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Martin Puryear

Press Packet

Plagens, Peter. "'Liberty/Libertà' Review: Grappling With America's Past in Venice." *The Wall Street Journal,* May 28, 2019.

Kennicott, Philip. "America picked artist Martin Puryear's work for the Venice Biennale — and he's everything America is not." *The Washington Post,* May 16, 2019.

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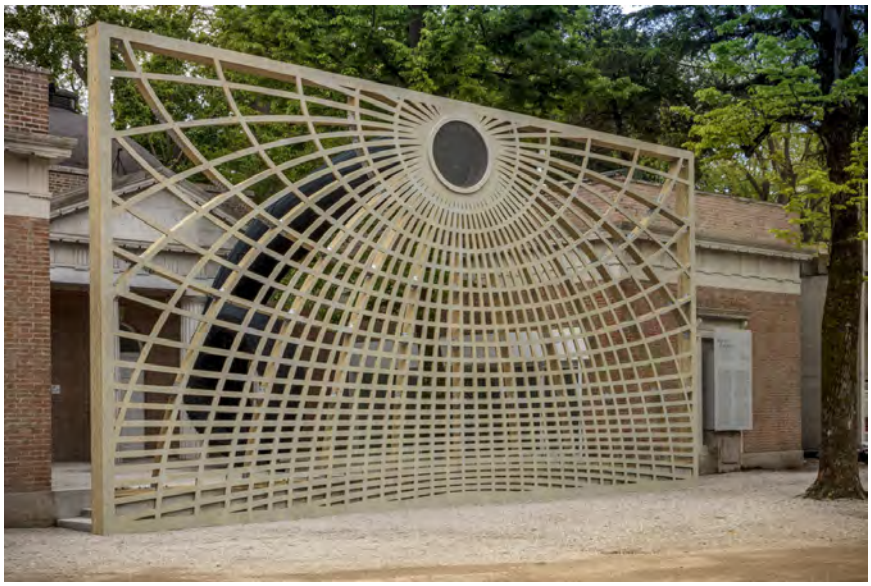
THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

ART REVIEW

‘Liberty/Libertà’ Review: Grappling With America’s Past in Venice

Martin Puryear, the artist chosen to represent the U.S. at the latest edition of the storied Biennale, gives beautiful form to the political in works that deal with slavery.



Martin Puryear’s ‘Swallowed Sun (Monstrance and Volute)’ (2019) PHOTO: JOSHUA WHITE/JWPICTURES

By Peter Plagens
May 28, 2019 5:25 p.m. ET

Venice

The title of this year’s Venice Biennale multi-exhibition extravaganza (organized by Ralph Rugoff, an American who is director of the Hayward Gallery, one of London’s contemporary art museums) is “May You Live in Interesting Times.” This allegedly ancient Chinese curse as a headline for the art world’s most important international event (or at least its most publicized and most reputation-enhancing) reflects a compromise between current, almost de rigueur, art as protest and art that’s more aesthetically inclined.

The U.S. Pavilion—with a solo exhibition by the 78-year-old African-American sculptor Martin Puryear—didn’t win a prize; the Golden Lion for the best national participation went to Lithuania’s, for an actual

Plagens, Peter. “‘Liberty/Libertà’ Review: Grappling With America’s Past in Venice.” *The Wall Street Journal*, May 28, 2019.

Liberty/Libertà

Venice Biennale
Through Nov. 24

opera on a fake beach about climate change. But Mr. Puryear's show, "Liberty/Libertà," came closer than anything else I saw to a fusion of soul-stirring political content and galvanizing, beautiful form.

His presentation comprises eight meticulously constructed sculptures, the first of which—"Swallowed Sun (Monstrance and Volute)" (2019)—is a huge 23-by-44-foot wooden screen that echoes the linear perspective of the dome and oculus inside the pavilion, attached to a curled-conical black tail in the courtyard that seems to prop up the screen. "Swallowed Sun" is a formally daring work whose central metaphor—the labor of black people supporting white people's palaces—is inherent in the visual impact of the piece.

Martin Puryear's 'Tabernacle' (2019) PHOTO: JOSHUA WHITE/JWPICTURES

Because identity politics drives contemporary art these days as much as art fairs, auction prices and, yes, big biennials, I asked Mr. Puryear via email about it. He answered: "Identity is essential for human survival, but an overly weaponized sense of identity can become a prison which blinds us to our common humanity....As for the question about the 'identity of the artist,' I feel this is an area where humanity is stretched to the limit."

Mr. Puryear's background goes a long way in explaining why he can so effectively bring off the likes of "Swallowed Sun." He was born in then-segregated Washington, D.C., where his father was a postal worker and his mother a schoolteacher. After graduating with an art degree from the Catholic University of America (Mr. Puryear was raised in the religion), he spent two years in the Peace Corps in Sierra Leone, where he learned native woodworking techniques, and then another three at the Royal Swedish Academy of Arts. In Stockholm, he met and learned from James Krenov, a Siberian-born master furniture maker. With all of this in his artistic kit bag, he then earned a master of fine arts degree from Yale.

Inside the pavilion, Mr. Puryear's best piece (and it's an impressively close call) is "A Column for Sally Hemings" (2019), a narrow, 80-inch-tall, white poplar column topped with a cast-iron slave's shackle and stake. One can't miss that it stands—both celebratory and accusing—right under the Monticello-like dome of the pavilion, which was built rather innocently in 1930, when Mussolini was ruler of Italy. Even without its poetically political charge, "Column" would still be, in form alone, a powerful work of art.

So, too, are "Tabernacle" (2019), a giant abstracted Civil War cap with a model of the famous Dictator mortar (which could propel a 200-pound explosive ball two miles) inside, and "Cloister-Redoubt or Cloistered Doubt?" (2019), about 8 feet tall. The latter has a woozily triangular thin sheet of wood (it

Plagens, Peter. "'Liberty/Libertà' Review: Grappling With America's Past in Venice." *The Wall Street Journal*, May 28, 2019.

looks exactly like metal) sheltering another curved cap form (a visual trope that appears frequently in Mr. Puryear's sculpture). Both sit atop horizontal wooden spokes that rest on what could be cross-stacked railway ties. To me (cued by the title), the work bravely questions the artist's whole enterprise of making sculpture that addresses historically embedded national problems of race while maintaining formal integrity, and at the same time offers the viewer pleasure in beauty. The metaphorical wooden roof, incidentally, is almost imperceptibly anchored in a slit on one side but left to rest freely on the other; this maneuver was improvised, Mr. Puryear says, during the installation. It's the sort of thing a true *artist*—as opposed to a mere maker of visual editorials—does intuitively.

Martin Puryear's 'New Voortrekker' (2018) PHOTO: JOSHUA WHITE/JWPICTURES

All is not, however, perfect in the American offering. "New Voortrekker" (2018) is a conspicuously figurative—albeit only schematically so—rendition of a tractor pulling a covered wagon up an incline. The work concerns the phenomenon of the oppressed (the Dutch settlers in South Africa, hounded by the invading British) becoming the oppressors (of blacks, by imposing apartheid when they regained control of the country), but it's disappointingly cartoonish among Mr. Puryear's otherwise rather magnificent oeuvre. And "Hiberian Testosterone" (2018)—elk antlers in cast aluminum painted white mounted on an upside-down wooden cross, both placed high on a wall in the same gallery as "Voortrekker"—is such a sculptural outlier that it almost seems, to invoke a chestnut, to have wandered in from another pavilion.

These are only minor downs among the otherwise wonderful ups in Mr. Puryear's moving contribution to this Biennale. He makes the American pavilion a site of deep artistic feeling, thinking and working. Those qualities never come easily or flawlessly for any artist, and the very imperfections in "Liberty/Libertà" give it a profound sense of shared humanity that's missing from too much contemporary art.

—Mr. Plagens is an artist and writer in New York.

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The Washington Post

Museums • Review

America picked artist Martin Puryear's work for the Venice Biennale — and he's everything America is not

One of the Martin Puryear installations in his "Liberty" exhibit in the U.S. Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. (Andrea Merola/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock)

By **Philip Kennicott**
Art and architecture critic
May 16

VENICE — Everywhere else in the world, our country projects its blustery self, muscling aside old friends, embracing authoritarians and autocrats, braying "America first" and going it alone as the old transatlantic order frays into tatters. But here, in one small building set into a garden in Venice, the U.S. State Department is showing the world something else: the sculpture of Martin Puryear, an artist whose work has been a lifelong exercise in quiet integrity, diligent craftsmanship and serious, sober, intelligent reflection on the best and worst of America.

Kennicott, Philip. "America picked artist Martin Puryear's work for the Venice Biennale — and he's everything America is not." *The Washington Post,* May 16, 2019.

When Puryear was chosen last summer to represent the United States at the Venice Biennale, it was a relief to know that the selection process was apparently uncorrupted, even if the State Department was in shambles and the tenor of American foreign policy had grown capricious and bellicose. Every two years, the government works with the Guggenheim Foundation, which technically owns the U.S. Pavilion, and a nonprofit presenting organization (this year it's the Madison Square Park Conservancy) to exhibit the work of an American artist at the world's most prestigious art gathering. A panel run by the National Endowment for the Arts advises the State Department, which chose Puryear, an African American artist whose work has for decades touched gently but insistently on race, the legacy of slavery and the elusive ideal of freedom. It couldn't have made a better choice.

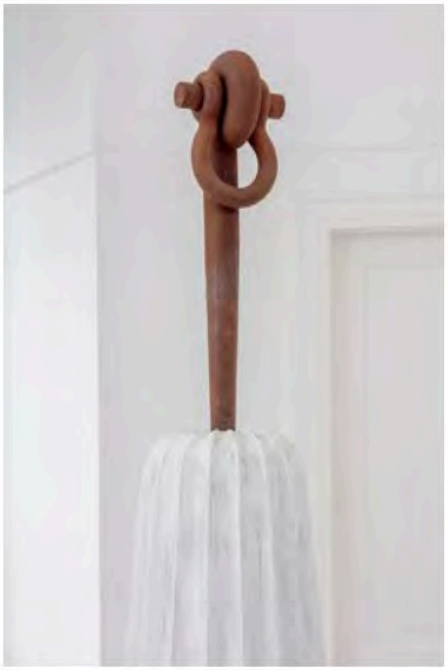
Puryear was born in 1941 and spent two formative years as a Peace Corps volunteer in Sierra Leone. He often works with wood, bending and forming it, cutting and joining it, with the meticulous craftsmanship of a fine carpenter and the visionary powers of distillation. Puryear has evolved an evocative and idiosyncratic iconography, including the slouching form of a pointed Phrygian cap historically associated with the freeing of slaves, a biomorphic shackle that resembles an elephant or a mammoth, and various head-like and vessel forms. Among his most powerful works, and one that encapsulates the way his art takes on metaphorical power, is "Ladder for Booker T. Washington," made of twisting rails and ever narrowing treads, a ladder that offers a vision of upward motion and escape while resisting any actual hope of climbing.

Puryear's "New Voortrekker" cart sculpture. (Antonio Calanni/AP)

Kennicott, Philip. "America picked artist Martin Puryear's work for the Venice Biennale — and he's everything America is not." *The Washington Post,* May 16, 2019.

Puryear's response to the U.S. Pavilion, an exhibition called simply "Liberty," is exquisite. Curated by Brooke Kamin Rapaport, it includes just eight works, each one a perfect canto in what feels like a single, polished poem. The display responds to the architecture of the building, the history of the country it represents, and the prevailing cultural and environmental anxieties that are felt everywhere, more bluntly, in other national pavilions. Each work offers multiple meanings, intersects with the others and connects to concerns far beyond the rarefied realm of art.

On one wall, a giant pair of Irish elk antlers, fashioned from cast aluminum, recalls an extinct species of mega fauna yet also looks like a hunting trophy one might find in an old-school men's club. It is attached to an upside-down cross, like the one on which Saint Peter was crucified. Nearby, a finely wrought model of a cart or wagon recalls old myths of this country's pioneer past, as well as other national dislocations, including the ongoing trauma of migrants around the world, in search of new hope, new land, new opportunities.



Martin Puryear's "A Column for Sally Hemings," 2019. Cast iron, painted tulip poplar. (Joshua White/Martin Puryear/Matthew Marks Gallery)

No single narrative emerges, but multiple possible narratives converge in a single work that's the centerpiece of the exhibition. In his 2019 "A Column for Sally Hemings," Puryear has attached a cast-iron shackle and stake to a tapered column of painted wood. It recalls the life of America's unacknowledged first lady, chattel of our third president, Thomas Jefferson, and mother of his children. It sits in the rotunda of the pavilion, and thus symbolically at the center of Puryear's work. In a gallery to one side, the old cart and the elk antlers suggest the fraught mix of hope and destruction in America's past, and on the other side, a work called "Cloister-Redoubt or Cloistered Doubt?" suggests ideas of intellectual evasion, insularity and skepticism that are fundamental to how a nation constructs a carefully manicured sense of its identity.

To experience all these works consecutively feels like an allegory, recalling centuries of human bondage, the depredations and promise of Manifest Destiny, and the lingering, inarticulate, angry trauma of not knowing how to integrate our history with our present, unable to go forward, or back.

That's one reading, and it's likely that Puryear would have none of it. His work feels precise, but not specific. It never offers the vague sense of being potentially meaningful that is common to lesser art,

but rather it is resolutely meaningful without specifying which meaning was intended. It relates to the visitor rather like the large, site-specific sculptural piece with which the artist has transfigured the pavilion — "Swallowed Sun (Monstrance and Volute)" — relates to the building, screening it off and transforming its message. "Swallowed Sun" connects a wooden screen that mimics a two-dimensional map of our three-dimensional world to a black hole and a tubular, snakelike form, as if we might fall through the flat plane of a representation of the world into a cosmic tunnel of darkness.

One can get lost in this work, sucked into its strange geometry and curious games with inner and outer surfaces, enclosure and imprisonment. But it also functions as a genial affront to the pavilion itself, a denial of its architecture and a shadow over its front door. The U.S. Pavilion opened in 1930, at the height of the popularity of Colonial revival architecture, when Colonial Williamsburg was being preserved and presented to the public as a fantasy of American origins, and just before the United States set out to build a resolutely classical memorial to Jefferson.

It is a brick structure, with two symmetrical wings, and a simple classical portico with white columns. It recalls Jefferson's Monticello, which was based on the work of Andrea Palladio, a Renaissance architect who built two of Venice's greatest churches and filled the surrounding countryside with elegant villas that have inspired architects for nearly half a millennium.

Like so much of Puryear's work, this evocative assemblage doesn't touch its subject in any literal or physical way. It lays no hands on the building itself, but the building is undone by the addition. The front door, behind which Heming's column is displayed, is closed off, and the classical details of the facade are now seen through the perforations in Puryear's screen. Art is often likened to a screen, or veil, or filter, through which we see the world differently. Puryear has taken the idea literally, and somehow transformed the dark associations of the Colonial architecture into something almost whimsical.

There was a gala dinner for Puryear during the opening of the Biennale, and it was full of billionaires and lesser mortals. When Puryear spoke to the crowd, one could sense an underlying shyness, or reticence, mixed with perfect clarity about what he wanted to say. "I had huge doubts about the enormous expense and scale of the project," he said, wondering aloud about whether the investment in his vision was worth the cost. "It is very moving to feel like it was worthwhile," he concluded.

It was indeed worthwhile. The U.S. Pavilion is one of the sharpest and most moving in the biennale. But more than that, it will remind those who despair of America's angry infantilism that we are

A visitor to the Venice Biennale is seen though Puryear's "Aso Oke" sculpture in the U.S. Pavilion. (Antonio Calanni/AP)

a country of multiple voices, and a full range of temperaments. There are honest, clear-thinking artists who speak with insistent sincerity, who make work tempered and perfected in self-doubt and humility.

It is not uncommon for a national pavilion to be at odds with the country's political leadership. In the pavilions of authoritarian countries one often finds paeans to dissent and individualism, acts of conscience and even direct rebukes to power. Authoritarians may be canny and have sharp instincts for self-preservation, but they are often stupid men, with closed minds and no capacity for thinking about art. The people who surround them are even worse, so no one in power notices that they have been shamed, publicly and explicitly, by art. It is curious and uncanny to see that the United States is now one of those countries.

Kennicott, Philip. "America picked artist Martin Puryear's work for the Venice Biennale — and he's everything America is not." *The Washington Post,* May 16, 2019.

The New York Times

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Arts&Leisure

SUNDAY, MAY 5, 2019

Martin Puryear, Citizen-Sculptor

The artist will represent the United States at the Venice Biennale, and his work captures the tensions of his home.

By HOLLAND COTTER

"This moment has caught me being as much a citizen as an artist," the sculptor Martin Puryear said on an afternoon in his studio in New York's Hudson River Valley early in April. In two days he would leave for Venice to begin installing a solo exhibition at the 58th Venice Biennale in which he will officially represent the United States. Rising to that responsibility can't be easy in an American "moment" tense with divisive politics, resurgent racism and gun violence. Yet anyone who has followed this artist's 50-year career knows he is more than up to the task.

Now 77, he is widely regarded as one of the nation's most distinguished sculptors, though one who eludes foursquare categories, including "political artist." His work, with its large forms, often of hand-planed and carpentered wood, looks abstract, though it is filled with references to things and events in the world. And though it refuses to yield ready meanings, it suggests many — cultural, emotional and political.

"Ensor, Bruegel, Goya," the tall, soft-spoken artist said. "These are people who looked very candidly at the world they lived in. I hope that that's what I'm trying to do."

With two exceptions, one architectural in scale, the eight sculptures in his show at the United States Pavilion — "Martin Puryear: Liberty/Libertà," organized by Brooke Kamin Rapaport, deputy director and senior curator of the Madison Square Park Conservancy in New York — were already underway in his studio before the Biennale in-

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

vitation came. Taken together, they constitute a kind of précis of his styles and methods. But they're also evidence of an intensified response to topical concerns in the present.

Mr. Puryear was born in 1941 and grew up, African-American, in a racially segregated Washington. His father was a postal worker, his mother an elementary schoolteacher. He was an early reader and, I suspect, an avid, pre-internet surfer-gatherer of information. In fact, he still is, which is why it's a mistake to try to pin his work down to any one set of sources and influences.

His parents took him to museums when he was very young — the National Gallery of Art, the Phillips Collection, the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History — and for him the line between art, ethnology and science seems to have been loose: Paul Klee, Eskimo kayaks and ornithological specimens all existed on a spectrum.

Also, he was raised Roman Catholic, and just by being in churches he may have absorbed, at an early point, a sense of the drama generated by mysteriously coded images and hidden interiors. "Confessional," "Tabernacle" and "Reliquary" are titles he would later give to sculptures.

After graduating from the Catholic University of America in Washington in 1963, where he had majored first in biology and then in art, he joined the Peace Corps and was sent to Africa. There he taught science and languages in Sierra Leone, and studied with local potters, weavers and woodcarvers.

Sojourns in Africa and Europe shaped an artistic identity that at its core is deeply American.

Cotter, Holland. "Martin Puryear, Citizen-Sculptor." *The New York Times*, March 5, 2019, p. AR1, p. AR30.

He has often commented on the impact of that two-year stay. As he told the art historian Richard J. Powell: "For most black Americans the connection to the Old Country is blank, erased by the middle passage of the slave trade. So to be able to live in West Africa and experience a tribal culture firsthand was priceless." Invaluable, too, was the exposure to living art and crafts tradition, most visible in the production of traditional utilitarian objects.

Existentially, the African stay instilled in him a strong and abiding identity as a world citizen, living here or there, but belonging everywhere. Creatively, it introduced him to the idea that, when it came to the application of technology to art, less could be more; the hand was still the sovereign tool. Politically, it gave him an eye-opening perspective on his own troubled and troubling homeland.

Unready to return to America, he applied to European schools and enrolled in a printmaking program at the Royal Swedish Academy of Arts in Stockholm, where he lived for two years. An encounter there with the Siberian-born master furniture maker James Krenov clinched a commitment to sculpture, which led him, in 1969, to Yale University's School of Art and Architecture as a graduate student.

The place was an odd fit. The kind of sculpture he was interested in — handmade from natural materials — was out of sync with a department dominated by Minimalism, which favored industrial fabrication, and by Conceptualism, which played down objects in favor of words and ideas. Mr. Puryear has described his outsider status there along class lines: the hands-off Minimalists and Conceptualists were "white collar"; he, with his saws and gouges and planes, was "blue collar." Yet the divide was not absolute.

