



Mel Kendrick

EXTENDED TIME

BY JONATHAN GOODMAN

Opposite: *Hammer*, 2005. Wood, 13 x 4 x 3 in.

Above: *6 Cuts*, 2006. Wood, 53 x 18 x 14 in.



The sculptures of Mel Kendrick are remarkably various: they twist and rotate and pulse as engaging experiments in positive and negative space. From the start of his career, in the early 1970s, Kendrick has taken a strong interest in piecing together parts and planes of wood, sometimes painting his work to accentuate the relationship between the extant elements building the composition and the empty spaces their cutting out left behind. Greatly taken with the process of making things, in the hopes of demonstrating not only the attractiveness of form but also the philosophical understanding of creating shapes and parallel openings, he cuts and builds marvelously intricate works that reflect on the consequences of their own being



and building. As he has said, “I became interested in the idea that an object could define itself, be completely self-referential.”* The innate self-containment of the works is enlarged and explored as an illustration of the imagination. Kendrick comments, “My pieces are self-referential; they are models of the thought process. I arrived at this way of working when I stopped drawing altogether. I wanted my decision-making very much evident in the pieces themselves.”

When Kendrick began making his self-sufficient art, Minimalism was the dominant language on the scene. He moved to New York in the early 1970s, immediately after graduating from Trinity College in Connecticut, and lived with fellow classmates—the painter Carroll Dunham and the architect Peter Wheelwright—in a loft on Thomas Street (Kendrick says that fixing up the loft was the first time he had really built anything). The self-limited, yet also expansive discourse of his sculpture quickly became both a tested method for making art and an inquiry into the limits and boundaries of the imagination. Kendrick claims that his tastes are eclectic, but he enjoys the process of creating above all else. He asserts, “I have always liked the early work of Don Judd when he was still exploring ways of making things and before he refined his vocabulary.” Kendrick’s emphasis is on process: there is a roughness to his wood pieces that emphasizes his connection with other artists such as Robert Smithson and Eva Hesse skilled in the use of materials. Interested in the *making* of things, Kendrick presents his

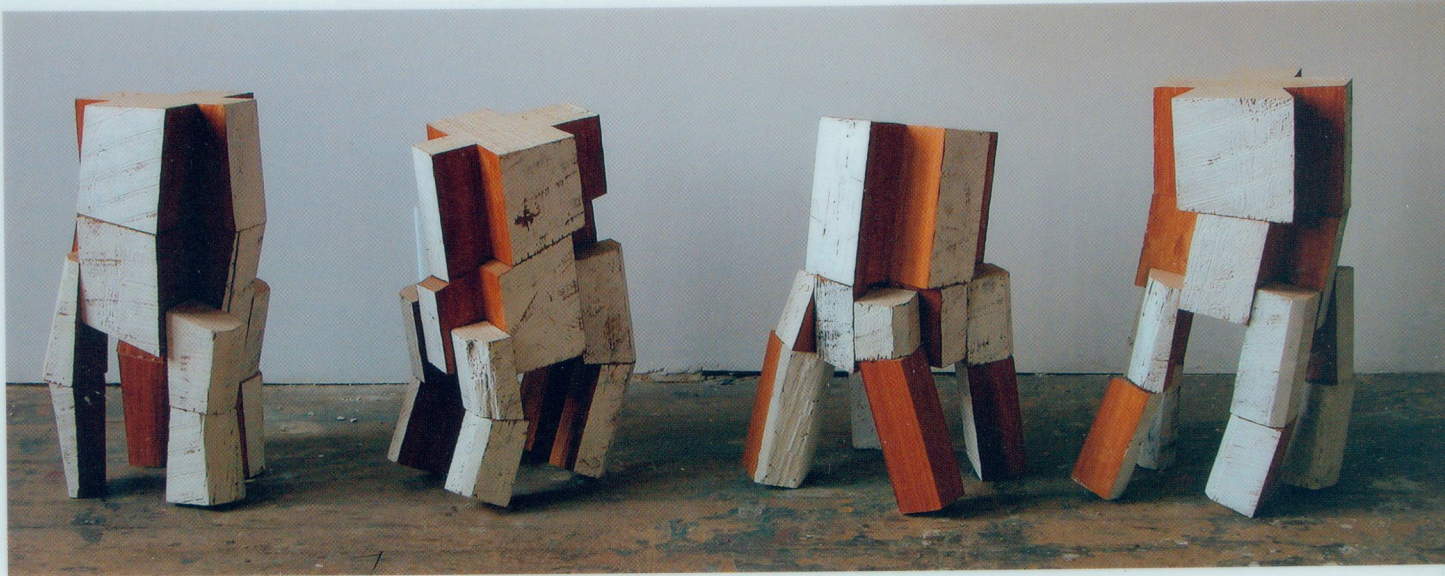


Left: *Amphora B (Pig)*, 2002. Wood and steel, 60 x 96 x 40 in. Above: *Amphora A*, 2002. Wood and steel, 102 x 65 x 49 in.

