natural material imparts a wholly different set of references to nature and to the cultures that live with nature.

Ursula von Rydingsvard's work refers, as well, to a culture of wood use, albeit a less elemental one. Her work is, in some sense, about the effects on cultural memory of living with wood, if not with nature. No less than Brancusi, with his references to columnar forms in wood, von Rydingsvard seems guided, or at least influenced, by memories of eastern European building methods. The progressive, incremental method of her sculptures, to say nothing of their look of having been built over time, brings to mind the wooden churches and houses in her native Poland. In *House of Spoons* (1989) this connection to wood as a staple extends to spoon and fork forms carved in relief in the three walls of this almost roomlike enclosure. The artist's application of graphite to the surfaces imparts a dark, weathered look as well as a kind of pearly luminescence.

For von Rydingsvard, as for Kendrick, wood is more a cultural phenomenon than a natural one. The strength of this exhibition is precisely that it demonstrates how wood—both as material and subject—apprehends a variety of approaches to issues of nature and culture and sculpture.

This exhibition will remain at the Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris until December.

—Cynthia Nadelman