His work shares — or at least doesn't reject — Minimalism's faith in the expressive force of plain, solid forms, though in his case solidity is often an illusion. One of his best-known early works, "Self" from 1978, appears to be a simple, smoothed-down lump of solid, ebony-black matter, though it is actually a hollow shell painstakingly shaped from layered strips of wood.

At the same time, from privileging matter and form alone, his sculptures are prickly with ideas, some in the form of perturbing conceptual ambushes. A 1980 piece titled "Bower," constructed from slats of spruce and pine, has the grace of a loose-weave basket, though this basket seems to have been turned upside down to become a trap.

And words, in the form of titles, have always been dynamic elements in his art, a way to bring complex narrative content to it, as in another 1980 piece, "For Beckwourth."

MARTIN PURYEAR, MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY AND MADISON SQUARE PARK CONSERVANCY; JOSHUA WHITE

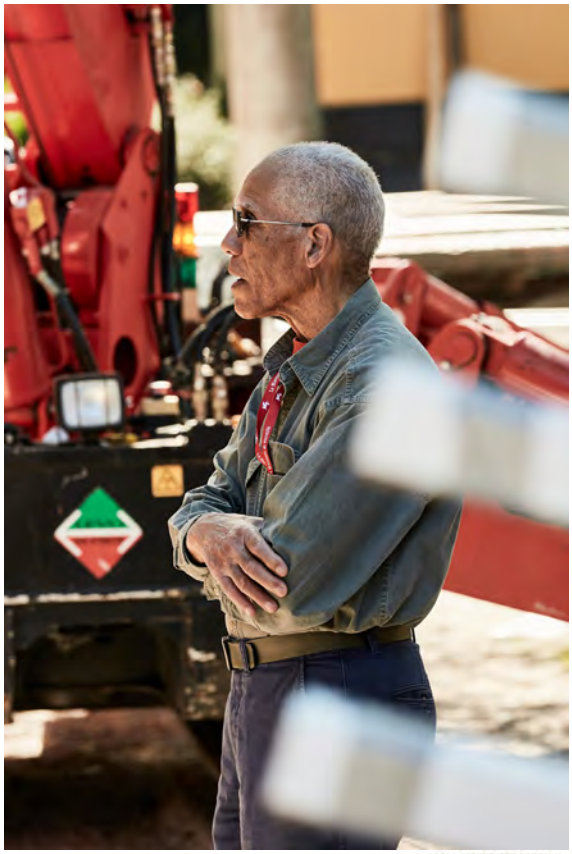
"Swallowed Sun (Monstrance and Volute)"

The reference is to James Beckwourth, an early-19th-century American adventurer and fur trader who was born a slave, lived with Crow Indians and worked for the United States Army. Over an adventurous lifetime, he managed to transcend the constraints built into a unitary racial identity. Yet he cannot be counted a hero — he assisted the army in massacring native peoples to clear the way for white settlers — and in Mr. Puryear's dark, floor-hugging, mound of earth and wood he isn't one.

"I'm not in an ivory tower making my work," Mr. Puryear said in April. "The ivory tower has been invaded."

"For Beckwourth" is the work of an artist who counts himself deeply American — "I think I'm a patriot," he said, with doubt in his voice — but an American who has serious doubts about what, ethically, American means, particularly now. And that's the artist we meet in the pieces that he's sent to the

Cotter, Holland. "Martin Puryear, Citizen-Sculptor." *The New York Times*, March 5, 2019, p. AR1, p. AR30.



YASUNORI MATSUI

ABOVE AND BELOW: MARTIN PURYEAR, MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY AND MADISON SQUARE PARK CONSERVANCY; RON AMSTUTZ

Biennale, two of them custom-made for the occasion.

One, "Swallowed Sun (Monstrance and Volute)," is immense. Designed by Mr. Puryear in collaboration with Tod Williams Billie Tsien Architects, it's in two parts, the most immediately visible: a high, white perforated wood mesh that stretches across the Pavilion's forecourt, like a church rood screen, half-obscuring what's beyond it. Churchlike, too, is the screen's openwork pattern, which traces a flattened-out perspectival view of a dome with an open, circular oculus high up.

It's a beautiful image, perfect for Roman Catholic Venice. And the United States Pavilion actually has such a dome, one based on a quasi-sacred source: the dome on

An artist with a candid gaze creates work that is prickly with ideas.

Thomas Jefferson's Monticello, outside Charlottesville, Va. That building was a model for the American architects who designed the Pavilion in 1930 as a neo-Classical chapel dedicated to art and global democracy.

The work's second component is quite different in character: a black, twisting tube, inspired by a detail on a Greek column but resembling, in shape and color, a lamprey or snake. With its "tail" end curled on the forecourt floor, the tube stretches up-

STEVE KAGAN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

The artist Martin Puryear, above left, at the 2019 Venice Biennale, and above, in 1984. His works include, from top: "Swallowed Sun (Monstrance and Volute)"; "New Voortrekker"; "Tabernacle"; and at right, "A Column for Sally Hemings," on the left, and "Cloister-Redoubt or Cloistered Doubt."

MARTIN PURYEAR, MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY AND MADISON SQUARE PARK CONSERVANCY; JOSHUA WHITE

Cotter, Holland. "Martin Puryear, Citizen-Sculptor." *The New York Times*, March 5, 2019, p. AR1, p. AR30.

ward and entirely covers the screen's oculus with its "mouth." Structurally, the tube is a source of support for the screen; symbolically, it's devouring its light.

The battle between darkness and light continues inside with the show's other site-specific work, "A Column for Sally Hemings," conceived to stand, linchpinlike, at the Pavilion's precise center, directly beneath the Jeffersonian dome. Sally Hemings was an African-American slave owned by Jefferson and the mother of five children by him. She and her story were probably unknown to the Pavilion's builders, so Mr. Puryear introduces her, strikingly and abstractly, in a monument to her. It's composed of a single white, fluted Classical column that seems to be melting and is stabbed through the top by an upright iron stake from which a shackle hangs.

I wouldn't call this a triumphant image. It's a battle standard, defiant, like a raised fist. And the battle is on, no quarter, in a third piece, "Tabernacle," the last to leave the studio for Venice. Dating from 2018, it's in the form of a military cap, six feet high, of a kind worn by both Union and Confederate soldiers. With its striking bulk, it encourages us at first to linger over its surface. But there's a secret inside. Look through a glass-covered hole cut in its crown and you find yourself staring, through cross hairs, at a siege mortar holding a cannon ball ready for firing. The ball is mirrored and you are reflected in it, a combatant, willing or not, in a political present that has sometimes been called a new American Civil War.

It's a mistake to view Mr. Puryear's art through any single lens, but the theme of "war" is certainly there to be found. "I don't want to see this moment become normalized," Mr. Puryear said. "We have to dig our way out of this somehow." In Venice, with a citizen's concern and an artist's acute commitment, he'll be digging deep.

Cotter, Holland. "Martin Puryear, Citizen-Sculptor." *The New York Times*, March 5, 2019, p. AR1, p. AR30.

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The New York Times

Sculptor to Represent U.S. in Venice

Martin Puryear, acclaimed for large-scale works, is selected.

By ROBIN POGREBIN

As with athletes who make the team at the Olympics, the selection of an artist to represent the United States at the 58th Venice Biennale next spring is a big deal in the art world. Now, at a time when museums nationwide are trying to diversify their collections and exhibitions, comes the announcement, for the second time in a row, of an African-American artist: the 77-year-old sculptor Martin Puryear.

During a 40-year career, Mr. Puryear has been acclaimed for large scale works in wood, stone and metals that display strong craft traditions and explore issues of ethnicity, culture and history. Mr. Puryear's "Shackled" (2014), for example, is a black iron sculpture with a metal hoop at the top, reminiscent of the cuffs once used aboard slave ships.

"Martin is one of the most important artists working today," said Brooke Kamin Rapaport, the deputy director and senior curator of the Madison Square Park Conservancy, which commissioned and will curate the United States Pavilion at the Biennale. "His work confronts contemporary issues and he has by now influenced generations of artists in our country and internationally."

Mr. Puryear will create new, site-specific pieces for the pavilion, a Palladian-style 1930 structure, including sculpture for its galleries and an outdoor installation in the forecourt. A spokeswoman said the artist was traveling on Tuesday and unavailable for interviews (which he typically avoids). The Biennale will run

Martin Puryear's "Big Bling," a 40-foot-tall, multi-tiered wood structure looming over Madison Square Park in 2016.

CONTINUED ON PAGE C2

Pogrebin, Robin. "Sculptor to Represent U.S. in Venice." *The New York Times,* August 16, 2018, pp. C1–C2.

Above, Martin Puryear received a National Medal of Arts from President Barack Obama in 2012. Left, "Ladder for Booker T. Washington" (1996).

May 11 through Nov. 24, 2019.

In 2017, the United States chose the Los Angeles abstract painter Mark Bradford to represent the country.

With the involvement of the Conservancy, a nonprofit organization that programs Madison Square Park in New York, this is said to mark the first time that the United States Pavilion will be organized by an institution focused exclusively on public art. In 2016 the Conservancy and Mr. Puryear collaborated on his monumental sculpture "Big Bling" for that park, a 40-foot high construction of plywood and chain-link fencing with a gold-leaf shackle.

"People notice great contradiction in that sculpture," Ms. Rapaport said. "It was stately and overwhelming and it was rough-hewed and it was refined and, for an artist who created work out of chain-link fence, it was significant because he chose to use a conventional urban material."

Mr. Puryear's selection was first reported by ArtNews and Jerry Saltz of New York magazine before it was officially confirmed by The New York Times on Wednesday.

The State Department is contributing a $250,000 grant toward the pavilion, as it has in previous years. The artist is selected by the nonpartisan Advisory Committee on International Exhibitions, a panel of scholars, professors, and artists convened by the National Endowment for the Arts.

In conjunction with the pavilion, the Conservancy and Mr. Puryear will work with underserved youth through Studio in a School in New York and Istituto Santa Maria Della Pietà in Venice.

Darby English, an art history professor at the University of Chicago, will serve as the project's exhibition scholar; Tod Williams Billie Tsien Architects will serve as exhibition designers.

While African-American artists have historically

Pogrebin, Robin. "Sculptor to Represent U.S. in Venice." *The New York Times,* August 16, 2018, pp. C1–C2.

been overlooked by major art museums, Mr. Puryear is one of the exceptions. In 2007 the Museum of Modern Art organized a retrospective of his work, which traveled to the National Gallery of Art in Washington, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth. In 2015, an exhibition of his lesser-known works on paper opened at the Morgan Library & Museum in New York.

The artist has also been publicly recognized, receiving the National Medal of Arts in 2011, the Gold Medal in Sculpture by the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 2007, a MacArthur Foundation award in 1989 and a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1982.

Born in 1941, the first of seven children, Mr. Puryear was raised in Washington, where he attended Catholic University of America and majored in biology before switching to art. Mr. Puryear joined the Peace Corps and went to Sierra Leone, where he learned West African woodworking and basket weaving. His work retains links to tribal art.

After the Peace Corps, Mr. Puryear spent two years at the Royal Swedish Academy of Arts in Stockholm and assisted the cabinetmaker James Krenov, experiences that allowed him to investigate local craft traditions and modern Scandinavian design. Mr. Puryear's first solo exhibition was at the gallery Gröna Paletten in Stockholm in 1968.

He also spent time in Japan, where he expanded his knowledge of ancestral traditions like weaving and pottery.

'I actually don't think my choice of materials makes me so unique.'

In 1969, with Post-Minimalism at its height, Mr. Puryear pursued his M.F.A. at Yale, where he was influenced by two prominent visiting instructors: Robert Morris and Richard Serra, Minimalist sculptors who wanted viewers to "experience" their work in an encompassing, physical way.

"Minimalism was the dominant sculptural movement of Martin's formative years," said the prominent curator John Elderfield. "He transformed it by combining it with the traditions of crafts and woodworking, to create very varied, highly original forms informed by the natural world and wide-ranging cultural experiences."

"Shackled," 2014, an iron sculpture by Mr. Puryear with a metal hoop at the top, reminiscent of the cuffs once used aboard slave ships.

Although Mr. Puryear once said of Minimalism, "I looked at it, I tasted it, and I spat it out" — rejecting the strict geometry and industrial fabrication — he also drew on its forms in his multifaceted use of wood.

"I actually don't think my choice of materials makes me so unique," Mr. Puryear told The Times in 2017. "Sculptors still work in wood, but what may seem a bit unusual today is that my works are still mostly made by hand, by myself and one or two assistants."

After leaving Yale in 1971, Mr. Puryear joined the faculty of Fisk University in Nashville, then taught at the University of Maryland in College Park while maintaining a studio and residence in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn. When a 1977 a fire destroyed many of his possessions and artworks, the artist went to Chicago, where he taught at the University

Pogrebin, Robin. "Sculptor to Represent U.S. in Venice." *The New York Times,* August 16, 2018, pp. C1–C2.

of Illinois.

He ultimately settled in Accord, N.Y., and went on to create large public art projects for such sites as the River Road Station of the Chicago Transit Authority, Chevy Chase Garden Plaza in Maryland, Belvedere Plaza in New York's Battery Park City and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in Seattle.

Among Mr. Puryear's best-known works is "Ladder for Booker T. Washington" (1996), a serpentine wood structure that seems to stretch to infinity, suggesting the long — potentially elusive — climb to success.

Having "emerged from the Minimalist and Post-minimalist vortex," the art critic Roberta Smith wrote in The Times, the artist's handworked sculptures "soothe more than seethe, balancing between the geometric and the organic with Zen aplomb" even as they also engage with charged subjects like race, African-American history, ritual and ethnic identity.

"These references seep out of his highly allusive, often poetic forms in waves, evoking the earlier Modernism of Brancusi, Arp, Noguchi and Duchamp, but also carpentry, basket weaving, African sculpture and the building of shelter and ships," she added. "His work slows you down and makes you consider its every detail as physical fact, artistic choice and purveyor of meaning."

He has also often revisited the soft Phrygian cap, which became a symbol of anti-loyalist resistance during the French Revolution. With "Big Phrygian" (2010-2014), Mr. Puryear created the cap writ large, as a five-foot-tall, red cedar-wood rendition.

"The Phrygian cap represents a brief preoccupation of mine," Mr. Puryear told The Times last year. "I noticed that it seems to have been a signifier for the idea of liberty, going back to ancient Greece, but also during the French and American revolutions."

In the publication accompanying Mr. Puryear's solo show at London's Parasol unit foundation for contemporary art, the art historian Robert Storr wrote that the history of the African diaspora "is profoundly ingrained or, more accurately, meticulously bundled by the artist into much if not all of his work, without the artist or the work ever become preachy or 'teachy.'"

To be sure, even as Mr. Puryear's work challenges viewers to consider weighty questions of oppression and racial identity, his approach is subtle, his touch light.

"What is there, and has consistently been throughout Mr. Puryear's career," Holland Cotter wrote in The Times in 2014, "is work that's political, playful, sweet to the eye and deep."

"Big Phrygian" (2010-14), based on the soft Phrygian cap that became a symbol of liberty during the French Revolution.

Pogrebin, Robin. "Sculptor to Represent U.S. in Venice." *The New York Times,* August 16, 2018, pp. C1–C2.

frieze

REVIEW - 13 NOV 2017

Martin Puryear

Parasol Unit, London, UK

BY ALEX ESTORICK

Since he began making sculpture in the late 1960s, Martin Puryear has shaped a form of experience between art viewing and totemic reverence. His works' obliqueness has prompted writers to read them as traces of Puryear's formative experiences: for instance how his rare deftness at shaping wood – here cedar, ebony, hickory, maple, pear, pine, poplar, willow and African blackwood – derives from his experiences of Swedish and Sierra Leonean craft traditions, or how his works' obduracy feeds back to the debate about the art object that preoccupied East Coast discourse when the artist was a student.

At Parasol Unit, works are displayed across two floors, with the main ground-floor space occupied by larger-than-life-sized sculptures made between 1993 and 2014. Without exception they are closed forms, albeit with different degrees of inwardness. *Night Watch* (2011) looms over the visitor, a mass of tall, tightly-packed grasses bowed by the wind and embedded in a table top – an unsettling vision of hoarded supply. By contrast, *Brunhilde* (1998–2000), a benign cage of interlaced cedar and rattan, exemplifies Puryear's method of 'drawing in space' – as the artist once described *That Profile* (1999) – his monumental outdoor commission for the Getty Center. Like that work, *Untitled* (1995) calls to mind the shrunken head of a tailor's dummy. Composed of black

Estorick, Alex. "Martin Puryear." *Frieze,* November 13, 2017.

Martin Puryear, *Brunhilde*, 1998-2000, cedar, rattan, 2.4 x 2.9 x 1.9 m. Courtesy: Matthew Marks Gallery, New York © Martin Puryear; photograph: Richard Goodbody

tar laid over wire mesh and supported on a cedar 'neck', the image stakes out the artist's African American identity with quiet power while maintaining allusions to Constantin Brâncuși, as well as the trio of metaphysicians: Carlo Carrà, Giorgio Morandi, and Giorgio de Chirico, whose lexicon of impenetrable signs christened the modern gallery 'an immense museum of strangeness'.

Upstairs, this humanoid form is cast in bronze, its surface miming wood grain. Set on a plinth across from *Shackled* (2014), a black iron hook, the artist's shift in media marks a gear change. Awaiting a manacled slave, *Shackled*, with its smooth curves, makes clear that the absence of

Martin Puryear, *Le Prix*, 2005, painted yellow pine, alaskan yellow cedar, 310 x 229 x 33 cm. Courtesy: Collection of Gretchen and John Berggruen, San Francisco, and Matthew Marks Gallery, New York © Martin Puryear; photograph: the artist's studio

Estorick, Alex. "Martin Puryear." *Frieze*, November 13, 2017.

human presence in Puryear's work is the root of its social and political force. This is especially vivid when the artist makes explicit the issue of race, as in earlier works including Ladder for *Booker T. Washington* (1996), a terrifying rickety ladder that tapers as it makes its precarious ascent. Also displayed here are several monochrome woodcuts printed to accompany an edition of Jean Toomer's masterwork of the Harlem Renaissance, *Cane* (1923). The imagery of roots predominates in this series, and *Karintha* (2000) – with its solitary, drooping cotton boll – is a piercing image of drought on Southern soil, and one of the artist's principal leitmotifs.

The issue of human liberty is often implicit in Puryear's work and here both *The Load* (2012), a wooden cart bearing a caged glass orb, and *Big Phrygian* (2010–14), a large red pupa of painted cedar, make for universal emblems. The Phrygian cap has served as a malleable national sign since antiquity, which is appropriate for an artist of such formal and semiotic hybridity. However, as I found out this week, it is also the medical term for a folded gallbladder. Martin Puryear is a social surrealist for our times; his first solo exhibition in London is uncomfortably overdue.

Main image: Installation view, 'Martin Puryear', 2017, Parasol unit, London. Courtesy: Parasol unit, London

Estorick, Alex. "Martin Puryear." *Frieze,* November 13, 2017.

The New York Times

THE NEW YORK TIMES INTERNATIONAL EDITION MONDAY, OCTOBER 16, 2017 | 11

FINE ARTS & EXHIBITS

Puryear mines African-American history

LONDON

A solo show of more than 30 sculptures and works on paper from four decades.

BY FARAH NAYERI

"Question," a sculpture in bronze. Benjamin Westoby/Parasol unit

"Shackled" is a black iron sculpture by the artist Martin Puryear. The metal hoop at the top is reminiscent of the cuffs once used aboard slave ships. Yet when viewed for more than a few seconds, the artwork sheds its political overtones and appears more and more as a sophisticated work of abstraction with delicate, animallike contours.

The sculpture, which was created in 2014, is part of Mr. Puryear's solo show at London's Parasol unit foundation for contemporary art, his first exhibition at a nonprofit art institution in Britain. It is spread across two levels, and brings together more than 30 sculptures and works on paper spanning about four decades.

Mr. Puryear, 76, an African-American artist born in Washington, earned a bachelor's degree from the Catholic University of America, then moved to Africa to "live among the people who lived in the part of the world that stamped me," he said in a talk last year at the Art Institute of Chicago. He joined the Peace Corps in Sierra Leone.

He later spent two years studying printmaking in Sweden, and also lived in Japan, drawn by the country's deep respect for its material culture and ancestral traditions such as weaving and pottery. His work reflects his rich and layered trajectory.