work with a nod to Minimalist simplicity and Arte Povera’s penchant for material truthfulness—his is a language meant to emphasize the nature of sculpture itself.

As Kendrick says, “Abstracting is in essence an interpretive activity that is in response to the outside subject.” Much of his coherence as a sculptor is based on this recognition, namely, that despite the self-directed limitations of his art, a concern with the exterior world comes though, so that references are not always ends in themselves. In fact, the self-defining nature of Kendrick’s sculpture results in a heightened awareness of the world around it, primarily because the points between boundaries are so sharply defined.

Inevitably, in Kendrick’s idiom, the creative process becomes a vehicle for thought, a consideration for the imagination in its own terms. In that sense, he remains close to the Modernist decision to concentrate on the dimensions, physical and philosophical, of the medium itself. While Kendrick says that Cubism is not relevant to his work, he nonetheless employs the forms and innate descriptive properties of wood—its ability to register decision-making as part of the artistic process—as a way of commenting on his methodology, in a fashion emphasizing the separate planes of the composition. The process is essentially open: “If I make a ‘mistake,’ I correct it or adjust to it, and that activity becomes part of the piece. In drawing, for example, an erased line never really disappears.” Because Kendrick works so regularly with wood, he is sharply aware of its nature, not as a craftsman, but as an artist: “I am not in love with wood, but it has distinctive attributes. A cut made in wood is irreversible. Mistake and repair are part of the process. I am not a woodworker; I use a tremendous amount of glue, mending plates, and threaded rods to reconstruct what I have pulled apart. I like the limitations of a



White Blocks, 2003. Wood and gesso, each block approximately 19 x 9 x 9 in.

material and the adaptations needed to compensate.”

Yet, despite the value that Kendrick places on process, he creates finished pieces capable of holding their own within the space of a room. Unlike so many artists today, who often appear to have forgotten the element of skill in the creation of three-dimensional work, Kendrick’s technical abilities compel viewers to see the sculptures as made things, in which an overall gestalt competes with the worked-on aspect of the wood. This big-picture view, alongside the many small decisions that went into the making, makes his art distinctive, demonstrative of a sensibility and aesthetic that incorporate large and small technologies.

The question may be asked whether Kendrick’s art is tied to traditional concerns or whether it reflects current thinking in sculpture, which has moved away from the self-contained formal object toward a statement of identity or politics best said in large, inclusive environments or installations. While Kendrick rejects the description of his sculptures as formal, preferring the adjective “philosophical” as illuminating the nature of his abstract explorations of form, his work inevitably acts as a corrective for an image-making culture whose casual informality has damaged its capacity for thinking through an idea. One hesitates to generalize, especially given the highly pluralist circumstances of art today, but the artists in the recent Whitney Biennial, for example, seem to have moved away from formal properties toward a more general, more often vaguely constructed vernacular. By contrast, Kendrick’s emphasis on tightly constructed planes, or on pieces in which the history of their making is evident on the surface, enables him to connect to art traditions that amply contextualize his efforts, even when they seem obligatorily self-constructed. Additionally, Kendrick does not turn his back on the details. He says of color, “Color was initially a system of coding, a marker that identified my progress. It is the sculpture within the sculpture.” And he identifies scale as an interesting issue, saying that “size does not indicate content; in fact, increased scale is often used to mask content or lack thereof.” Indeed, many of his sculptures are diminutive by current standards, although the completeness of their language gives them a monumentality that can be striking.