"For as long as he's been making sculpture, Martin Puryear has been engaged with craft traditions: forms of making that have been passed down through the ages in many cultures, all of which carry with them distinct histories," said Michael Brenson, an art historian and art critic (he worked for The New York Times for several years) who has written extensively on Mr. Puryear and is writing a

Nayeri, Farah. "Puryear mines African-American history." *The International New York Times,* October 16, 2017, p. 11.

Mr. Puryear's solo show at Parasol unit in London is his first exhibition at a nonprofit art institution in Britain. Benjamin Westoby/Parasol unit

biography of the sculptor David Smith.

"Puryear has studied, embraced and rethought various craft traditions," Mr. Brenson said, "and in his sculpture has enabled the histories embedded in them to become part of artistic culture."

Mr. Brenson said Mr. Puryear has a "deep interest in history. He continues to mine African-American history and to bring aspects of it into the history of abstraction." Ultimately, he said, "Puryear's interests are very broad," and his work is "difficult to categorize."

Mr. Puryear works predominantly with wood, which is unusual for a sculptor active in the 20th and 21st centuries. Even the iron "Shackled" was originally sculpted out of particleboard, a cheap form of wood — the texture of the particleboard can be seen in the iron piece that was cast from it.

"I actually don't think my choice of materials makes me so unique," Mr. Puryear wrote in an email interview. "Sculptors still work in wood, but what may seem a bit unusual today is that my works are still mostly made by hand, by myself and one or two assistants."

"Wood is versatile," he wrote. "It can be used additively, to construct a work from separate elements, as well as subtractively, by carving into a solid block."

The Puryear exhibition came about thanks to Ziba Ardalan, the founder of Parasol unit. As a research assistant in the 1980s at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, Ms. Ardalan encountered the work of Mr. Puryear and of the sculptor Robert Therrien.

"They were this group of young artists who decided, having studied Minimalism, to bring their own identity and expression into the work," she said. She decided to give each of them an exhibition, because "these are really giants of American art, but, somehow, have not been shown in Europe, and definitely not in London."

"Martin Puryear's works are aesthetically simple," she said. "Yet they stun you by their complexity."

Another exhibition showpiece is "Big Phrygian" (2010-2014), Mr. Puryear's five-foot-tall, red cedarwood sculpture of a Phrygian cap, an anti-establishment accessory worn during the French Revolution. (It is one of several Phrygian bonnets in the show.)

Nayeri, Farah. "Puryear mines African-American history." *The International New York Times,* October 16, 2017, p. 11.

From afar, the sculpture looks heavy and voluminous. But as you come closer, it looks soft and cozy, as if made of felt.

"The Phrygian cap represents a brief preoccupation of mine," Mr. Puryear said. "I noticed that it seems to have been a signifier for the idea of liberty, going back to ancient Greece, but also during the French and American revolutions."

The artist had already started working on the sculpture when he saw a stipple engraving from 1794, the year that France first abolished slavery. The engraving showed a black man wearing the bonnet and was labeled: "I, too, am free."

As the art historian Robert Storr writes in an essay in the exhibition publication, the history of the African diaspora "is profoundly ingrained or, more accurately, meticulously bundled by the artist into much if not all of his work, without the artist or the work ever become preachy or 'teachy.'"

Mr. Storr added that Mr. Puryear's art invited viewers to "learn by inquiring into what these references might be, and so invites them to discover aspects of our common heritage, of which they may be partially or totally ignorant."

Martin Puryear's "Shackled," a black iron sculpture, evokes the kinds of cuffs once used aboard slave ships. Martin Puryear, Matthew Marks Gallery

"Big Phrygian," a sculpture representing a type of cap worn during the French Revolution, is made of painted red cedar. Martin Puryear, Matthew Marks Gallery

Nayeri, Farah. "Puryear mines African-American history." *The International New York Times,* October 16, 2017, p. 11.

ArtReview

Martin Herbert's pick of shows this September

By **Martin Herbert**

Martin Puryear, Big Phrygian, *2010–14, painted red cedar, 147 × 102 × 193 cm. Photo: Ron Amstutz. Courtesy the artist and Matthew Marks Gallery, New York & Los Angeles*

Martin Puryear, Parasol Unit, London, 19 September – 6 December

In London, a belated righting of wrongs. Martin Puryear is finally receiving an institutional show, at Parasol Unit: one covering four decades of his brilliantly allusive and elliptical sculpting practice, augmented by works on paper. If Puryear has a parallel in the uk, it's probably the so-called Lisson sculptors, particularly Richard Deacon and Tony Cragg, in their catholic approach to materials and organic, edge-of-recognition fuzzing of abstraction and figuration. But Puryear's work is predicated on issues of race, liberty, injustice: see, for instance, the black ironwork Shackled (2014), which is half crouching creature, half restraint, elegant and ominous, or the meticulously veneered red cedarwood *Big Phrygian* (2010–14), which looks like a recoloured Smurf's cap but refers to a headgear signifying resistance in the French Revolution and freedom in the American one. A 2.5m outdoor bronze here is titled *Question* (2013–14), and to an extent, that's the subtitle of all Puryear's work. Art's job isn't to give answers but to formulate better questions, the saying goes. These are better than most.

Herbert, Martin. "Martin Herbert's pick of shows this September." *ArtReview*, September 2017.

artnet news

Martin Puryear's 'Big Bling': Manhattan's Spirit Animal?

THE DAILY PIC: Puryear's public sculpture feels like the beast within buildings, let out to play.

Blake Gopnik, October 19, 2016

THE DAILY PIC (#1658): Yesterday, Mad. Sq. Arts announced that Martin Puryear's *Big Bling* would be extending its visit to Madison Square Park in New York all the way through April 2. I was surprised to find myself pleased at the news, because I would normally think of a public sculpture like Puryear's as thoughtless plop art – big bling, indeed, for a corporatized urban fabric.

But there's something about Puryear's piece that makes it seem unusually alive and almost necessary to the park it's been in since May. For one thing, it feels big enough to truly claim its space, whereas almost all other postwar plop art has felt too small for the vast architectural settings it has been plopped into. Even a huge Calder or Oldenburg has a very hard time competing with a 40-story building. *Big Bling* has such a strong animal presence, however, that it feels enlarged

Gopnik, Blake. "Martin Puryear's 'Big Bling': Manhattan's Spirit Animal?" *Artnet News*, October 19, 2016.

and mammoth (literally) rather than overshadowed. That is, it feels like the world's biggest beast rather than like an urban tchotchke that's notably smaller than all the other man-made structures around it.

The other problem with the more old-fashioned kinds of public sculpture has been their poor fit with their settings – their lack of "site specificity," to use a tired term, that meant they could be plopped down anywhere and so didn't feel necessary to any one particular place. But *Big Bling*, with its animal energies and presence, feels like a perfect companion to the trees that it is nestled among, while the building materials it is made from give it a solid link to the architecture the park is surrounded by. If the Empire State Building had an animal alter-ego – a "totem creature," as Manhattan's original inhabitants might have conceived it – it would look like *Big Bling*, and would be sure to be seen lumbering among the trees as dusk turns to night in Madison Square Park. We'll see what happens there on Hallowe'en. (*Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery, © Martin Puryear, photo by Yasunori Matsui)*

Gopnik, Blake. "Martin Puryear's 'Big Bling': Manhattan's Spirit Animal?" *Artnet News*, October 19, 2016.

THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

MARTIN PURYEAR *Big Bling*

by Jason Rosenfeld

MADISON SQUARE PARK | MAY 16, 2016 – JANUARY 8, 2017

In the early 1990s the central oval of Madison Square Park was an uninhabitable dust bowl, and newspapers published animal behavior studies that compared the park's squirrels to those of Union Square and Washington Square Parks, finding Madison Square's emaciated and psychologically scarred from evading unleashed dogs. In 2016 it is a different story, and it is now the finest restored park in the city, resuscitated by local merchants and residents, hamburgers, and contemporary art. Memorable Mad. Sq. Art projects have abounded, but none impact the environment and relate better to the formal qualities of the park than Martin Puryear's monumental and terrific *Big Bling* (2016), which commands the now lush and verdant oval for the next three seasons, and is deeply resonant of life in today's New York.

It has been a moment of grand gestures in contemporary art in New York—from Richard Serra's latest vessel-sized Corten steel labyrinth, *NJ-1* (2015), at Gagosian, to Anish Kapoor's thirty-foot long arch of mammary earth, *She Wolf* (2016), at Barbara Gladstone just west in Chelsea. Puryear is familiar with such scale, having made *Bearing Witness* (1997), his powerful bronze evocation of individualized democracy outside the Ronald Reagan Building in his hometown of Washington D.C., and the twinned and totemic stainless steel *North Cove Pylons* (1995) here in Battery Park City. But the former's metallic hide is in stark contrast to the masonry of the National Mall, and the latter are framed by the murky and brackish Hudson. *Big Bling*, by contrast, feels fully and naturally immersed in its gridded urban environs, responding to, enhancing, and expanding the

Installation view: Martin Puryear, *Big Bling*, 2016, Madison Square Park, New York. Pressure-treated laminated timbers, plywood, fiberglass, gold leaf. 40 × 10 × 38 feet. Collection of the artist, courtesy of Matthew Marks Gallery. © Martin Puryear. Photo: Yasunori Matsui

experience of this emerald patch of urban park, as well as the surrounding architecture, including one of the city's first skyscrapers, Daniel Burnham's Flatiron Building of 1902, and the distinctive clock faces of the Metropolitan Life Tower of 1909.

A small iron version of the sculpture was included in Puryear's recent Matthew Marks Gallery and Morgan Library and Museum exhibitions: its arched form and plummeting pillar-like front resembling ancient Egyptian bronze sculptures of seated upright cats linked to the protector goddess Bastet. There is one in Baltimore's Walters Art Museum with gold earrings and the resemblance to *Big Bling* is uncanny. Puryear's small version is titled *Shackled* (2014), and alludes to the history of slavery. Certainly the ebony-toned iron of the maquette bears a solemnity appropriate to that grim association, as in Lorenzo Pace's similarly themed dark granite monument, *Triumph of the Human Spirit* (2000), downtown on Foley Square. But *Big Bling* of Madison Square is composed of laminated wood, fiberglass, and chain link fencing—its materials and transparency complicating this singular reference.

The new title is alluded to in the gilded shackle at the top, a bit of hardware that is affixed to the swelling head of the form and, like the larger shape below, in a state of rest. Slack on its pin, the shackle is not under tension, but merely suggests the equipment used to lower the structure into place—I like to imagine via wires that stretched from nearby skyscrapers, as if *Big Bling* navigated to the park through the city canyons like Spider-Man, via tensile webs.

As ever with the meticulous Puryear, the process is in large measure the piece. For *Big Bling* he collaborated with Unalam fabricators in Sidney, New York, who provided the pressure-treated curved laminated timbers (as seen in a recent *Art 21* short film on the project). The company usually supplies materials for churches, bridges, and other structures, and not works of fine art. But Puryear is as much a technician as artist, who revels in interfacing with materials and the construction challenges that ensue; he has noted with delight that the engineers at the Unalam factory worked the same way as he does in his own studio.

On a recent visit, the late-afternoon sun glinted off the shackle and burned through the squared latticework of the structure, casting elongated rectangular panels of light onto the resodded lawn. It recalls both the glass-and-steel skyscrapers that have defined the New York skyline since the 1940s, and the rectangularity of that form's most monumental example—the Twin Towers. Puryear was on the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation jury that selected Michael Arad and Peter Walker's design for the 9/11 Memorial back in 2003. Considering Puryear's evocative description of *Big Bling* as a "visual poem of praise to Manhattan," it is appropriate to see it as his own contribution to the memorialization of that day fifteen years ago. The resulting and sadly persisting culture of fear seems subtly imbedded in the surfaces of *Big Bling*—chain link fencing serving as both skin and protection, its small mesh dissuading anyone who might attempt to climb the sculpture's haunches. Ultimately, though, *Big Bling* reverberates with the persistence and impressiveness of what one of New York's finest early photographers, Alfred Stieglitz—who made the nearby Flatiron Building his first great motif—called "The City of Ambitions." That makes it doubly indomitable.

Rosenfeld, Jason. "Martin Puryear: Big Bling." *The Brooklyn Rail*, July 11, 2016.

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The Washington Post

Museums

A sculptor's work, seen in two and three dimensions

Martin Puryear. "Vessel," 1997-2002, eastern white pine, mesh, tar. Copyright Martin Puryear, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery. (Martin Puryear/Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery)

By **Philip Kennicott** May 27, 2016 Email the author

Any reasonably complete collection of American art over the past half century will include the work of Martin Puryear, but all too often, it feels strangely out of context when displayed. Puryear's sculptures may be the best-made material in the room, but they are also strikingly reticent, even humble. His wooden circles, curving baskets, poetic ladders and enigmatic containers are quiet and self-contained, and they don't glare at you with the hyper-polish of machine-made metal minimalism or the narcissistic sheen of latter-day Pop.

Kennicott, Philip. "A sculptor's work, seen in two and three dimensions." *The Washington Post*, May 27, 2016.

Sadly, though, the squeaky wheel gets the oil in museums, just as it does in the dysfunctional family and the corporate office. If you don't make the effort to actively listen to a Puryear sculpture, you may hear nothing at all.

An exhibition at the Smithsonian American Art Museum places Puryear in his ideal context, which is Puryear's own imaginative landscape. "Martin Puryear: Multiple Dimensions" includes 14 of his sculptures along with his lesser-known work on paper, including prints, drawings and sketches made in relationship to evolving sculptural projects. It begins with drawings from the 1960s, when he served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Sierra Leone, and ends with ongoing meditations on forms that are still taking shape in public parks and plazas, including the recently installed "Big Bling" in New York's Madison Square Park.

Throughout, you sense the complexity of how the hand relates to the world we make. In drawings and prints, the artist has directly impressed fingerprints — markers of personal identity — onto the paper. But in work such as the 1997-2002 "Vessel," a large wooden cage that looks like a giant bottle lying on its side, the hand is a hidden symbol of the well-made object, the perfect joint, the polished seam, the marker of craftsmanship. And in other pieces, including the 1982 "Untitled," a wood circle made of maple sapling and pear, you feel the slow, polishing power of the hand, its presence over time smoothing and eroding natural materials into something soft and domesticated.

The hand in its multiple manifestations brings with it a sense of time, the instantaneous capture of the fingerprint, the calculation and care of the constructed object, the gentle amnesia of wood worn down over the ages. Among other things, the exhibition reminds you of how much we have lost when it comes to the hand, especially in the past century and more, when machine-made objects replaced handcrafted ones. A fraudulent language masks the void: We buy "hand-tossed" pizzas from mass-market fast-food joints and wear "handmade" clothing made from polyester and plastic. Few of us carry anything, anymore, that bears the imprint of the hand, no pens with nubs worn down by actual writing, or umbrellas with wooden handles polished by long use.

Puryear hasn't been particularly forward when it comes to promoting his works on paper, or his drawings. After the mid-1960s, he turned to sculpture as his primary medium, and while he continued to make drawings, his production of public prints basically ceased until he returned to the form in 1999. As Ruth Fine writes in a catalogue essay, drawing was an everyday way of existing in the world and not something the artist necessarily wanted "out there" for an audience: "Perhaps one reason why he has never considered his drawings as equal to his sculpture or prints is that he has always made them with a quotidian intent, like eating or breathing, something that is essential to life but not of particular note."

Kennicott, Philip. "A sculptor's work, seen in two and three dimensions." *The Washington Post,* May 27, 2016.

The early drawings, however, are delightful, and they are full of the same humility one feels in his sculptural work (which, no matter how large, never feels monumental). A 1965 portrait, "Gbago," shows a man with a long, thin face, and large, columnar hat. Mostly it is an outline with a few, fleeting suggestions of shadow and three-dimensional form. In the hollow of the subject's cheeks, however, you sense Puryear's lifelong interest in hollows and voids, in the way that something cut out of a larger form can speak as powerfully as the volume that encloses it.

Another pen-and-ink drawing made in Sierra Leone, of a shack with a grass roof, is deft and evocative, with crosshatching suggesting the shadows, textures and inner spaces of this simple built form. It sits in the middle of the page, surrounded by blank paper, like a three-dimensional object on the floor of a studio or gallery space.

Seeing the early, representational work of an artist who has long worked in more abstract forms can lead one astray. It may seem proof of the artist's legitimacy, or raw talent, which is somehow suspect or difficult to measure when the work floats free of mimesis. But in Puryear's case, the early drawings are entirely charming in their own right — connected in multiple ways to the forms and ideas of his larger career and yet further proof of the honest, candid groundedness of his vision. In their quiet, attentive observation of a faraway place, they suggest a curiosity about the visual world, and the larger world, which is still the hallmark of Puryear's unassuming but artistically evocative handicraft.

Martin Puryear: Multiple Dimensions is on view at the Smithsonian American Art Museum through Sept. 5.

Kennicott, Philip. "A sculptor's work, seen in two and three dimensions." *The Washington Post,* May 27, 2016.

The New York Times

Committed to Sculpture, Even in Two Dimensions

JASON FARAGO
ART REVIEW

Visitors to Martin Puryear's 2007 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art will remember the singular appeals of his mostly wooden sculpture: its enigmatic forms, its astounding craftsmanship, its humanistic spirit. When contemporary art is often said to exist in a "post-medium condition" — the art historian Rosalind Krauss's phrase for the dissolution of boundaries between painting, photography and other once neatly defined disciplines — Mr. Puryear has remained faithful to sculpture, and keeps probing the medium's capacity for revelation and beauty.

BYRON SMITH FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Martin Puryear's less familiar drawings and prints at the Morgan Library & Museum are mostly studies for sculptures, some of which also are on view.

His commitment to three dimensions endures even when he's working in only two. Mr. Puryear's less familiar drawings and prints, now on view in an intriguing show at the Morgan Library & Museum, are mostly studies for subsequent sculptures. Unlike his precise works in wood, his output on paper can feel provisional and uncertain. Which, actually, gives its own sort of visual satisfaction to "Martin Puryear: Multiple Dimensions." In the drawings here, you can see Mr. Puryear exploring motifs, trying out forms and contours, and not worrying unduly about finish. The bulk of the drawings here have never been shown, and most come from Mr. Puryear's own collection. They are autonomous and contingent at once, and this show sits in a pleasant limbo zone: It's a stand-alone exhibition of prints and drawings, but at the same time a glimpse into his sculptural process. (The exhibition, which also contains a few impressive sculptures, was organized by the Art Institute of Chicago and will travel there next year.)

Martin Puryear
Multiple Dimensions
Morgan Library & Museum

Mr. Puryear was born in Washington in 1941, and after undergraduate study at the Catholic University of America, he joined the Peace Corps, which sent him to newly independent Sierra Leone between 1964 and 1966. In West Africa he drew proficient sketches of local architecture, palm trees and cactuses, and a few Sierra Leoneans he met while teaching English, French and biology. One scraggy contour drawing of a night watchman includes a floppy hat — a form that will recur throughout his career. If the appeal of his African juvenilia is now mostly

Farago, Jason. "Committed to Sculpture, Even in Two Dimensions." *The New York Times,* December 25, 2015, p. C28.

biographical, one sheet of drawings of a rhinoceros beetle, its carapace rendered through tight crosshatching, suggests Mr. Puryear could have had a fine career as an entomologist.

After his stint in the Peace Corps, Mr. Puryear studied printmaking in Sweden and then attended Yale, where he turned definitively to sculpture. It was 1969, and Post-Minimalism was then at its height; while Mr. Puryear worked on his M.F.A. at Yale, Richard Serra and Robert Morris were visiting artists there. His sculptures' rationality and restraint reflect that Post-Minimal influence. But Mr. Puryear upheld the virtue of craft when the art world was abandoning it, and the abstract forms of his wooden sculpture were subtly inflected with cultural concerns. Mr. Puryear, who is African-American, returns again and again to a number of motifs, devoid of personal expression yet resonantly political. One recurring figure is the gate, a sign of welcome or of exclusion. Another is the soft Phrygian cap, worn by 18th-century revolutionaries in France and Haiti. In one spiraling drawing here, from 2003, two dozen lines go on a semicircular jog before narrowing and curving in on themselves, rearticulating a symbol of both egalitarian citizenship and black liberation.

Vessels and jugs, with their capacity for an interior secret, also make frequent appearances, and this show suggests how Mr. Puryear uses drawing to investigate those forms' sculptural potential. A 1990 drawing, done with black Conté crayon and smudged around its edges, consists of an irregular oval that is extended at its bottom into a rectangle, looking a bit like the business end of a golf club. Two years later the form recurs, this time in a large preparatory drawing for a sculpture: the shape has been tilted 90 degrees, and translated from a solid mass of black into a lattice structure. The sculpture itself ("Vessel," 1997–2002) is here too, and the lattice creates a cage of white pine, containing in its cavity a tar-covered ampersand. What was once solid has become hollow, and what was once abstract now feels almost anthropoid. That feeling is heightened by a smaller white bronze sculpture with the same shape, titled "Face Down."

While many prominent sculptors embrace drawing and printmaking as stand-alone efforts — consider Rachel Whiteread's spare domestic impressions, or Thomas Schütte's fraught and bulbous heads — Mr. Puryear evidently considers his works on paper as facilitators of something more substantial. But the germination process can take years. In a print here from 2001, a net of lines describes a conical form that bends at its apex and points back down, like a swan nuzzling its beak into its plumage. (Mr. Puryear calls it his "9/11 Print," as he was at work on the image on Sept. 11.) The form recurred in three dimensions last year, in an elegant sculpture of hardwood saplings and cordage at Mr. Puryear's outstanding exhibition at Matthew Marks Gallery in Manhattan. Look closer at the 2001 print and you'll see a second, smaller network of lines in the corner, echoing the swan-cone, but abbreviated and more rectilinear. That one, too, became a sculpture. As the work on paper is not a drawing but an etching, a medium permitting no revisions, the second form could hardly have been an idle sketch.

Neither of those new sculptures is here. Despite a few three-dimensional inclusions, this is a show of works on paper, and much of its argument about media is implicit. It may, by the way, look better in Chicago next year; at the Morgan, the show is divided between the museum's low-ceilinged, crepuscular upstairs gallery and its taller, one-room downstairs exhibition space. The split is unwieldy, and makes the smaller second half, which contains models of Mr. Puryear's public works, feel thrown together. (The show confirms the insufficiency of Renzo Piano's Morgan Library renovation; the success of his Whitney Museum of American Art design and of his Art Institute expansion should not obscure the deficiencies of this one.)

But the Morgan is at its core a repository for drawing. If a sculptor of Mr. Puryear's stature fits into its halls with some difficulty, that may affirm that his works on paper, while estimable, are still only a reflection of his greatest achievements.

"Martin Puryear: Multiple Dimensions" continues through Jan. 10 at the Morgan Library & Museum, 225 Madison Avenue, at 36th Street; 212-685-0008; themorgan.org.

Farago, Jason. "Committed to Sculpture, Even in Two Dimensions." *The New York Times,* December 25, 2015, p. C28.

BLOUINARTINFO

Shows That Matter: Martin Puryear at the Morgan Library

BY NOELLE BODICK | OCTOBER 19, 2015

Left to right: Martin Puryear's "Gbago," 1966, and "Untitled," 1964/66.
(© Martin Puryear/Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery)

WHAT: "Martin Puryear: Multiple Dimensions"

WHERE: The Morgan Library & Museum, 225 Madison Avenue, New York City

WHEN: Through January 10

WHY: A member of the postminimal generation, Martin Puryear has distinguished his 40-year career with an enduring commitment to traditional methods of craft, shaping his monolithic, mostly wooden sculptures with his own hands. Puryear identifies foremost as "a worker," unlike Minimalists such as Richard Serra and Donald Judd, who use fabricators to execute their economic designs. "I'm not somebody who's happy to let my work be made for me and I'll pass on it, yes or no, after it's done," he has said about his shelter-like structures and carved forms, often invested with historic references. It seems appropriate then that a new show at the Morgan Library & Museum (organized by the Art Institute of Chicago) uncovers and examines another step in Puryear's laborious handcrafted process: that of drafting works on paper.

Bodick, Noelle. "Shows That Matter: Martin Puryear at the Morgan Library." *Artinfo*, October 19, 2015.

Preliminary drawings are just some of the 70 works — sketchbooks and prints, alongside maquettes for public sculptures — that the show assembles to illustrate what the Morgan characterizes as the "iterative process" of Puryear's art making. Culled largely from the artist's personal collection, the works on paper have never been on view, and carry evidence of the artist's hand (ink palm smudges, finger prints), and occasional neglect (water damage marks, stains from a 1977 fire in his Brooklyn studio).

This unfussy, sometimes even improvisational quality also comes through in the materials used. Puryear rendered early work on the paper wrappings of art magazines, like ARTnews, which he subscribed to while in Sierra Leone with the Peace Corps from 1964 to 1966, as well as on the backs of letters. During these years abroad, he left his camera behind in order to document the African landscape with ink, sketching isolated, grass-roofed houses and fat, anatomically precise beetles viewed from different angles, like plates in a biology textbook. (Notably, Puryear wanted to be a wildlife illustrator as a young boy in Washington, D.C.) Pared-down woodcuts of local Mende children reveal his early tendency towards simplification.

Puryear's work becomes more abstract while studying printmaking at the Swedish Royal Academy of Art in Stockholm, from 1966 to 1968. Soft ground etchings of Stonehenge, a gate, and a Runestone (boulders that mark the place of the dead in Scandinavia) are barely discernable as real-world objects. The latter looks like something between an eyetooth and a smooth river stone, and prefigures some of his sculptures that are distinctly bodily, yet anatomically unidentifiable. In the next room, more shapes are repeated in his sculptures — of a Phrygian cap, round jugs, bean-shapes, and heads — and demonstrate the artist's return to certain objects charged with symbolic meaning, like the model on display for a 40-foot shackle, which will be raised in Madison Square Park next May.

It is perhaps surprising to learn that Puryear, now 74, has never felt compelled to exhibit this work before. In a catalogue essay, Mark Pascale, curator of prints and drawings at the Art Institute of Chicago, notes that the artist "displays a perplexing ambivalence toward his drawings, claiming that the flat plane of a piece of paper vexes him." This work might not reveal much about the hewing away at and bending of natural materials, but it does stake out Puryear's artistic domain. Or as he describes it, the evolution of his artwork that is "linear in the sense that a spiral is linear. I come back to similar territory at different times."

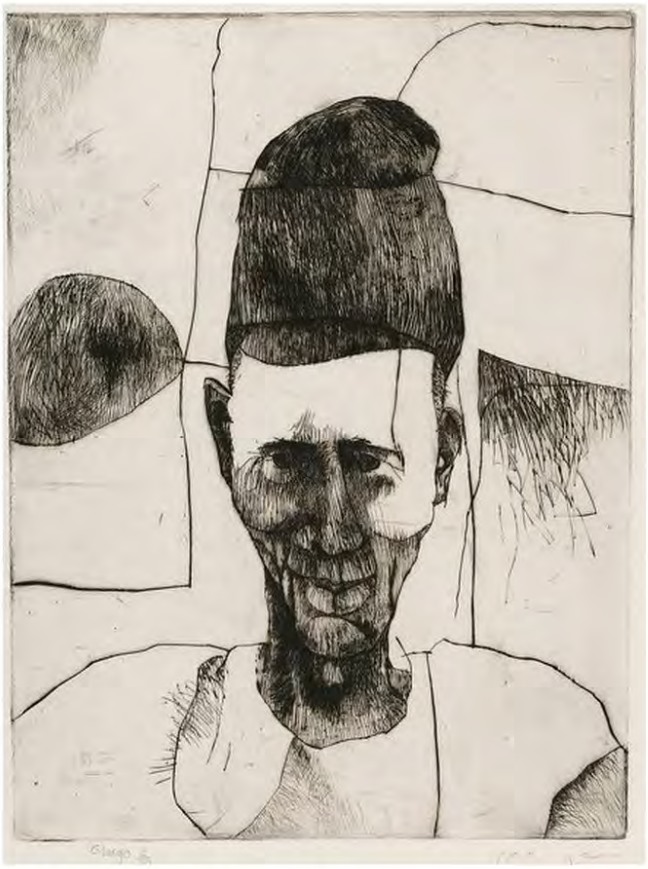
Bodick, Noelle. "Shows That Matter: Martin Puryear at the Morgan Library." *Artinfo*, October 19, 2015.

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY
523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047

VOGUE

Head to Head With Martin Puryear at the Morgan Library

OCTOBER 15, 2015
by JULIA FELSENTHAL



Martin Puryear, *Gbago*, 1966

Photo: Courtesy of Martin Puryear

In 1964, the sculptor Martin Puryear, just out of undergrad at Catholic University, headed off to West Africa to spend two years volunteering in the Peace Corps, living with the Mende people of Sierra Leone in a village with no electricity and teaching English, French, biology, and art. While there, Puryear left his camera at home and instead recorded his surroundings in a series of sketches and woodcut

prints. Those works—images of rhinoceros beetles, night watchmen, thatched-roof houses, and local children, sometimes sketched casually on the backs of letters home—were filed away for decades. Some pieces were later destroyed in a fire that ravaged Puryear's Brooklyn studio in 1977. Some were damaged, the ink from the files in which they were kept seeping through the paper. Others remained intact but unseen by the public.

In the decades since, Puryear, who went on to study printmaking at the Royal Swedish Academy of Arts and sculpture at Yale, has become one of this country's foremost sculptors, known for his use of wood and other natural materials, and for the hand-hewn, homespun quality of his work. He's won a MacArthur Foundation fellowship, a Guggenheim fellowship, and the National Medal of Arts. He's had a major retrospective at New York's Museum of Modern Art. Next spring, you'll read all about him when he installs his next public sculpture—a 40-foot-high colossus called *Big Bling*, made of wood wrapped in chain-link fence and crowned with a gold-leafed shackle—which will hover over Manhattan's Madison Square Park from May 2016 through January 2017.

With somewhat less pomp and circumstance, this month the Morgan Library & Museum in New York has mounted "Martin Puryear: Multiple Dimensions," a show of the artist's works on paper (it will later travel to the Art Institute of Chicago, whose curators organized the show, and then to the Smithsonian American Art Museum). It's notable both because it's the first exhibition to focus on the artist's drawings and prints, and because it's the first time that some of his early work from Sierra Leone will see the light of day. Every artist starts somewhere, but what's fascinating about the drawings Puryear made in West Africa is that they show the kernels of the ideas he's gone on to play with for 50 years. As the curator Ruth Fine writes in an essay she contributed to the exhibition catalog, "Puryear no longer draws from nature, but the body of forms that he gathered as a young artist sustains him still." Back in the '60s, in these casual, almost documentary sketches, Puryear was already discovering and manipulating the imagery that has obsessed him for the rest of his long career.

Many of the works in the show are process drawings for his sculptures. Rarely, I'm told by Morgan curator Nadia Perucic, who walks me through the exhibition, does Puryear make a drawing of a sculpture *after* it is completed. (There's one notable exception in the exhibition.) Also on display are a few small sculptures, two large sculptures, some maquettes for larger sculptures, and a selection of prints that Puryear created while studying in Sweden and later in his career.

The show offers a remarkable glimpse into the iterative process of an artist whose elemental, abstract work defies easy categorization. But it's equally remarkable as

elemental, abstract work defies easy categorization. But it's equally remarkable as a bird's-eye view into the way Puryear has toyed with a handful of essential shapes over time and in different mediums. As he's quoted in the exhibition's introductory wall text, his development as an artist has only been "linear in the sense that a spiral is linear."

Using Puryear's metaphor, those Sierra Leone drawings can be seen as the spiral's central point. Take, for example, Puryear's 1966 graphite portrait *Gbago*, a drawing of a night watchman wearing a tall cap that lends his head an ovular shape. Later, while in Stockholm, Puryear re-created the same image as a drypoint print. The work that Puryear made in West Africa and Sweden is far more representational than anything else in the show—facial features, with the exception of ears, don't play into the later Puryear visual vocabulary—but the image of the head, or at least the suggestion of a primordial headlike shape, echoes over and over: elongated in the manner of the capped Gbago; sometimes in profile, as in a 1966 woodcut of a boy exhibited alongside the heavily incised woodblock from which it was made; sometimes viewed from behind, as in a 1964 drawing of a baby craning on his chubby neck away from the artist.

Martin Puryear, *Untitled*, 1999

Printed by Jacob Samuel / The Art Institute of Chicago

Headlike shapes abound in the exhibition's upstairs gallery (part of the show is installed in a separate gallery downstairs). There's one, like the baby in a three-quarter, away-facing view, rendered in thick, smudged black Conté crayon, part of a series of sketches for an *Untitled* sculpture. A 1999 etching called *Untitled (LA MoCA portfolio)* depicts what could be thought of as a disembodied head rocking a pair of hoop earrings, seen from behind (the image can also be interpreted as an inverted jug). Another etching called *Profile* rotates the same shape into a form that more closely relates to a set of 2009 *Untitled* head sculptures in bronze and pine.

Face Down, from 2008, in white bronze, introduces a head in face-planted repose, a posture that reappears in *Vessel*, the largest work in the room,

composed of a massive cranium-shaped cage of white pine enclosing a large mesh and tar ampersand that is punctuated by a basketball-size wooden sphere. It's a position that vibrates with possibility, walking a fine line between, as Perucic puts it, "humorous and ominous. It's meant to evoke a beached ship or a bottle. But of course it can be very much like a head." That ampersand is unusual for Puryear, she tells me. "It's the only source of an actual referent in his work." He told Perucic he liked the formal quality of it as a sign, and also its meaning: "The association it has with continuity. If you read this as a head, it could be the goings-on in one's mind."

It doesn't end there. In the second gallery downstairs, the head rises in a maquette and a drawing for Puryear's 1997 sculpture *Bearing Witness*, a hammered and welded bronze vertical totem permanently installed in the Federal Triangle in D.C. That totem, Perucic tells me, is based in part on a rear view of the artist's then-young daughter's skull. And in a miniature iron version of *Big Bling*, called *Shackled* (the material, says Perucic, should absolutely call to mind slavery), I notice a kidney bean–shaped cutout, negative space that evokes a head cocked off-kilter on a thin neck, recalling those drawings of children twisting away from Puryear an ocean and a half-century away in Sierra Leone.

Martin Puryear, *Face Down*, 2008

Photo: Courtesy of Martin Puryear

The head is not the only shape that captivates the artist. He's also into rounded Stonehenge-like forms, funny little Phrygian caps (headwear seems appropriate),

and vaguely elephantine figures that resemble the shapes of *Big Bling* and *Shackled* (in other iterations the shackle appears more playfully as a trunklike curve). But to me, the heads stand out as the most ubiquitous and most essential motif in the show.

So why heads? Puryear is traveling and unavailable to field my question, so I put it to Perucic. "There's definitely a formal consideration, the beauty of the line," she tells me. "But also the interest he always has and explores in interior and exterior. The head is the vessel of so much." Later, she emails to say she's been thinking more about my question. "It's something universal that can be distilled to a recognizable yet abstracted form," she writes. "It's also a shape that lends itself to experimentation and transformation. It can be elongated, widened, rotated around. It can stand in for other forms."

And as for what it means: "I also think of the head as a repository of thoughts, fantasies, knowledge, all interior processes (many of which are still not fully understood)," says Perucic. "Yet it's also the medium through which we can make ourselves known to others."

And, apparently, the medium through which Martin Puryear makes himself known to us. At least to a point. "It certainly has meaning," Perucic tells me when I press her to interpret *Vessel* for me. "But his art, as you can see, is not very explicit. I think he leaves it to you." As they say: You can never fully know what's going on inside someone else's head.

Felsenthal, Julia. "Head to Head With Martin Puryear at the Morgan Library." *Vogue*, October 15, 2015.

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The New York Times

Inside Art

Puryear in a Park

Next May, Martin Puryear's largest sculpture to date, 40 feet high, 38 feet across and 10 feet deep, will command Madison Square Park in New York like a kind of Trojan horse. Known for his allusive abstract works that fuse organic and geometric forms, Mr. Puryear will employ rough-hewed versions of his signature materials that nod to urban life. A model of the piece, "Big Bling," shows a plywood grid, with a curvilinear outline suggestive of an animal's silhouette, and an amoeboid shape cut out of the interior. Its plywood tiers will be wrapped in chain-link fencing. "It becomes a barrier — people can't ascend," said Brooke Kamin Rapaport, senior curator at the Madison Square Park Conservancy, which commissioned Mr. Puryear, 74. The work will be crowned by bling: a bright gold shackle, "a beacon that you can either say adorns or restrains," Ms. Rapaport said — depending on your New York story. *HILARIE M. SHEETS*

Sheets, Hilarie. "Puryear in a Park." *The New York Times*, October 2, 2015, p. C24.

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Art in America

MARTIN PURYEAR
Matthew Marks

If Martin Puryear's distinct style of minimalist sculpture has earned him widespread recognition these last several decades, it is partly because his work is so deeply satisfying. Densely allusive and technically pristine, the new sculptures exhibited at two of Matthew Marks's four New York galleries assert the talents of a master still in his prime.

The exhibition's 10 sculptures take as their unifying conceit the rather loaded and obliquely humorous shape of the Phrygian cap: a limp, conical hat that droops forward at its top. (Two small etchings on view were studies of the same shape.) Red Phrygian caps were worn by 18th-century French revolutionaries, who referred to the hat as the "red cap of liberty" because of its association with the headgear worn by emancipated slaves in ancient Rome.

Each sculpture was an interpretation of this basic form. The red-painted *Big Phrygian* (2010-14) is a roughly 5-foot-tall mass of red cedar, whose every surface, crease and bulge is hand-finished to machinelike perfection. *Up and Over* (2014) realizes the shape in a smaller, more bashful work of rust-colored ductile iron; *Cascade* (2013) and *Phrygian Spirit* (2012-14), by contrast, abstractly render the cap's curving contours with thin, spooling wooden strips that are as crisp, fluid and confident as the marks of a Japanese ink brush.

The African-American artist has noted, according to the gallery, that the cap accrued additional significance for him when he came upon a 1794 stipple engraving after he had already begun *Big Phrygian*. The engraving, made by Jean-Louis Darcis in the year France first emancipated its slaves, depicts a black man wearing the red cap, and includes the statement, in French, "I, too, am free." (Slavery was restored by Napoleon eight years later, and then abolished for good in 1848.) But visually and as a symbol, the cap conjures other associations. It appears on the Cuban coat of arms and on the heads of garden gnomes. There is also the unavoidable connotation of a flaccid phallus—perhaps suggesting for Puryear the impotence of "liberty" as we experience it and allow it to be defined. Several pieces, with their slouching postures and smooth surfaces, recall the ambiguously gendered genitalia referenced in Louise Bourgeois's work.

Martin Puryear: *Big Phrygian*, 2010-14, painted red cedar, 58 by 40 by 76 inches; at Matthew Marks.

The son of a self-taught woodworker, Puryear learned to build guitars, boats and furniture as a young man; he sculpts with a craftsman's attention to precision and durability, often spending years on a sculpture. Rather than outsourcing labor to assistants or industrial fabricators, he drafts each work by hand, then cuts, planes and fits its components himself. The sculptures are Brancusi-esque in their ability to evoke so much with such simple means. But as with a well-crafted instrument, the interior spaces that you don't see are equally important. Puryear foregrounds these normally concealed aspects in *Faux Vitrine* (2014), a 6-foot-tall conical structure consisting of shelflike scaffolding in polished steel and painted wood.

In every work on view, the results were as robust on close inspection as they were from afar. *Question* (2010), an impressive sculpture displayed on its own in the smaller Marks gallery, thrills with its lush curves and twisting contours—a complex assembly of dozens of interlocking sections of tulip poplar, pine and ash wood. It is a prime example of what Michael Auping, in his catalogue essay for Puryear's 2007 retrospective at New York's Museum of Modern Art, called one of the artist's "most pointed contributions to sculpture"—namely, "bringing the eye and the hand of the woodworker to Minimalism's precise forms."

—Austin Considine

Considine, Austin. "Martin Puryear." *Art in America,* March 2015, pp. 156–57.

ARTNEWS

REVIEWS: NEW YORK

Martin Puryear, *Big Phrygian*, 2010–14, red cedar and paint, 58" x 40" x 76".

MARTIN PURYEAR

MATTHEW MARKS
NOVEMBER 8 - JANUARY 10

Martin Puryear's first solo show with Matthew Marks was a virtuoso riff on the theme of the Phrygian cap, consisting of ten sculptures and two etchings that take the 18th-century symbol of liberty far beyond its political connotations. True, Puryear did discover, as he was at work on the monumental *Big Phrygian* (2010–14), an image of a black man wearing a similar red cap with the caption "Moi libre aussi" (I too am free), but there was no cause-and-effect relationship involved. The slave is evoked, but Puryear is not mounting the barricades.