Today, in an age of spectacle, emphasis is given to the surface, both literally and metaphorically. In contrast, Kendrick, in his serial experiment *Orange Blocks* (2004), takes the cut-away interior of a cube of wood and displays it as part of the sculpture, placing it on top of the open shell. The result is a fine-tuned complexity, in which the inside is displayed as an external, but also integral, part of the work. These pieces are

fully in keeping with Kendrick’s penchant for displaying the decisions behind creation. Sitting on the ground, they convey a basic force in which the hollowed cube functions not only as part of the sculpture, but also as the pedestal on which its interior rests. The sculptures display a nearly primitive sense of form. There is a rawness to much of Kendrick’s work that could conceivably link the artist to the practice of the artisan. At the same time, of course, the pieces are driven by intellectual choices, so that their expression is mediated by an awareness of basic, innate sculptural qualities: positive and negative space, the use of color, the play of scale. Kendrick uses the inside of a tree or wooden cube to publicly comment on its interiority—the sculptures become metaphors for internal states whose creative energies are strong enough to stand up to the pressures of the external world. In *6 Cuts* (2006), for example, bark-free circles of wood pierced with holes rise up from several sections of a tree with its exterior intact: the contrast between the two states is powerful. As a small tower, *6 Cuts* is a sophisticated, imagistically meaningful exercise in forms that balance each other, their subtle modulations building platforms that both occupy and diffuse space.

Kendrick’s proclivity for a vigorous dualism of effort and effect makes his art exceptionally dynamic. One can see how the manual labor affecting the surface



and core of the wood conveys the deliberations of an active mind. While his work is about process, chance doesn't seem to play much of a role. Instead, he makes his mind up to pattern and build in a controlled fashion, the underlying idea giving his work its depth and energy. The stacking of related parts results in a subtle shift in the perception of the sculpture, so that small changes in volume suddenly become very important to the presentation. The juxtaposition of the wood's core with the exterior from which it was extracted allows for extended contemplation of the construction's slow coming-into-being, inciting pleasure and an abstract interest in how the works have been made. By addressing these issues, Kendrick suggests a metaphor for creativity, in which the privately considered becomes publicly available. He tends to reverse categories, the inner becoming the outer and vice versa, undermining our subjective assumptions about such states.

It is possible to see Kendrick's focus on, as he calls it, "attacking the wood" in *Amphora A* (2002). A large piece (102 inches high) propped up by wooden wedges and metal struts, the tree has been cut into slices and painted black, with thin planks separating one slice from another. Roughly the shape of an amphora, the sculpture also resembles a woman's torso, the sensual curves of which can be followed by an attentive eye. In a very big sculpture such as *Amphora A*, it is hard to control the volumetric overview of the work, yet Kendrick has created boundaries and measured elements by cutting the wood into roughly equal slabs. The pieces inserted into the edges left by the cuts afford a view through the cracks to the other side of the piece, creating a feeling of lightness and transparency despite the volume and color of the sculpture. Kendrick, who has worked effectively within the constraint of very small objects, has here created a remarkably graceful monumental work in which elaborately curved outlines are joined to a grandly volumetric mass. The combination of grace and weight creates a willed distortion or tension that makes for a highly satisfying and powerful object. It also exemplifies Kendrick's unrelenting interest in interiors and exteriors, resulting here in a wonderful balance of forces.

When he first came to New York, Kendrick "wanted to extend the school situation as long as possible." As he puts it, "The idea of art as a career was an absurdity. There was little evidence of commerce in the galleries. Much of what I saw seemed impossible to sell. Art was more a philosophy, a way to experience the world." After graduating from college, Kendrick would quickly go on to earn an MFA from Hunter College in 1973 and soon after was written up in the art magazines. Despite this success, his appraisal is accurate: the problem of an audience for three-dimensional art has continued, with sculptors still the poor relations in the art world. One of Kendrick's strengths as an artist is his genuine commitment to sculpture and to the specific problems of the medium. By remaining close to these issues, he has also maintained his ties to sculpture's philosophical resonance. His commitment to the idea is part of his ongoing involvement with work that occupies both abstract and representational spaces, as happens, for example, in *Amphora B (Pig)* (2002). Here, Kendrick has connected round cuts of barkless wood on a horizontal plane and mounted three vertical blocks of wood in the center. The blond pieces are aesthetically satisfying in their own right, but the gestalt of *Amphora B (Pig)* is overwhelmingly pig-like. The work conforms to both non-objective and representative idioms, so that Kendrick and his audience can have it both ways. The wood for *Amphora B (Pig)* originated as a piece from the much larger *Amphora A*, so that one artwork has given birth to another, accentuating the physical continuity of Kendrick's methods.