What he did do was transform the Phrygian cap into a leitmotif: every piece in the show alluded to it, but did so both seriously and playfully. This was especially the case in the room-size *Untitled* (2014), a huge playground construction made of hardwood saplings. This sculpture transforms the cap into a "thinking cap," one we might enter, scale, and transform into a model of our own mind. It may well represent Puryear's statement on the dangers of freedom: total freedom is also total anarchy.

The same notion, that the cap is an aid to reflection, recurs in the *Faux Vitrine* (2014), a stand-alone piece made of mirror-polished stainless steel. Here Puryear metamorphosed the cap into a tower of mirrors, perhaps to jar us with the idea that merely donning a cap does not really change who we are, that the cap may be a disguise. The piece inevitably evoked a clown's hat, which in turn recalled the fact that the Phrygian cap is the favorite chapeau of Mr. Punch, sublime mischief-maker, libertine, and criminal.

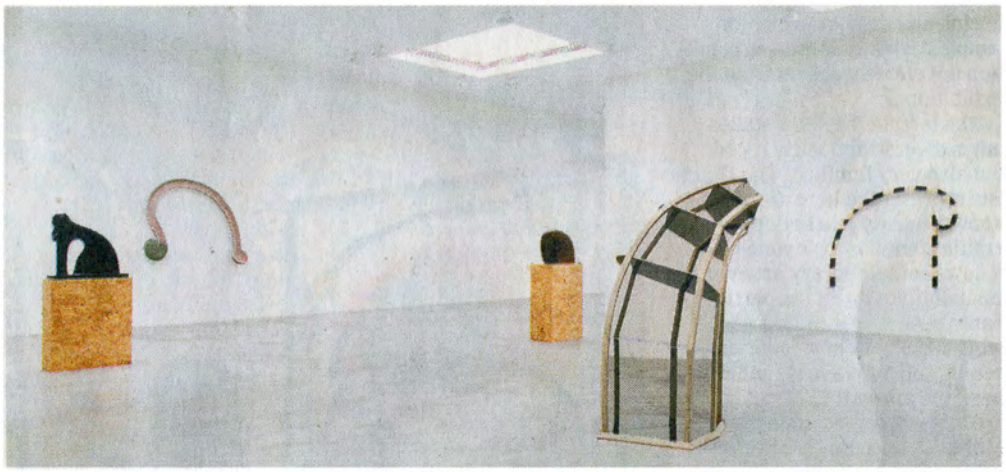
In terms of Puryear's career, these caps are a gust of artistic liberation: light, full of fun, intellectually complex. This artist's hallmark is elegance, but here we found a sensibility akin not to the 18th-century revolutionaries of the Phrygian cap, but to witty, sensual artists like Houdon, Fragonard, and Boucher. Puryear is a purveyor of Rococo mirth joyfully tweaking the nose of sculptural solemnity.

ALFRED MAC ADAM

Mac Adam, Alfred. "Martin Puryear." *ARTnews,* February 2015, p. 78.

The New York Times

Art in Review



MARTIN PURYEAR, MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

Martin Puryear's sculptures at Matthew Marks. From left, "Shackled" (2014), "Shell Game" (2014), "Up and Over" (2014), "Faux Vitrine" (2014) and "Phrygian Plot" (2012).

Martin Puryear

Matthew Marks Gallery
502 and 522 West 22nd Street, Chelsea
Through Jan. 10

Late in long careers, some artists settle for delivering signatures rather than fresh work, but not Martin Puryear. His first solo show was in 1972, and for his latest, which is also his debut at Matthew Marks Gallery, he has come up with an exploratory group of nine sculptures and two large etchings, all ingenious variations on a single historical image, the Phrygian cap, the soft, red conical hat that became an emblem of anti-loyalist resistance during the French Revolution. The extended political implications of the headwear caught Mr. Puryear's attention when he saw an antique print of a black man wearing one of these "liberty caps," a reminder that slavery in France and its colonies was officially, if briefly, abolished by the revolution. (Napoleon later reinstated it).

The show's centerpiece is a nearly five-foot-tall cedar carving, painted a rich vermilion, of the cap's shape, with its distinctive forward-flopped peak: That thick-based tapering curve is the show's motif. It's there on a large scale in a tall, openwork, shelterlike structure of bent and roped-together saplings. It's small and compressed in a squat iron piece that looks like a locked manacle. And it's most complicated in "Faux Vitrine," which resembles a curving display case or bookcase with shelves set at an impractical tilt: They can hold nothing.

To compound a sense of disorientation, the vitrine is two-sided. One side of its skewed grid of shelves is painted in dim pastel shades of Mondrian's utopian red, yellow and blue. On the other, the grid is composed of mirrorlike plates of polished steel: As you circle the piece, you see your own reflection, but fragmented and distorted, the way the vaunted universal concept of freedom is broken up and elusive depending on when, where and by whom it is defined.

No such message is specified; maybe it's not really there. What is there, and has consistently been throughout Mr. Puryear's career, is work that's political, playful, sweet to the eye and deep.

HOLLAND COTTER

Cotter, Holland. "Martin Puryear." *The New York Times*, December 12, 2014, p. C29.

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523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047

THE NEW YORKER

ART

MARTIN PURYEAR

November 15 2014 – January 10 2015

A quietly victorious show from one of the country's most thoughtful and meticulous sculptors. Puryear's new works, made of cast iron or hardwood, all start from a single shape: a soft cone whose apex curves into itself. The leitmotif derives from the Phrygian cap worn by revolutionaries in France and Haiti, subtly inflecting the abstract forms of Puryear's art with themes of Enlightenment virtue and black liberation. The largest sculpture here, made of red-painted cedar, elegantly tapers from its oval base to its drooping nose, an icon of craftsmanship and inspiring dignity. Through Jan. 10.

"Martin Puryear." *The New Yorker,* December 5, 2014.

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523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047

The Boston Globe

A portal that leads to introspection, questions

by Sebastian Smee | December 24, 2013

MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

Martin Puryear's "Confessional" (1996-2000), which was recently acquired by the Museum of Fine Arts and is on display in the museum's Linde Family Wing, has a door. A wooden door. It's a strange door, and perhaps not even a door at all, because it doesn't open. What's more, it has a sort of step in front of it. Perhaps the step is for entering. Or is it (thinking of the work's title) for kneeling?

The door itself is wooden and very plain, but it suggests some kind of power. Is it supposed to evoke the ending of Kafka's parable "Before the Law" in "The Trial"? "No one but you," wrote Kafka, "could gain admittance through this door, since this door was intended for you. I am now going to shut it."

It's always possible, I suppose. But I doubt it, just because there is no "supposed to" about it in Puryear's work. He was born in 1941 and grew up in Washington, D.C. He started out as a painter but later turned to sculpture, and has spent more than three decades inventing a lexicon of superbly crafted, original forms in an array of materials — especially wood. (He was given a retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2007.)

Like Ellsworth Kelly, whose wood sculptures inaugurated the temporary exhibition program in the new

Linde Family Wing two years ago, Puryear comes across as a virtuoso — almost a fetishist — of the properties and textures of different woods.

But unlike Kelly, Puryear — although he is deeply influenced by abstraction — is no minimalist. His forms are ambivalent and enigmatic, but they are charged with poetic meaning, haunted by history.

"Confessional" has a backward-blooming shape that Puryear, who is African-American, has used in other works. For me, it conjures the shape of a human head, particularly as abstracted in certain African sculpture. The door might be the face, the rest the mind's container.

This container may be inaccessible, but it is also transparent. Over a frame of metal rods Puryear has placed overlapping squares of wire mesh, welded together and coated with tar.

"Confessional" is charismatic. It keeps you on your toes. The materials combine lightness and warmth with heaviness and darkness. The sculpture's form suggests delicacy but also a daunting robustness. It evokes architecture (a hermit's chapel?) and a human form (a head).

Nothing about it is settled or clear. Everything is in tension.

Smee, Sebastian. "A portal that leads to introspection, questions." *The Boston Globe*, December 24, 2013.

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Art in America

Puryear's Tall Tales

A traveling survey of Martin Puryear's 30-year-long career as a sculptor highlights a narrative inclination that has become increasingly apparent in his recent work.

BY NANCY PRINCENTHAL

Can the sleek corporate architecture of New York's Museum of Modern Art be enlisted to serve the purposes of a wily fabulist? Does Martin Puryear fit that description? That these questions are rendered rhetorical by a traveling survey of Puryear's career which originated at MOMA is something of a surprise. He is best known for work that preserves a certain Post-Minimalist decorum. But in filling the museum's ostentatiously soaring atrium with sculptures that involve extravagantly tall forms and overlarge wheels, and by highlighting the space's towering walls, one painted a dreamy and decidedly un-MOMA-like shade of blue-gray, Puryear turned the space into something suggestive of John Hejduk, or Italo Calvino, or Lafontaine.

Climbing toward the ceiling in this introductory installation (most of the show was elsewhere in the museum) was *Ladder for Booker T. Washington* (1996), of which Puryear says, in an interview for the exhibition's catalogue, that its "exaggerated diminution of scale" was the impelling idea; the title came afterward, chosen because "the work seemed to connect with the kind of gradual, often illusory notion of upward progress that Washington encouraged blacks to adopt."[1] That is, Puryear chose to celebrate Washington's faith in illusion, which has a conceptually punning link with his own. It was joined in the atrium by the new, 63-foot-tall *Ad Astra* (2006-07), whose two big wagon wheels flank an irregular wooden polygon that serves as a brake and supports a seemingly endless ash sapling, bark intact. Rooted at its base in a kind of pitchfork, the slender trunk sails away, narrowing as it goes, toward the museum's distant skylight; the bridge it creates between boxy wooden obduracy and linear form seems, at its nether end, to bring it close to the hypothetical. Also in the atrium was (among other sculptures) *Some Tales*, which dates back 30 years, and makes clear by the scriptlike character of its slender, horizontal, wall-mounted wooden forms—one of them a crude ladder laid on its side—as well as by its title that a narrative impulse has been present from the beginning, and with it the belief that sculpture, like the pictorial arts, can partake of imaginary space.

Discussing a 1988 sculpture by Richard Wentworth that involves a very tall ladder, theorist Peter Schwenger traces its predecessors back to William Blake's tiny 1793 engraving *I Want! I Want!*, in which a man

Princenthal, Nancy. "Puryear's Tall Tales." *Art in America*, February 2008, pp. 116–21, 165.

A comparison between *Thicket* and *Bower* is an opportunity to consider whether integrity is signaled by roughhewn or painstaking craft.

Thicket, *1990, basswood, cypress, approx. 5½ by 5 by 1½ feet. Seattle Art Museum.*

places a ladder on the edge of the moon. Both, says Schwenger, are fables of desire, the kinds of artworks that "dismantle the house that has allowed its viewers to feel comfortably at home in the world."[2] Puryear's acknowledged sources for the ladder as a symbolic form include vernacular, tribal and religious structures from the cultures of Africa (he spent two years in Sierra Leone with the Peace Corps in the early '60s), Indonesia, Japan and Lapland (he went directly from Africa to Stockholm, where he studied printmaking and, on an extracurricular basis, woodworking); other references range all the way from the Bible to Gina Pane.

But the most specific thing that can be said about Puryear's ladders—another, curved on itself into a teardrop shape, is a component of an untitled work of 2000—is that, like Blake's, they trace a path of longing, at the very least for climbing above the obstinate material presence of conventional sculpture. This yearning goes back, in Puryear's work, to his 1977 installation at Artpark in Lewiston, N.Y., which paired a 54-inch cube of wood with a 100-foot-long pole—in photographs, it seems to almost vanish as it rises. The same impulse animates *Bodark Arc* (1982), an outdoor work whose basic form, a vast strung bow drawn as a path through tall grass, could be called imaginary (you can't really see the bow's arc and its implicit string as a complete form unless you're a bird, though a ceremonial seat and arch provide occasions for contemplating it).

As much as signs of aspiration, tall ladders in Puryear's work become, more surprisingly, symbols of humility, lending viewers the perspective of awed children and in doing so answering the question of how art can be humble without being abject—without asking for pity. This, too, is a recurring theme. Among the early and deservedly celebrated works in the show are *Bask* (1976) and *Self* (1978), both fiendishly hard-to-describe rounded shapes made of carpentered wood painted a glossy brown-black. The first is a low, swelling but deeply reticent floor-bound crescent that suggests the dark side of the moon, or a sliver of a breaching whale seen at night. Of *Self*, a stooped, hulking form nearly 6 feet tall, Puryear has said it is meant to represent a "visual notion of the self, rather than any particular self—the self as a secret entity, as a secret hidden place."[3] Lending oddly literal form to the "wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others" that Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Ramsay identified with the experience of interiority, *Self* takes a stand about privacy as a virtue, and art as a way of extolling it—one of several positions that put Puryear at odds with the art world of the moment.

To some extent, he has always worked in independence of the zeitgeist. But Puryear's self-distancing should not be exaggerated; having completed an MFA at Yale in 1971, he was in the thick of things in the late '70s and '80s, and though he has generally taken up residence at some distance from art's epicenters (in 1990 he moved to rural upstate New York after having lived in Chicago for 12 years), he has never lacked for sympathetic attention or influence on his peers. Moreover he is an artist who returns again and again, at extended intervals, to favored themes, forms and processes; John Elderfield, the show's curator, begins his catalogue essay by quoting the artist on his development, which Puryear calls "linear in the sense that a spiral is linear."[4] A survey is, then, as much an opportunity to review how his work's meaning has shifted in relationship to new contexts as to plot the development of his career.

As Robert Storr has pointed out, Puryear came of age in the era of Minimalism and reached his stride in the decade of appropriation, both of which favored the techniques of mass production.[5] In relationship to the formal austerities of much abstraction immediately preceding his, Puryear's work seemed provocatively idiosyncratic in its fabrication and expansive in its range of references. Now, the early sculptures seem taciturn, even a little mute; some, like the wonderful little *Believer* (1977-82), a squat poplar vessel plugged at the top with a bright red tongue of painted pine, seem almost literal ciphers of resistance to expression.

There is also the lingering question of skilled craft, which (like "quality") came under suspicion by the end of the '80s. "Of late," Storr wrote in 1991, "the concept of 'mastery' has fallen into almost total

Bower, *1980, Sitka spruce, pine, approx. 5⅛ by 7¾ by 2¼ feet. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.*

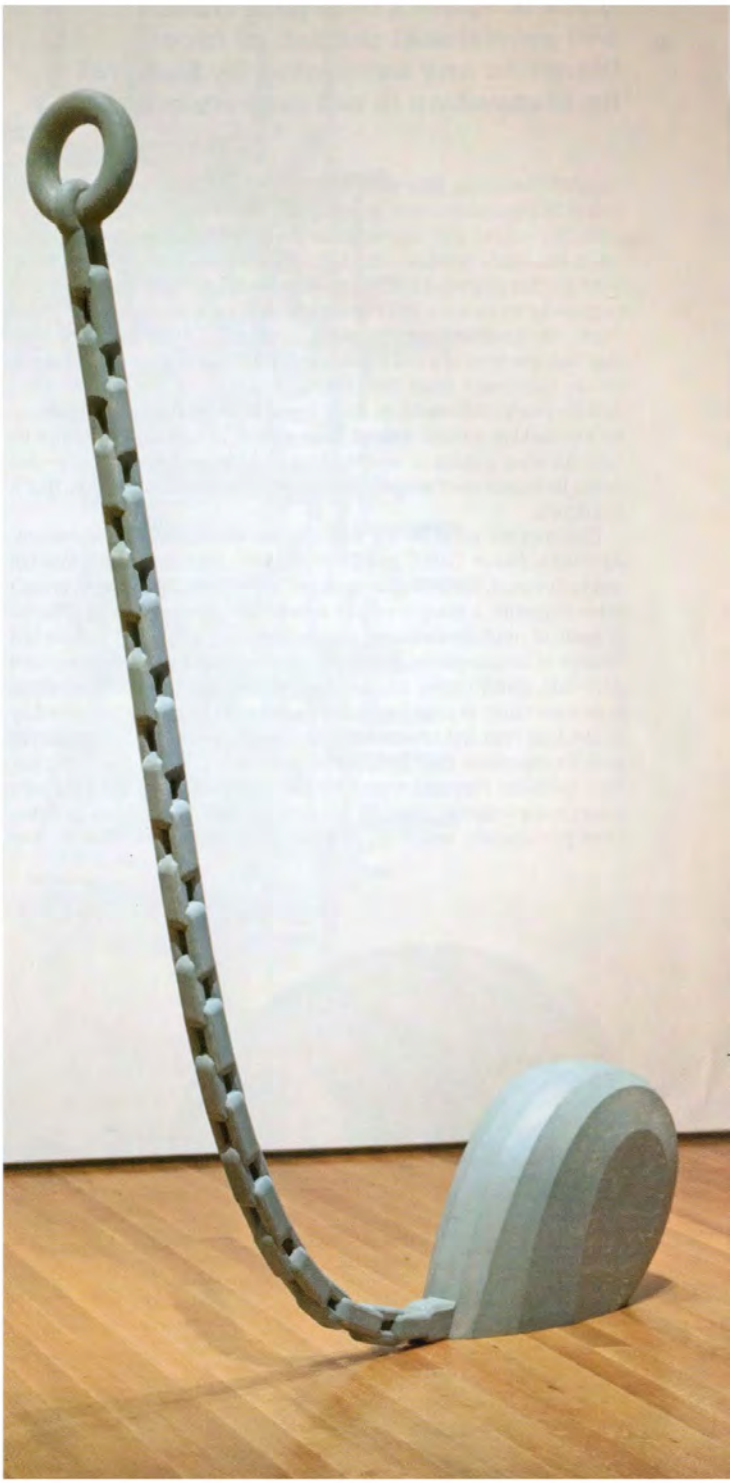
Princenthal, Nancy. "Puryear's Tall Tales." *Art in America*, February 2008, pp. 116–21, 165.

This spread, views of Martin Puryear's exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Above (left to right), Ladder for Booker T. Washington, *1996, and* Desire, *1981. Opposite,* Ad Astra *(foreground), 2006-07, and* Greed's Trophy *(on wall), 1984.*

All photos this article, unless otherwise noted, Richard Barnes.

Princenthal, Nancy. "Puryear's Tall Tales." *Art in America*, February 2008, pp. 116–21, 165.

Untitled, 2000, maple sapling, Douglas fir plywood, pine and hickory, approx. 8½ by 3 by 8¼ feet. Collection Marguerite and Robert Hoffman.



Le Prix. *2005, painted yellow pine, Alaskan yellow cedar, approx. 10¼ feet high. Collection Gretchen and John Berggruen, San Francisco.*

Princenthal, Nancy. "Puryear's Tall Tales." *Art in America*, February 2008, pp. 116–21, 165.

C.F.A.O. speaks of urgent transit and provisional shelter, of faces blanched and excavated by fear. Yet its disposition is not entirely grim.

disrepute, becoming little more than an epithet for the ostentatious display of facility, and/or a code-word for 'patriarchal' privilege."[6] In Puryear's work, the issue of craft was linked at the outset to the question of utility (as in handmade wooden tools, furniture and dwellings) and enlisted in a debate that promoted function as a somehow inherently good, unselfish purpose for art to serve. But Puryear's work, even when built in the public realm, has never been conventionally functional. The early constructions that took the form of a cedar lodge and, particularly, a yurt are closer to Louise Bourgeois's cages than Krzysztof Wodiczko's homeless shelters. And Puryear's craftsmanship, while based in longstanding inclination—he was making acoustic guitars from scratch in college, experience he built on when looking at woodworking in Africa and Scandinavia—has never, he insists, merited the praise, or even some of the attention, that it has drawn.

That does not mean he has neglected the question of craft's meaning. At MOMA, *Bower* (1980) and *Thicket* (1990), both around 5½ feet tall and both vaguely hedgehoglike in shape, were placed near enough to each other to provide a sharp comparison between raw woodworking (*Thicket* is made of rough-hewn beams doweled together willy-nilly) and cooked (*Bower* is an exceptionally elegant construction of slender spruce and pine slats, gently curved into an open, symmetrical basket). The pairing is an opportunity to consider whether integrity in technique is signaled by painstaking craft and smooth finish, or seemingly untutored workmanship with its expressive yield in apparent spontaneity. These questions, too, have animated Puryear's work from the beginning. Now, when his company among sculptors attentive to handcraft and its simulacra includes, most prominently, artists as different as Robert Gober, Charles Ray,

Untitled, 2005, white pine, wire and rattan, 5¼ by 6 by 4½ feet. Collection John and Martha Gabbert.