In the case of Kendrick's sculpture, the difference between abstract and representational art is moot, a dichotomy that does not do justice to the subtle exchange that occurs in the spectrum between the readable and the idealized. When Kendrick's work functions in the cusp between the two ways of seeing, it does double duty, convincing us of the beauty of abstract form even as it solidifies into a recognizable composition. The small but exquisitely

formed *White Blocks* (2003) can be seen as eloquent exercises in improvisational form, their white-painted parts highlighting

Two views of *Plaster Core*, 2005. Plywood and plaster, 52 x 31 x 36 in.



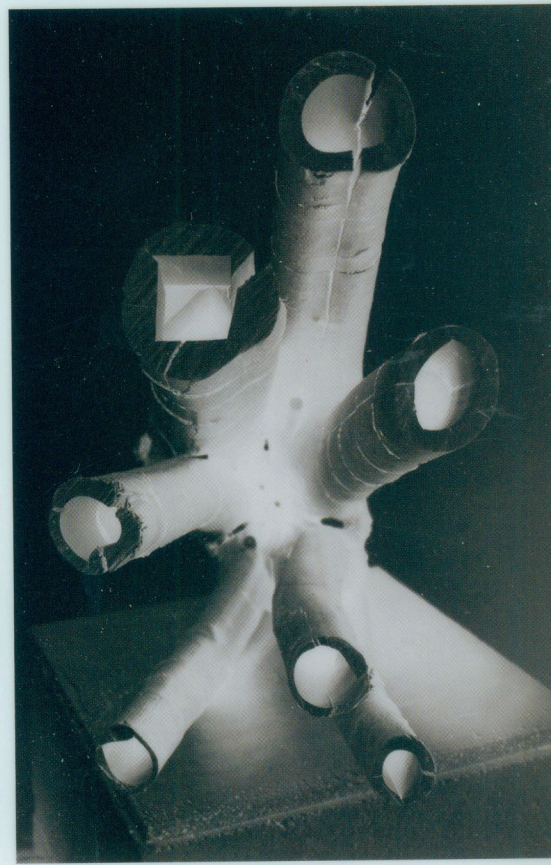
Above: *Second Shell*, 2003. Plaster, steel, and wood, 58 x 60 x 35 in. Right: *Tubes*, 2004. Giclee print, 60 x 48 in.

the very large, rough and tumble *Double Core* (2006), in which a wooden structure has been cast in bronze, one can observe the pieces seemingly balanced on top of each other. While this work does not copy the form of the human figure, its notions of size and space generally relate to the body. *Double Core* also suggests, in the transparent history of its manufacture, the human qualities of a sculptor at work, sizing up and deciding how to fix the elements so that they stand out and define a thoroughly three-dimensional sense of things.

Plaster Core (2005), another striking, abstract composition, works with positive and negative space. Kendrick has applied plaster to different parts of the three-tiered sculpture, so that there is a marked contrast in tonality between the white of the plaster and the darker wood. Kendrick is arguably at his strongest when investigating the properties of absence and presence. This work, with such complex relations between its components, is highly intellectualized, but in a way that does justice to the sculptural issues involved. The fit between the core and the space it occupied seems nearly perfect, so that the intricacies of its spatial dimension are engendered from within the piece, rather than from without. As a self-consuming artifact, *Plaster Core* treats its own creativity as an end in itself, as if it were discovering its own particularities in volume, space, and form.

Recently Kendrick has taken on the photography of his own work. These are printed negatives—the group of photographs is called “Negatives”—in which the sculptures themselves appear as white, with the surrounding space of the image seen as dark matter. According to Kendrick, the negative contains more information than the positive. This reversal of values underscores the interchange of positive and negative space

specific components. However, the way the planes have been painted accentuates the experience of seeing them as standing figures. In the more abstract works, such as



in many of his works. In *Tubes* (2004), a cluster of tubes extends toward the viewer, the contrast between the darks and lights creating a fascinating experimental photograph. In *Balls* (2005), much the same occurs: the white balls emerging from the image’s middle space appear lit from within, apparently issuing from the white heat of an incendiary explosion. These images recall Man Ray’s experiments with rayograms: their sense of mystery appeals by itself and provokes the question of just what it is that we are looking at. Much of Kendrick’s career has encompassed the mysteries of space, and not surprisingly, similar issues arise in the photographic images. His gifts, in both making and thinking about sculptural volumes and surfaces, survive wonderfully from medium to medium.

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*All quotations are from the author’s conversation with Mel Kendrick in August 2006.