Richard Deacon (a link made by Peter Schjeldahl in the *New Yorker*) and, as a progenitor, H.C. Westermann, such concerns stake out a territory that is defined in part by its opposition to another occupied by the heirs of Richard Tuttle and Franz West (for an abundance of examples, see the inaugural exhibition of determinedly funky assemblages at the New Museum in New York). On Puryear's side is a deep commitment to process and form, on the other an insistence on the unskilled and materially negligible; noting the boundary between them is, still, a way of talking about mastery and value.

Confessional, *1996-2000, wire mesh, tar and wood, approx. 6½ by 8 by 3¾ feet. Cartin Collection, Hartford.*

If the atrium installation established the premise that Puryear has always had an inclination to tell stories (though never in the first person), it is amply substantiated in the recent work shown. Having had a hard time, he says,[7] giving up representation as a student artist (he started out as a painter), he has now given freer rein to an impulse already long evident in titles rife with historical reference and wordplay and in variably overt visual references to objects and animals. One body of recurrent imagery includes both boat forms and waterfowl, and is reprised in an untitled work of 1997-2001 that greeted viewers entering the survey's main galleries at MOMA. Looking something like a brontosaurus skeleton, but also a colossal swan, this sculpture is distinguished by a towering, gracefully curving and headless neck from which dangles a rope terminating in a little wooden ball that makes the nearly 12-foot-high sculpture seem oddly toylike.

This work, a playful variation on *Lever #3* (1989), a swan-necked pine sculpture painted a reticent gray, in turn anticipates *Le Prix* (2005), which gives the form a comic turn. Here the long curved neck is fashioned from a chain of carved wooden links, terminating in a ring that hangs in midair; it should anchor the chain, but is instead supported by it.

continued on page 165

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C.F.A.O., 2006-07, found wheelbarrow, painted and unpainted pine, approx. 8¼ by 6½ by 5 feet. Photo Richard P. Goodbody.

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Puryear

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Le Prix's playfully showy illusionism evokes magicians' acts as much as it does the kinds of optical tricks more commonly associated with painting. But the sympathy for animals also evident in this sculpture ("a zoo can be as stimulating as an art museum," Puryear once said[8]) pulls him in other directions, too, toward the art of pantheistic cultures (celebrations of animals are more common in tribal and pre-Christian objects than in the Western tradition) and the modern masters who drew from the same sources (Brancusi, Noguchi). Evident from the beginning, these varied influences have recently been embraced more openly in Puryear's work.

Similarly, while *Confessional* (1996-2000), a big (6½-foot-high) head-shaped cage made of tarred metal mesh, has a wooden door whose mismatched knobs, holes and handle only loosely suggest an oddly assorted face, its successor, an untitled work of 2005, is more overtly figurative. Not that it is unambiguous: one reading of this recent work's wooden features suggests panic-skewed eyes flanking a mouth opened in a Munch-worthy scream; in another reading, the central feature is not a mouth but a displaced though credibly shaped ear. The back of the head is here suggested by an open basket of rattan and wire, airy as a geodesic dome; its lucidity makes the heavy planked face seem the more impenetrable.

The invocation of the penitent practices of the Catholic Church, in *Confessional* if not its progeny, put Puryear in the vicinity of ecclesiastic architecture, a place he revisits in a very different mood in *A Distant Place* (2005). The most fairy talelike structure of all the recent work shown, it features a little domed chapel rooted in a tumorous maple burl that sits on a cruciform platform; rising from the chapel's roof is a steeple of absurdly disproportionate height (it rises to 15 feet); though made of wood, it takes the twisted, candy-cane form of a narwhal tusk. Puryear's connection to the Arctic (whence the narwhal) is real and longstanding. (His choice of studying in Stockholm reflected an interest in the far north that has also led him to travel elsewhere in Scandinavia and deep in the Alaskan wilderness.) But the landscape of *A Distant Place* could be better described as mythical, the same allegorical territory explored by the never-ending ladders of the sculptures in the atrium.

If we follow its title's indication, *Deadeye* (2002) can be seen as a single-featured, cyclopean face, its one small oculus the hole in a doughnut of neatly joined and finished unpainted pine. A little hollow neck sticking out from one side, which some visitors lined up to peer into, provoked contemplation of the mysteries of the torus and its endlessly shifting potential configurations of inside and out. While *Deadeye* is not as baleful as its name suggests, *Malediction* (2006-07) makes good on its title's promise, taking Puryear's recent involvement with faces, masks in particular, in a very different direction. This teardrop-shaped sculpture, constructed with paper-thin wood (it brings to mind the body of a guitar) and hung on the wall, has squinty little eyes made of slender dowels and a squared rod extending from its pointed chin like a rudder, or tongue, or badly wrenched (lynched?) neck. Thin wooden walls that descend from the eyes could be the trails of tears.

A Distant Place, *2005, basswood, yellow cedar, white pine and maple burl, 15 feet high.*

Nowhere is Puryear's involvement with African masks more explicit than in *C.F.A.O.* (2006-07), the most surprising (and remarked upon) work in the survey. Balanced precariously on an old wooden wheelbarrow painted a fading blue is a dense mass of wooden scaffolding. (The closest precedents are the scaffolds that Japanese artist Tadashi Kawamata has erected on buildings worldwide, in gestures at once protective and aggressive.) Pressed into one side of the scaffolding is a tall, narrow, deeply stylized face. Ghostly white, with pinhole eyes, a long sharp nose and a fishhook-shaped incision above its brows, this face is a greatly enlarged variation on a 19th-century Fang mask from Gabon, in West Africa (the original is 30 inches high; Puryear's version is roughly 6 feet tall). Wall text connects a constellation of dots: the French West-Africa trading company of the title—*C.F.A.O.* stands for Compagnie Française de l'Afrique-Occidentale—sailed between Marseilles and various points on the African coast, including some in Sierra Leone, Puryear's Peace Corps posting (his town had an old C.F.A.O. warehouse); the old wheelbarrow was found while he was in residence at Alexander Calder's former studio in France.

But absent the background information, the sculpture still tells a powerful and readily understood story. Clearly at issue are colonial trade and its legacy in the contemporary world, the art market not excluded. More generally, *C.F.A.O.* speaks of urgent, improvised transit and provisional shelter, of faces blanched and excavated by fear. Wheelbarrows carrying all the worldly possessions of war refugees, and used as transportation of least expense and last resort for the sick and maimed, also come to mind. And despite all that, the disposition of the whole is not predominantly grim. The scaffolding around the mask looks a little like raffia, animating a link to the ceremonial uses that the original would have served. Along with the wheelbarrow, the bleached face suggests a spectral but irrepressible kind of endurance. Like *Ad Astra*, the only work in the show that is more recent, *C.F.A.O.* is grounded in immovable fact, but points to someplace infinitely less secure. □

1. Quoted in Richard Powell, "A Conversation with Martin Puryear," *Martin Puryear*, New York, Museum of Modern Art, 2007, p. 99.
2. Peter Schwenger, *The Tears of Things: Melancholy and Physical Objects*, Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press, 2006, p. 53.
3. Hugh Davies and Helaine Posner, "Conversations with Martin Puryear," *Martin Puryear*, University Gallery, University of Massachusetts at Amherst, 1984, p. 23.
4. In John Elderfield, "Martin Puryear: Ideas of Otherness," *Martin Puryear*, Museum of Modern Art, p. 13.
5. Robert Storr, "Martin Puryear: The Hand's Proportion," *Martin Puryear*, New York, Thames and Hudson, and Chicago, Art Institute of Chicago, 1991, p. 130.
6. Ibid., p. 133.
7. In college, Puryear says, "I had to really fight my way . . . out of my habits of a very meticulous realism." Quoted in Jennifer Field, "Chronology," *Martin Puryear*, Museum of Modern Art, p. 168.
8. In Nancy Princenthal, "Intuition's Disciplinarian," *A.i.A.*, January 1990, p. 134.

"Martin Puryear," organized by John Elderfield, opened at the Museum of Modern Art in New York [Nov. 4, 2007-Jan. 14, 2008]. It is currently at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth [Feb. 24-May 18] and travels to the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. [June 22-Sept. 28], and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art [Nov. 28, 2008-Jan. 25, 2009]. The exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue with essays by Elderfield, Michael Auping and Elizabeth Reede, along with an interview and chronology.

Princenthal, Nancy. "Puryear's Tall Tales." *Art in America*, February 2008, pp. 116–21, 165.

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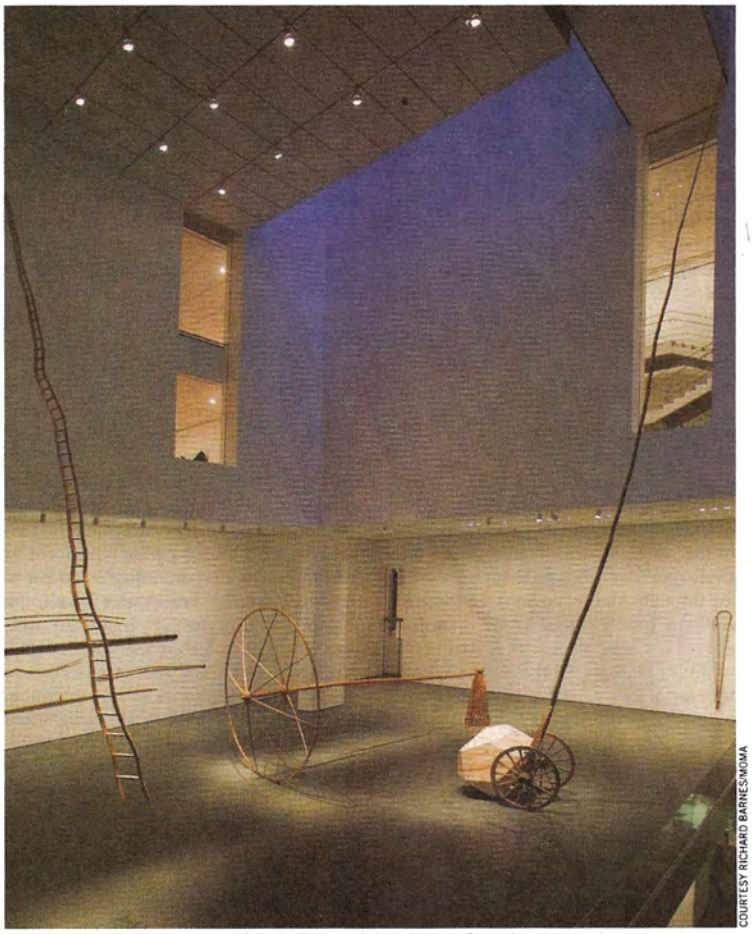
THE Nation.

Books & the Arts.

Tilted Ash

by ARTHUR C. DANTO



COURTESY RICHARD BARNES/MOMA

Installation view of MoMA's Donald B. and Catherine C. Marron Atrium with Martin Puryear's sculptures

When the new MoMA building opened in 2004, one of its many peculiar features was a sixty-foot-tall atrium space rising from its second floor. It was thought of as an "indoor sculpture garden," but it really served two functions: to be a piazza where those who survived the ticket lines could gather and gab, and to be a display space for some of MoMA's largest pieces, including Barnett Newman's *Broken Obelisk* and, against its east wall, one of Monet's *Water Lilies* paintings. The space was designed so that visitors could look down on these works at sharper and sharper angles from each of the five gallery levels and, vertiginously, from an opening in the floor of the sixth level—a grand view to a space disposed only to demoralize whatever art was placed there.

At the new building's opening, the atrium's height—a mere eight inches lower than the Sistine Chapel—famously reduced Monet's canvas to a shriveled painted rag. Since then, the atrium has given temporary residence to works by various artists that, while strong enough to hold the wall in most other spaces, are here somehow dwarfed by the weight of all that emptiness above them. One cannot but recall the dread with which the thought of infinite spaces filled Blaise Pascal. Quite the most exciting feature of the current MoMA retrospective exhibition of American sculptor Martin Puryear (on view through January 14) is the way he has used the unprecedented opportunity of having the entire atrium to himself to infuse bare height with meaningfulness and to turn this shaft of hostile emptiness into something aesthetically breathtaking.

The bulk of the show consists of about fifty works, from the mid-1970s to the present, artfully distributed to give each piece the room it needs. The main components of the atrium installation are built to a scale substantially larger than Puryear's typical pieces and in a way that does not diminish but rather glorifies their virtues—craft, beauty, intelligence, invention, wit, depth, meaning and a spirit of lightness. Much of what Puryear made before the '70s was destroyed in a studio fire, and everything he has made since fuses an unmistakably modernist vision with anthropological references to what one might call the aesthetics of everyday life in black Africa. Puryear, an African-American, spent time in the Peace Corps in Sierra Leone in the '60s. His materials, in the works on the sixth floor and in the atrium, are characteristically wood and fiber; but more than that, he makes a sophisticated use of what Claude Lévi-Strauss calls bricolage ("improvisation") in his masterpiece, *La Pensée sauvage*. Like Robinson Crusoe, Puryear appropriates whatever objects come to hand.

Danto, Arthur C. "Tilted Ash." *The Nation,* December 31, 2007, pp. 27–30.

The whole second floor of MoMA, including the atrium, was planned for and built in a misled effort to anticipate the future history of modern art, which MoMA's curators believed was bent on the creation of ever larger works. That view was widely shared, though it has not exactly been borne out in the radical pluralism of twenty-first-century art, which comes in all sizes, including no size at all. It was also the justification for converting a complex of vacated factory buildings in North Adams, Massachusetts, into the huge gallery spaces of MASS MoCA, which had the benign consequence of turning a decaying mill town into the home of "America's largest contemporary art center" (as the museum's website puts it) in 1999. It had been the vision of curator Thomas Krens too, and it earned him the directorship of the Guggenheim Foundation in New York, which he has held since 1988. Krens found even greater success with essentially the same vision in Bilbao, where, with help from architect Frank Gehry, he transformed the drab industrial Basque city into a site of global aesthetic pilgrimage. Guggenheim Bilbao came equipped with an interior as capacious as a hangar and fulfilled its destiny with an exhibition of Richard Serra's *Torqued Ellipses* in 2005—"Surely one of the most wonderful exhibitions of [Serra's] work," according to MoMA curator Kynaston McShine. So electrifying was Krens's formula that I once heard a poignant lecture by an Ecuadorean curator asking whether a "Bilbao effect" was possible for Quito. The difference between the Guggenheim Bilbao and New York's Museum of Modern Art is not just the difference between New York and Bilbao, however. It is that Bilbao has no collection to speak of, whereas MoMA's collection has been traditionally committed to a philosophy of art history that presupposes an evolving canon, and hence an obligation that its architecture be able to hold the gigantesque works that the unfolding spirit of modernism was believed to promise.

In terms of MoMA's collection, this more or less meant Richard Serra. The augmented galleries of the second floor seemed to have been created just for him. During his recent retrospective at the museum, three of his giant, multi-ton sculptures were raised to the second floor, which had been massively reinforced to keep them from crashing through. And yet no one asked what the aesthetic payoff was of lifting them from ground level—which seems, in Aristotelian terms, to be their natural entelechy—and transporting them one story up, in defiance of gravity, to the second-floor spaces surrounding the atrium. (They weren't put in the atrium. Even Serra's *Band* and *Sequence* would have been stunted by the immensity of the space, though in fairness, there are works of his that might have risen to the occasion.)

The result of the second-floor installation was a feeling of claustrophobia. "The space has no side entrances or exits," Serra said in an interview. "If you want to experience the entire installation you have to walk the length of the space and back, but there is no prescribed way of seeing those pieces." They all but touched the ceiling. Here is how Serra conceived the installation:

> I decided to work out a coherent installation that would be representative of the body of work I'd done in the past seven or eight years. To bring that work together in one place would enable anyone going there to understand its evolution. Without knowing anything about sculpture you understand that the single and double ellipse, the spirals and the piece made up of torus and sphere sections share a language and a syntax. You become the reader of that language in your bodily movement. You can go anywhere you want, but... you are within the volume not only of the encapsulating architecture but of the field that unfolds as sculpture. The entire field becomes one of sculpture as you're spun into and out of the different pieces.

Critics celebrated the shift from the visual to the bodily in experiencing Serra's art, but what in fact was dramatic was the way he incorporated the compressed space of those galleries into his work, making space and sculpture a seamless totality. Now Puryear has achieved the same effect in the atrium, joining the architecture of the room with the objects within it.

There are three main pieces in Puryear's installation, two of which particularly account for its success. One of them, nobly titled *Ad Astra* (2006) and made for this exhibition, consists of a sixty-three-foot-long sapling held in a base on caisson wheels. Exceeding the atrium's height, the sapling is tilted, augmenting the impression that the ceiling is too low to hold it. The other vertical piece is *Ladder for Booker T. Washington* (1996), a thirty-five-foot ladder hung high against the west wall, so that its bottom rung is about ten feet above the floor. In contrast with Serra's installation, meant to force upon the viewer a heightened bodily consciousness, here the body—stationary, gazing upward—is only involved in terms of scale. When I saw the show, the upper part of the atrium was in shadow, which engulfed the top parts of the ladder and the sapling, making it difficult to determine, by eyesight alone, whether the latter's length has been added to or not. (It has.)

Ladder for Booker T. Washington, on loan from the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, is one of Puryear's iconic pieces. The bottom rung is about two feet wide, while the top is, at most, a few inches wide. There are about a hundred rungs in all, set at roughly graduated intervals and designed to create the illusion of a vanishing point at the top. There is something organic about the work, an effect enhanced by the fact that the ladder's uprights are wavy lengths of a single split ash trunk. It wiggles upward, like a runged serpent, against the wall. There is also something vaguely ghostly about the ladder as a whole, which seems to have been bleached or given a coat of whitish paint. Ladders are, of course, natural metaphors for human or spiritual ascent—or in the case of Booker T. Washington, of the ascent of African-Americans in society—step by step up narrower and narrower rungs. Puryear's piece is like an abstract biography of Washington—whose journey, as described in his actual biography, grew more and more difficult—made vivid by the imagined ordeal of placing a foot on rungs that grow ever tinier and more precarious as one approaches the top. Suspended as it is from high on the wall, the ladder suggests how difficult it would be to put a foot on even the lowest rung.

Ad Astra plays a similar game; in its case, the irony is located in its heroic Latin title. The two pieces together express desire and hope. David Levi Strauss, a *Brooklyn Rail* editor, suggested in conversation with Puryear that the caisson gives *Ad Astra* a military aura, indicating that its role is to carry artillery shells. But for me, it brought to mind a phrase from a book by the physicist Erwin Schrödinger, *What Is Life?*—a question he answers by saying, somewhat cryptically, that life is an aperiodic crystal. In fact, the base has just that form—its facets have different shapes, though they are composed of beautifully joined lengths of wood, screwed together with the authority of a master carpenter. That made it difficult for me to think of *Ad Astra* as associated with field artillery. Its wheels, in any case, are like those from the wagons of the Franco-Prussian War. But Puryear's works do not dictate meaning; his titles, rarely as specific as *Ladder*, merely prompt the imagination. For me, *Ad Astra* is not so much a military installation as either a crude movable monument to life, wheeled

Danto, Arthur C. "Tilted Ash." *The Nation,* December 31, 2007, pp. 27–30.

into ceremonies by a tribe that practices phallus worship, or a push toy for a baby giant.

It is more than monumental—it is a monument. It reaches for the stars, expresses desire and—formalistically speaking—collaborates with *Ladder* to measure the height of the atrium, subduing the architectural oppressiveness of space upon art. The idea of a movable monument is also supported by a marvelous piece in the main exhibition called *C.F.A.O.* (2006–7), which consists of a cast of a giant African mask placed in an arbor fashioned from kindling perched, perilously, in or on an old-fashioned wooden wheelbarrow. *C.F.A.O.*, which takes its name from the initials of a French trading company in Africa (Compagnie Française de l'Afrique Occidentale), could be a protest against the appropriation of cultural properties that also has the last laugh. At least moving what looks like an immense African mask on a primitive French wheelbarrow strikes me as pretty funny.

The title of the remaining large atrium sculpture is *Desire* (1981), licensing the thought that the three pieces are, in the aggregate, a tribute to yearning. A gift from Count Panza di Biumo, whose collection of Minimalist art is widely acknowledged as unparalleled, *Desire* was installed until recently in an eighteenth-century villa in the Italian province of Varese. Measuring thirty-two feet across, it consists of a single wheel of much larger circumference than those in *Ad Astra*, joined to an inverted conical basketlike object with a long horizontal pole. Weaving and basketry are signature Puryear features, perhaps inspired by the tools used by the people Puryear lived with in Sierra Leone—nets, cages, coops and traps. (On the back wall of the atrium hangs a work from the mid-'70s, when Puryear's art took on the look of African tools and utensils, called *Some Tales* [1975–78]: yellow pine, ash and hickory carved into a long saw blade and what look like curvy sticks.) *Desire* has the appearance of one of those primitive grinding devices in which an ox or a horse is tied to a pole and walks in a circle around a rotating upright. What the object of desire might be is not obvious. Perhaps the wheel makes it easier for a person to apply energy to the device—not as easy as an ox would make it! But that is just an uninspired guess. The word "desire," like the titles *Ad Astra* and *Ladder for Booker T. Washington*, slows the viewer down, causing us to play with plausible theories of any given work.

The allusions throughout this great show are too numerous, too arch, too knowing and too smart for me to spoil the fun. Once in a while, an artist appears whose work has high meaning and great craft but, most important, embodies what Kant, in the dense, sparse pages in which he advances his theory of art, called Spirit. "We say of certain products of which we expect that they should at least in part appear as beautiful art, they are without spirit, though we find nothing to blame in them on the score of taste," Kant wrote. I'd like to revive the term for critical discourse. Not a single piece here is without spirit, which is in part what makes this exhibition almost uniquely exhilarating. ■

Danto, Arthur C. "Tilted Ash." *The Nation,* December 31, 2007, pp. 27–30.

THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

ART NOVEMBER 4TH, 2007

INCONVERSATION

Martin Puryear with David Levi Strauss

In the midst of preparing for his retrospective at MoMA, Martin Puryear took time out to talk about his life and work with the Rail's Consulting Editor, David Levi Strauss. They are neighbors in the Hudson River Valley, and the conversation took place at Strauss's home near High Falls, not far from Puryear's house and studio. The exhibition is organized for MoMA by John Elderfield, and it will be on view there from November 4, 2007 to January 14, 2008, and then travel to the Modern Art Museum of Forth Worth, Texas (February 24–May 18, 2008); the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (June 22–September 28, 2008); and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (November 1, 2008–January 25, 2009).

David Levi Strauss (Rail): When I came to see you at the museum on Friday, to view all the works being installed, including the new piece, "Ad Astra," which you made especially for the atrium, it was quite a scene, with museum visitors gathered all around the edges watching you and your assistants install the pieces. That familiar space was entirely transformed.

Martin Puryear: Well, the new piece has a very long sapling attached, like an attenuated shaft for the wagon, stretching upward "to the stars." There are two Latin phrases the title derives from: *Ad astra per ardua*, meaning "to the stars through difficulty," and *Ad astra per aspera*, which translates as "to the stars through rough things or dangers."

Rail: *Ad astra per aspera* is the motto of Kansas, where I grew up, and I've always thought it fitting. Is that long shaft really one piece or is it joined?

Puryear: The main section is one piece, 48 feet in length, with an additional piece spliced on that extends it another 15 feet, so it stretches all the way up and a few inches beyond the atrium's ceiling, which is 60 feet high, to the sixth floor. It's slightly angled, so it's a bit longer than the ceiling is high. As you noticed, it extends up to the edge of the elevated walkway on the sixth floor level.

Rail: So in the atrium are arranged the giant wheel of "Desire," connected by a long wooden shaft or axle to a conical pylon made of wood lattice, with "Ad Astra," and the "Ladder for Booker T. Washington," suspended high in the air. On the wall is "Some Tales," the earliest piece in the show, from 1975-78, and "Greed's Trophy," which MoMA owns. And then the bulk of the show will be installed on the sixth floor, with works spanning the last thirty years?

Puryear: A little over 30 years, yes, because "Some Tales," was begun in 1975, and I managed to just finish "Ad Astra" a

few days before it had to be picked up from the studio, which was what I wanted: to have something that was absolutely new, and not working in a way that has a lot of control and predictability. What was interesting for me was to see how these sculptures, which span over 32 years from the earliest to the most recent, manage to feel like they're all members of the same family.

Rail: Looking at "Ad Astra," I was trying to remember whether you've ever done anything with that much vertical reach, especially in an indoor piece.

Puryear: It actually connects all the way back to "Box and Pole," a piece I did for Artpark in 1977, consisting of a Canadian hemlock box and one very long straight pole out of Southern yellow pine, close to 100 feet high. But you're right. That was an outdoor commission.

Rail: From what I could tell, the arrangement of the works on the sixth floor will allow for ample space between them—there appeared to be a lot of half-walls separating them.

Puryear: Well, that's a complicated and interesting issue because, as we were laying out the show, we understood that each work needed its independence as an object and generous space around it. Also, the traffic at MoMA is not something you take lightly. There are 42 works in the sixth floor galleries, but we worked hard not to make the place seem crowded. The planning for this exhibition far exceeded anything I've been involved in before.

Rail: I think this will be the first time that a group of works has been able to stand up to the massive volume of that atrium. The combination of "Desire," "Ladder for Booker T. Washington," "Some Tales," "Greed's Trophy," and the new piece "Ad Astra" is visually and conceptually exciting. However, I wasn't sure what I thought about the "Ladder" being suspended so high in the air, after becoming used to seeing it hovering just off the ground in Fort Worth.

Puryear: When I built it I wasn't really thinking of an ideal way to show it. But once it was finished I realized it was probably something that should exist in a kind of idealized space that does not invite any kind of accessibility, approachability, or usability, whether real or imagined. It's just an image or a presence in a space. The whole notion of making such a forced perspective, an artificially attenuated illusion, has always interested me. Actually, before I built that piece, I was approached about a project in Japan for which I made a proposal. It was for an enormous meeting hall, the Tokyo International Forum, designed by Rafael Viñoly. What I had proposed was a 250-foot ladder, where the illusion of forced perspective could be indistinguishable from the actual diminution over such a long distance. You wouldn't know whether the tip of the ladder was really as far away from you as it seemed in a space that vast.

Rail: You would have started very wide at the bottom?

Puryear: Yes, and gone up diagonally through the building. I have a sketch at home of the entire thing drawn to scale. It's on a long scroll [Laughter]. Anyway, it was never realized. So that's when I began to think of it on a more modest scale.

Rail: The original idea was still for a split sapling?

Puryear: It would have been that shape, but in that larger dimension and scale it would have to have been constructed differently, and probably been hollow. It would have had to be an artificially contorted construction. The ladder I ended up making was in fact a naturally grown and wavy sapling, a young ash tree.

Rail: Let's talk a little about your early years. You moved around quite a lot over the last 30 years. In 1973, you established a studio in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, and had a very productive four years there. You must have been one of the few artists who lived and worked in Williamsburg at that time!

Puryear: Well, of course when I came to New York I began looking for workspace in Soho, because that's where everything was happening, and the lofts I visited there would've been perfect for me, except that by the time I arrived they were completely out of reach financially. I didn't have a steady job at the time, so like a lot of artists in those days I was doing anything I could to survive. I was doing some building and construction work, with my brother at times or by myself, in the city. I worked as a set carpenter in a photo studio for a while. I did a couple of renovation jobs. I was doing all sorts of freelance work and putting ads in the *Village Voice* to get work. Then I got an offer for a teaching position at the University of Maryland, College Park, which is right outside of Washington, D.C., where I grew up. I went down and interviewed and figured this would at least give me a reliable, steady way to survive and keep my studio rent paid in New York. So I took the job even though it involved a four-hour commute. And I did that for almost four years. Commuting was not fun, but I look back on my time in Williamsburg with a lot of fond memories. I had as much contact with the art life in Manhattan as I wanted, but I also had what felt like a quiet place to live and develop my work.

Rail: Did you like teaching then?

Puryear: I've always liked teaching. I can't say that I like what often comes with it, all the committee work, and some of the campus politics drove me absolutely crazy. But I did like working with students, especially those who were motivated. What you can share is your own passion, and if they pick up on it, it can be rewarding. But it was not a way to get a lot of work done. I worked like mad. I was there three days a week, and then I would have a four-day weekend. One day would invariably be taken up making the transition from the work week to being in the studio, and vice versa. So I essentially had a three-day weekend working in the studio, which was great as far as it went, but it didn't go far enough in terms of really being able to be productive.

Rail: In this show, "Bask," "Circumbent," and "Some Tales" are all from that period. So they must have survived the fire that destroyed most of your early work on February 1, 1977.

Puryear: Everything else that was in my place, which was on Berry Street, not far from the Marcy Avenue stop on the J or M train, got destroyed in the fire. It was a second floor loft with a freight elevator—a wonderful space, with a view of Manhattan, for very little money. At that time it was a fraction of what I would have to pay in Manhattan for a comparable space. I could even park my truck in a locked courtyard with a roll-down gate. But if you left your car outside with your hood unlocked, in half an hour your battery would be gone, invariably. And if you left it for much longer, other parts would disappear. There were just a lot of people struggling. It was an intense but also a very rich time.

Rail: So the whole building was destroyed?

Puryear: Actually, four floors were destroyed, which were connected to an enormous complex of loft buildings on two separate blocks, which still remain. It was a very cold winter that year, so they had cut off the water to our sprinkler system because the pipes had frozen. And that's why the fire went as fast as it did. Luckily, I had an adjoining space off to one side that I had set up as sort of a gallery for myself, in which I kept "Some Tales," "Circumbent," "Bask" and a few other pieces. It was not part of the main space and it was closed off. So those few pieces were recovered nearly intact from the fire, but everything else, including all my personal possessions, books, and tools, everything I'd done on paper to that point, and most of my slides and photographs of work were gone.

Rail: This was a real turning point. As it turns out, it was also the point of departure for this whole retrospective . . . .

Puryear: That's true. It's the genesis of the whole growth of my work from that point on. And I did feel in some strange way that suddenly I had no past, but since my past was obliterated, I felt liberated to move forward into a new future.

Rail: In 1978 you moved to Chicago and spent the next 12 years there. That was when you really became known internationally.

Puryear: After trying for awhile to gain some visibility in New York, it just wasn't happening, because I didn't have the ability to do what we call today "networking," productively. I mean, I certainly enjoyed peoples' company, and I had a lot of friends, but I didn't seem able to translate that into a contact that would get me someplace in terms of serious gallery exposure. It just wasn't something that I was good at. I think Chicago at the time was a more open place. I had one person who told me when I arrived in Chicago, "You're going exactly the opposite direction from most people, who leave Chicago for New York. We really appreciate that you're here." Not that I was well-known when I left New York, but when I got to Chicago some people had heard of me and I felt very welcomed.

Rail: It's also nice to be missed. When you left Chicago in 1990 and moved here to Ulster County, the art critic for the *Chicago Tribune* wrote, "We lost not only a gifted sculptor, but also the first Chicago artist who had conquered the rest of the world since the photographer Harry Callahan did it in the 1960s." And when your retrospective opened at the Hirshhorn Museum in 1992, Washington, D.C. treated you like a returning hometown hero. This is Paul Richard in the *Washington Post*: "Not since the 1960s, and the bursting into fame of Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland and the painters of the Color School has a modernist from Washington earned such well-deserved acclaim."

Puryear: I think maybe the fact that I was born there, educated there, and came back and could be claimed as a genuine Washingtonian, born and bred, may have had something to do with it. And with Chicago, I was there long enough—twelve years—to have a tremendous number of friendships and contacts. I did a lot of work there, had a number of shows, and got my first really important gallery connection which I still have to this day, with Donald Young Gallery (originally Young-Hoffman).

Rail: On March 30, 1991, your daughter Sascha was born, and this was another turning point.

Puryear: It sure was! [*Laughs*] As you well know . . . from one dad to another. It's been by equal measure a challenge and an amazing liberation from the kind of self-absorption that I was able to indulge in, even after I got married. Once I became a father, being married was still profoundly life-changing, but not nearly as much of a turning point as becoming a father.

Rail: We moved to Ulster County from San Francisco in 1993, three years after you got here, and our daughters, Sascha and Maya, are less than two years apart in age. I remember when I first met you, you were talking about how you needed to step back from doing so many big public commissions so you could spend more time in the studio, and it seemed like that was a struggle for a while.

Puryear: I was getting commissions that it felt crazy not to accept. But it might have been wiser to just stay in the studio. I don't do commissions that efficiently, because for every project I tend to take on extensive research and development. I try to take into account the factors of site, material, scale, and context, so each one ends up being a completely different entity. Since they get fabricated, I have to find a way to stay as connected to the process as I possibly can. Being the obsessive and controlling person that I am, it means a lot of oversight, and usually a lot of travel back and forth to check in on it. They are usually constructed somehow with industrial processes, but it gets done differently each time. It's been very fascinating and rewarding to go in so many different directions, but it does take its toll.

Rail: You said once that it's a good thing you became an artist, because if you had to make a living building things for their utility, you would have gone broke a long time ago. Because the way you make things is not "efficient."

Puryear: I tend not to have the kind of mind that thinks in terms of what I guess a business person would call "efficiency." I think only in terms of the result, and whatever I have to do to achieve that result. I've often done things over and over again until I get it right, or worked on one piece for so long and then ended up having to discard it in the end because it didn't work. I think every artist has to do that from time to time, and similarly, I am constantly finding ways to resist any

kind of predictability in my work, mostly because I always seem to need to be doing something that I don't fully understand. So there needs to be an element of discovery for me usually, which again doesn't make for the greatest efficiency or productivity, or predictability as far as success is concerned. Even though I think I'm efficient enough once an idea is clear, I don't have a "production" kind of attitude towards the work. So I tend not to make lots of variations on a given theme, or work in series very much.

Rail: There has always been a relation in your work to dwellings, buildings, architecture, and shelter. I'm thinking especially of works like "Cedar Lodge" (1977), and "Where the Heart Is" (1981). These pieces evoke a kind of melancholic longing, perhaps a longing for home. John Elderfield refers to this in his catalogue essay: "If at times he does seem to be re-creating a primitive dwelling, it is not as a representation, but as a wish, one that can never come true." Does that ring true to you?

Puryear: As somebody growing up in the city all my life, I always had an interest in the natural world from the time I was very young, but my urban life was my entire life until I moved up here to the Hudson Valley. I think there is something about that fantasy of living in a natural environment that came from being a city dweller who never fully accepted the fact that he was an urban person. The irony is, now that I'm living in the country, I realize how important it is for me to maintain contact with the city. I get down to New York about once a month, and it's almost like coming up for air. I always thought that as I grew older, I would be happier to just be in the studio and not need or want to know what was going on culturally so much, but the fact is I love the energy that's in New York, and I enjoy seeing what's going on.

The other part of the whole notion of habitable spaces has to do with the notion of scale. So much sculpture historically has been about looking at a thing in front of you and being completely outside of it. However colossal it is, you're outside of it, and I'm always fascinated by what it's like to have a sense of the inside of something, and that's in a way what I felt as I was doing in "Cedar Lodge." It was a kind of strange, bio-morphic, organic structure that had a door that you could enter. So I'm fascinated by that, and even in the things that aren't inherently about dwellings or about inhabitable spaces, there is the sense that if a thing is a certain size or a certain scale in relation to your body, and that you're conscious of the hollowness of it, I think there is a way to project yourself into it, to imagine what it would be like to experience that from the inside. This has given rise to a lot of my works which are not sealed off, unbroken skins, but are in fact various ways of articulating a space or a volume that's permeable, visually permeable, that you can penetrate, sense the inside as well as the outside. It's always been fascinating to me to have that dual sense. So it isn't about fantasies of living in a primitive way, it's about the space that you can intuit or feel inside of.

Rail: I wanted to ask you about the titles. You've always taken titles pretty seriously and I've always liked your titles a lot, because they manage to be open-ended and poetic and not nail things down too much. But when you called that piece "Ladder for Booker T. Washington," it did fix its meaning.

Puryear: Absolutely. I discovered that the historical connectedness of that image to the reality of who Booker T. Washington was overrides any kind of expectation I might have had of the work as a primarily aesthetic experience. The ladder did in fact start with an idea that was visual, and the title, despite its specificity, was a complete afterthought. But it seemed so apt, given the contorted, precarious ascent presented by the ladder and its distorted perspective, that I couldn't resist it.

Booker T. Washington believed that freed slaves and their descendants should prove they were deserving of equal rights when they were granted them. He was an educator whose ideas of racial uplift were more gradual than someone like W.E.B. Du Bois, for example, who was much clearer in his analysis of the intransigence of American society with respect to equality for black people. Anyway, I feel that our knowledge of each other's history in this country is so spotty that if I can put something out there, and people get curious, they might learn a little bit about the whole history, and that's not a bad thing.

Levi Strauss, David. "Martin Puryear with David Levi Strauss." *Brooklyn Rail,* November 4, 2007.

Rail: Have you had time to look at the Kara Walker pieces that are next door to the atrium here [at MoMA]?

Puryear: I did. When I came to MoMA, I realized that she had an installation of some works on paper here, while her other show has just opened at the Whitney.

Rail: Did you read the Hilton Als piece on her in *The New Yorker*?

Puryear: I did.

Rail: What did you think of it?

Puryear: I think he came as close as I've ever seen anybody come to capturing her as a person. I find her fascinating, a really brave artist. She is someone I've been interested in and curious about for a long time. I think her silhouettes are brilliant. She's incredibly eloquent with the language she's developed for herself, and it makes me sad that people can take her work so literally that they can miss its point—that it's really a complicated, ambiguous critique. She blows a window open to show things we'd rather forget, or that we refuse to face, about our past as a nation, and it is work that is meant to get under your skin, as it should. It gets under mine.

Rail: In her series of prints at MoMA, "Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated)," she's taking these civil war lithographs and then screen-printing onto them, and there were a couple of them that, to me, seemed related to some of your recent works in this show. "Confederate Prisoners Being Conducted from Jonesborough to Atlanta" has a black man's head projected right into the middle of it, so that the Union soldiers look like they are surrounding it and gazing into it. And then there is another piece over by the stairs, "Pack-Mules in the Mountains," that has Walker's trickster woman figure superimposed on the mule train, with an interior section cut out of it. The spatial imposition of those made me think of your work, and especially the most recent works, which I think are really much more in-your-face racially and politically than a lot of things from the past. I'm thinking of the most recent piece, "C.F.A.O." I'm told the initials stand for "Compagnie Francaise de l'Afrique Occidentale," or "the French Company of West Africa," a French trading company that operated between Marseilles and West Africa. The piece consists of a complex scaffolding of milled wood rising out of an old wooden wheelbarrow—it's the kind of thing that you see in poor countries, where impossibly large piles of material are being moved around on simple carts—and whoever is pushing the wheelbarrow is facing this large white Fang mask which is cut in reverse. It's literally "in your face." This sculpture hits me on so many levels I don't even know where to start, but in some way I almost think of it as a self-portrait. I don't know whether you ever thought of it that way. It's in your form language, but it seems like another step out. It's really more direct, more . . .

Puryear: It's more overt, isn't it?

Rail: Yes, more overt.

Puryear: The more overt and literal the elements are that I'm trying to incorporate into the work, the more of a struggle it is for me to make it work as art. I've been dealing with abstract forms for a long time, so the inclusion of some pre-existing things from the world (rather than from my own hand and brain) felt like a pretty dicey proposition. It still does.

In the case of "Ad Astra," I feel that what I've done is make a kind of still-life composition using those wheels as a starting point. And with "C.F.A.O.," I feel I was trying to reconstruct a feeling—and I can't call it a dream, or even a memory, but just a way to look back to 1964, 65, 66, when I was in Sierra Leone, and there was a warehouse building in our village, Segbwema, which had those letters on it, C.F.A.O., which was an abbreviation for 'Compagnie Francaise de l'Afrique Occidentale"—a faded metal rusting warehouse, and the local people just called it "French company." It was by the railroad tracks, among other big warehouse buildings, where they were unloading goods and so forth. In any case, it had once been an active French trading company, in a former British colony. It just struck me, as I got to learn more about colonial-

ism, that colonialism wasn't simply about bringing raw materials out of the colonies, it was also about creating markets for the goods that were produced by the colonizers. A huge part of the whole colonialist enterprise was to create markets with the goods from all the administrative centers, such as Paris, Marseilles, London, Lisbon and elsewhere in Europe. It was a huge part of the way that the interface happened between Europe and Africa, or Europe and Asia during that period. So when I saw that wheelbarrow, which looks like it might have been made during the time when France still maintained colonies in West Africa—when I saw that rustic, obviously handmade, object, I had a couple of thoughts. The first thought was "I understand this object," way the form of each part was generated by the role it had to play in making the thing function, and I felt that I could have come up with something very similar myself if I had to solve the same problem, using the materials and the means the original builder had at his disposal. The second thought, and this feels uncanny, was about the form of this mask from the Fang people of Gabon, in West Africa, which I'd seen reproduced numerous times, and which was on the cover of a book I'd picked up in Paris shortly before I came upon the wheelbarrow. The book was called *L'Art à la Source* (Art at the Source) by Claude Roy. To me, this very well-known mask seemed almost modern in its form.

Rail: Certainly as photographed by Walker Evans . . . .

Puryear: Yeah, it's in so many books. Today the Fang are regarded as among the most sophisticated of the carvers in West Africa, and this particular mask, from our Western perspective, has an almost iconic status. The idea of carving it in the negative so that you actually become the mask looking out was somehow important to me, and so it's in fact not as though you are inside the mask, but you are the mask facing outward, in a way. It's as though you had taken a mold of the mask, and that's what you have. As though you'd made a mold, or imprint of the mask, and that's what you are.

Rail: Well, that's what I saw.

Puryear: The other thing about it is that there is a shape that's been in my work for many years that keeps coming back, so this mask in a way is, long after I first started making these shapes, a way of discovering an origin, or imputing an origin for those shapes.

Rail: I think of the shape in that untitled piece from 1989, which is actually a strip of red cedar taken off of "Lever #1," right? Do you know what the first occurrence of that shape was?

Puryear: It might have been that . . . I know which one you're talking about. It's the simplest of the ribbon-like wall pieces in the show.

Rail: Michael Auping made me very happy when he brought in the words of the poet Robert Duncan (who was my main teacher in San Francisco) to talk about your work. Auping writes, "The poetics of Puryear's image suggest what Robert Duncan called 'access to the world mystery,' in which 'the immediacy of what I can grasp and form with my hands is as big as any idea I can imagine." That's why I've kept coming back to your sculptures over and over, all these years: because they have that access, and are thereby inexhaustible to me. They are dealing with very big ideas, but these big ideas are always grounded back into the body, through the hands. I was taught poetics (by Duncan and the other poets in San Francisco) as the study of how things are made, and I also think that much of poetics is about *joinery*. The place where things are cut and joined together or where they touch, is really where meaning is made. And that holds true for poetry or writing as well as for sculptural objects. It's all about the edges, this cutting and joining.

The new piece, "Ad Astra," has a kind of martial look to it, with what could be an armored cart to carry ammunition mounted on these big caisson wheels. At the same time, it casts out this impossible extension, if not to the stars, at least to the sixth floor (*Laughs*). I just found out that in astronomy, a "Wagon" refers to an "asterism," like the Big Dipper. What was the origin of this piece?

Puryear: Well, in one sense it began as a response to an extremely tall space, something like the way I created an earlier

work called “This Mortal Coil” in 1999 for a cathedral in Paris (the Chapelle Saint-Louis de la Salpetrière). That interior was over 80 feet high, and for that installation I also made a construction that was massive at its base but became much lighter and more fragile as it rose upwards. Actually, I first worked this way back in 1977, when I incorporated a wooden pole that rose vertically 100 feet above the ground into a work installed in an enormous field. That was my first time trying to hold a very large space with minimal means, and from that first attempt I began to think more in terms of concentrated energy than enormous mass and volume in dealing with large spaces. So there were precedents in my work to my response to the atrium space at MoMA.

I had found those wheels in France while I was working at the Calder Studio—it must have been about fourteen years ago, because my daughter Sascha was two years old at the time. They were from an old farm wagon, and I saw them in an open shed not far from the Calder place, which is surrounded by the most extraordinary rural landscape. I bought two pairs from the farmer who owned them and they’d been in my possession ever since, waiting for a suitable idea. As I’ve already said, using found objects is a departure for me, but it’s been a way of sabotaging some of the control I tend to exert in my work, and opening the door to some chance and even spontaneity. Also, the things I tend to want to appropriate are things which I feel were originally conceived and made in ways which are close to my own way of creating things.

“Ad Astra,” the work that I finally made, was pretty far removed from the original history of the wheels, and was an attempt to transform them into something that felt like my own work. It was also a question of physically balancing the whole thing so that it stands up like that, so that it’s erect.

Rail: Does it have an interior?

Puryear: Yeah, the wagon’s “cargo,” the crystal-shaped box, is hollow. The walls of it are very thick, but it is hollow.

Rail: I find these latest works pretty wild. “A Distant Place” has got that horn—people will see it as a unicorn horn or a narwhal tusk—rising up, in idealism and aspiration, out of a twisted burl, which reads like a kind of cancer.

Puryear: That’s pretty much what a burl is on a tree. It’s an uncontrolled growth on the trunk that just keeps generating these twisted and contorted fibers. This was one that a friend had collected in Vermont and brought down to me. I had thought to use it as a utilitarian thing. Burls are often used for bowls, because the wood is so dense and interlocked that they don’t split easily, and they were used by Native-Americans and by settlers throughout the colonial era. Wooden bowls can be quite fragile, but these burl bowls are very tough. But once I’d lived with it for awhile I felt I wanted to work with it intact, as an ingredient in a piece of work. And it’s always a challenge, you know: What can you do with this? How can you use this and claim it, make it yours? Especially something that has as much presence as a burl or a pair of old beautiful wheels or a wheelbarrow. How do you claim that for yourself as an artist? Like I said, I am such a controlling person. I want to take everything and impose my will on it, and this is a way that feels like more of a collaboration.

Rail: Could you talk about “A Distant Place,” as a title?

Puryear: It’s not that specific. I like what you said about putting words together as a form of joinery in poetry. That’s what I’m trying to do with titles, where I juxtapose things in order to open up various possible meanings to the imagination.

Rail: How do they generally come?

Puryear: All kinds of ways. But the main thing is that I try not to have it be something that a person can regard as a key to unlock a work and interpret it. Like I said, “Ladder for Booker T. Washington” is perhaps unique among my titles, in that it lets you into the work in a fairly specific and rather concrete way, which many people will probably never get out of, they’ll just see it as a metaphor for a certain social idea.

Levi Strauss, David. “Martin Puryear with David Levi Strauss.” *Brooklyn Rail,* November 4, 2007.

Rail: I think sometimes when young artists look at a career like yours, they might imagine that it's been an unbroken string of successes and accolades, and one of the things that happens with a retrospective like this is that the rough spots get smoothed out in the art historical narrative. I know that's not exactly how things went with you. There were good times and bad times, especially when the kinds of things that you were working with or on were sometimes considered so far out of fashion that there was no place for them in the art historical narrative. Is there anything that you can say that might be useful to younger artists about that?

Puryear: Well, it's interesting that you bring that up now, because looking over a thirty-odd year span of my work, it's obvious that my way of making art must seem anachronistic and out of sync with what is most vital in art today. I still work with my hands, in the belief that touch, or the way the material is manipulated, can influence the work, and that the physical making process itself can generate ideas, as well as bring them to fruition. And this is happening at a time when so much of the power in recent work resides in the ideas, whose translation into physical form has become almost perfunctory, capable of being farmed out to the skilled hands of others, often quite removed from the artist's direct control. It's odd for a living artist to say this about his own work today, but my way of making art seems very traditional, at least in its methodology, and in the values that guide the result. What I can say at this juncture, though, is that even as I am more aware than ever of urgent social realities, and of the youthful surges as the art of our present moment evolves in response, I hope I can continue to persist, and to hold on to what's most important in my own work.

Levi Strauss, David. "Martin Puryear with David Levi Strauss." *Brooklyn Rail*, November 4, 2007.

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The New York Times

Humanity's Ascent, in Three Dimensions

by Roberta Smith | November 2, 2007

On Sunday, when the Museum of Modern Art's 30-year retrospective of the sculptor Martin Puryear opens, the New York art world will find itself in what may be an unprecedented situation. For the first time in recent memory — maybe ever — two of the city's most prominent museums will be presenting large, well-done exhibitions of living African-American artists. The Whitney Museum's 15-year survey of Kara Walker's work has been searing hearts, minds and eyes since it opened early last month. Now it is Mr. Puryear's turn to weave his finely nuanced yet insistent spell.

Richard Barnes/Museum of Modern Art
The Martin Puryear sculpture "Ladder for Booker T. Washington" (1996).

Perhaps in the future welcome and overdue coincidences like this will no longer merit mention. In the meantime this one has the added bonus of representing radically different ways of being an artist, black or otherwise. Ms. Walker comes out of Conceptual and appropriation art and makes the bitter legacy of race relations in this country the engine of her cut-paper installations, animated films and language pieces.

Mr. Puryear, who was born in 1941 and grew up in Washington, D.C., is a former painter who emerged from the Minimalist and Postminimalist vortex making hand-worked, mostly wood sculptures. These soothe more than seethe, balancing between the geometric and the organic with Zen aplomb.

Mr. Puryear is a formalist in a time when that is something of a dirty word, although his formalism, like most of the 1970s variety, is messed with, irreverent and personal. His formalism taps into a legacy even larger than race: the history of objects, both utilitarian and not, and their making. From this all else follows, namely human history, race included, along with issues of craft, ritual, approaches to nature and all kinds of ethnic traditions and identities.

These references seep out of his highly allusive, often poetic forms in waves, evoking the earlier Modernism of Brancusi, Arp, Noguchi and Duchamp, but also carpentry, basket weaving, African sculpture and the building of shelter and ships. His work slows you down and makes you consider its every detail as physical fact, artistic choice and purveyor of meaning.

Smith, Roberta. "Humanity's Ascent, in Three Dimensions." *The New York Times,* November 2, 2007, p. E27.

The MoMA show, which has been organized by John Elderfield, the museum's chief curator of painting and sculpture, is quite beautiful and conveys Mr. Puryear's achievement persuasively. With 40 works on the sixth floor and 5 more on the second-floor atrium level, it displays a lack of repetition unusual in these product-oriented times. Of the five in the atrium, two are attenuated sculptures that reach upward several stories, making new use of that tall, awkward space. "Ladder for Booker T. Washington" from 1996 is a wobbly ladder whose drastic foreshortening makes it seem to stretch to infinity.

It suggests that the climb to success is deceptively long — and perhaps longer for blacks than whites. But its limitless vista also has a comedic joy worthy of Miró.

Mr. Puryear once said of Minimalism, "I looked at it, I tasted it, and I spat it out." But he has taken a lot from it, and used it better and more variously than many of his contemporaries.

While rejecting Minimalism's ideal of being completely nonreferential, he said yes to its wholeness, stasis and hollowness, to sculpture as an optical, imagistic presence that nonetheless can't be known completely without walking around it. Above all he applied the Minimalist embrace of new materials in a retroactive manner: using wood in so many different ways that it feels like a new material, both physically and poetically.

Mr. Puryear's treatments of wood verge on the encyclopedic and give the material an almost animal diversity, creating a kind of rainbow coalition of contrasting skin tones and textures, bone structures, muscle densities and personalities. Surfaces are light or dark, matte or gleaming, smooth or bristling, richly stained or au naturel. Woods are thick, thin and very thin; opaque or transparent; solid or skeletal.

Each piece is to some extent a new start, with its own integrity and references. Topped by a layer of dried mud, the squat bulletlike block of weathered wood that is "For Beckwourth" (1980) conjures up an Indian lodge, a Baule sculpture coated with dried sacrificial material, an early Greek tomb and a nondenominational church dome. (These associations can arise before a label informs us that James Beckwourth, the son of a black mother and a white father, was born into slavery and was eventually made a chief of the Crow Indian nation.)

The elegant 1975-78 wall piece "Some Tales" is a series of lines so spare they might almost be drawn, but are in fact long, thin pieces of wood, abstract yet glowing, with intimations of human use, and somehow sinister too. They bring to mind drumsticks, an oxen yoke, saws, bullwhips, tree branches. One long loop is both a giant hairpin and a rope ready for coiling into who knows what. "Bask" (1976) is a low-lying floor piece in black-stained pine, tapered at both ends, but with a gently swelling center.
It suggests a sleeping seal, but also a rolling wave of oil that might kill a seal.

A mysterious seductive blackness, one of Mr. Puryear's touchstones, dominates in a large rounded monolith from 1978 whose polished, headlike form is tellingly, even ominously titled "Self" — the dark inescapable

Smith, Roberta. "Humanity's Ascent, in Three Dimensions." *The New York Times,* November 2, 2007, p. E27.

thing within us all. But this looming form also tilts oddly, a little like the Rock of Gibraltar or a whale's breaching snout..

The monolith of "Self" is also a Puryear staple. Later on it is streamlined and open like a rib cage in the lustrous "Bower," and a kind of crazy scribble in "Thicket" — or as close to a scribble as raw two-by-fours can get. In "Old Mole" it culminates in a beak and its densely crisscrossing lath suggests a creature both blind and bandaged. In "Confessional" the monolith expands into a habitable hut made of a semi-transparent patchwork of wire lightly clotted with tar. One side is truncated by a large plane of wood that might be a door or even a face, at which point the hut mutates into a cowled head, that of a priest or perhaps of Death.

The face of "Confessional" becomes explicit in "C.F.A.O." (completed this year), whose initials stand for Compagnie Française de l'Afrique Occidentale, the French trading company that sailed between Marseille and West Africa beginning in the 19th century. Its most striking form is an enlarged negative impression of a white Fang tribal mask that is embedded in an impenetrable scaffolding of wood dowels. This in turn rests on a worn-out wheelbarrow: European and African forms enmeshed in an intractable post-colonial chaos.

Mr. Puryear's work is humorous but not ironic. It has a complex worldview devoid of trendy critique. It offers more integrity than innovation and proves repeatedly that accessible doesn't rule out subtle. Like Elizabeth Murray, who was also the subject of a recent MoMA retrospective, Mr. Puryear has pursued what might be called an old-fashioned approach to the new. But really, both have done nothing more, or less, than ground formalism in the rich world of their own experience and identity. And that is new enough.

Smith, Roberta. "Humanity's Ascent, in Three Dimensions." *The New York Times,* November 2, 2007, p. E27.

ARTNEWS

LOOKING AT ART

Brunhilde Stripped Bare

In his latticework structure, Martin Puryear gives his diva full body and full voice

BY LILLY WEI

At first glance, *Brunhilde* (1998–2000), Martin Puryear's honey blond sculpture, more closely resembles an inflated, upside-down, open-weave sack with pinched corners than it does its namesake, the fierce and beautiful Valkyrie of Norse mythology, or even the buxom, armor-encased divas of Wagnerian opera. Gracefully poised, taut, it stands lightly on its "head" despite its vital statistics (some 93 by 113 by 73 inches)—a great, metaphoric armful of warm girl. This imposing Brunhilde, however, is more geometric in shape than voluptuous, with the swell of its rectangular form—which tapers to an oval base—the only shy, sly indication of sex appeal.

What is more instantly apparent is the hatched network of cedar strips, demonstrating the gorgeous construction and attention to detail that have long been the artist's hallmarks. Puryear's dedication to traditional crafts and the handmade has been evident from the beginning, a preference stimulated by the time he spent in Sierra Leone and in Sweden in the 1960s. In those places he honed his skills in woodworking, furniture making, boat building, basketry, and other labor-intensive, time-consuming processes. A virtuoso with wood, his primary medium, Puryear prefers assemblage and additive methods to carving or casting. He likes to wrap, tie, weave, polish, laminate, and join.

COURTESY MCKEE GALLERY

Puryear's cedar and rattan *Brunhilde*, 1998–2000, flaunts her ample girth and graceful bearing.

In her catalogue essay for the exhibition "Martin Puryear," organized by the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts this year (and on view through January 13, 2002, at the Berkeley Art Museum + Pacific Film Archive, and from February 2 through April 14, 2002, at the Des Moines Art Center), Margot Crutchfield quotes the artist, who explained, "I enjoy and need to work with my hands, with tools. They give you a measure of the extensions of the mind and body; they keep ideas of the work connected to the man making them."

Puryear's works are rooted in the modernist canon—with a twist. His biomorphic abstractions are influenced by such sculptors as Brancusi and Arp, but they also go directly to modernist sources, to tribal and other non-Western art. While more minimal than otherwise, his sculpture is not merely formal but double-dipped, mantled in symbolism and an array of postmodern readings. *Brunhilde*'s airy lattice of cedar and rattan—which also resembles a woven basket, a blown-up string bag, a vessel—is wholly open, wholly revealed. The inside is as visible as the outside, as if space had only been interrupted, lightly wrapped, and shaped—a reversal of the traditional notion of sculpture as mass, as solid, weighty form.

Puryear has said that he is interested in describing form without hiding interior space. He pointed out that he wanted to create a work that "strained at the skin" and had "internal expansion as though it were inflated, filled with something, like a filled bag, or a balloon, or an airship—like things that are inflated and are pushed from within." The theme of insubstantiality—of intangible forces—is repeated in the shifting pattern of shadows on the floor and surrounding walls that reimage

Wei, Lilly. "Brunhilde Stripped Bare." *ARTnews,* December 2001, pp. 90–100.

the latticed construct as an ephemeral web, a delicate drawing that ebbs and flows with the light. The negative of the shadow paired with the positive of the structure is part of the rhetoric of opposition that makes up Puryear's work, a kind of visual thesis and antithesis.

Other polarities also underscore the dynamic: the combination of the linear and the volumetric, space and solid, surface and interiority, liberty and constraint. *Brunhilde* functions, essentially, like a cage, one that is both open and closed.

Subtly ironic as well as straightforward, the piece conveys a number of meanings, beginning with its materials, which express a faint whiff of identity politics. The flexible rattan and fragrant cedar contain a mix of geographic references, evoking more exotic climes: the land of Solomon's Sheba, for instance, linked to that of Viking goddesses. Puryear remarked—with a touch of humor—that he thought the sculpture resembled a flour bag, and that's why he named it *Brunhilde*, referring to the popular stereotype of divas as full-bodied and full-voiced. But there is also the incomparable, heroic Brunhilde of Nordic myth, one of Wotan's daughters—the Valkyries—those wild maidens who rode through the air on thunderous horses to bear dying warriors to Valhalla, the home of the gods, where they were revived.

The flexible rattan and fragrant cedar contain a mix of geographic references, evoking more exotic climes: the land of Solomon's Sheba, for instance.

Finally, there is the luminous, transfigured Brünnhilde of Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelung*, who, through the redemptive power of love, would establish a new era based on human desires and just laws as Valhalla burned and the old avaricious, lust-filled order of vengeful gods collapsed.

Fragile in appearance but not in actuality, *Brunhilde*'s buoyant, seemingly expandable frame is full of "something," as Puryear put it. What that might be is breath, the breath of life that also animates art. Right now, many of us can't help thinking of Götterdämmerungs, since the world these days is a far less certain place than it was.

Puryear's vision of simple, beautiful form is compelling and consoling, a tribute to what else civilization is capable of. It is also a tribute to clarity, to creative rather than destructive will, and ultimately, to love of measure over love of apocalypse. ■

Lilly Wei, an ARTnews *contributing editor, is a New York–based critic and independent curator.*

Wei, Lilly. "Brunhilde Stripped Bare." *ARTnews,* December 2001, pp. 90–100.

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Art in America

New Puryear for the Getty

Continuing to commission contemporary art for its public spaces, the Getty Center in Los Angeles recently installed a 45-foot-tall bronze and stainless-steel sculpture by Martin Puryear just west of the tram stop on the complex's central plaza. The project follows inaugural commissions by Ed Ruscha for the auditorium lobby and Alexis Smith for the center's restaurant. Titled *That Profile*, Puryear's gridded, tubular sculpture is shaped like a human head tilted up to face the Pacific Ocean—seeming to take its cue from the hordes of Getty visitors around it.

Structurally similar to earlier Puryear works that evoke hunting traps or lacrosse mitts, *That Profile* resembles a huge-scale, flat-fronted version of earlier geometric wire-head sculptures by Alexander Calder. It complements the curves and angles of Richard Meier's architecture without obtruding on the mountaintop views to the north.

Martin Puryear's *That Profile*, 1999, during installation at the Getty Center.

A small concurrent exhibition [through Jan. 9], curated by project consultant Lisa Lyons, includes two Puryear sculptures, several works on paper, a project maquette and photographs by Lynn Davis of the project in process. *—Michael Duncan*

Duncan, Michael. "New Puryear for the Getty." *Art in America,* January 2000, p. 23.

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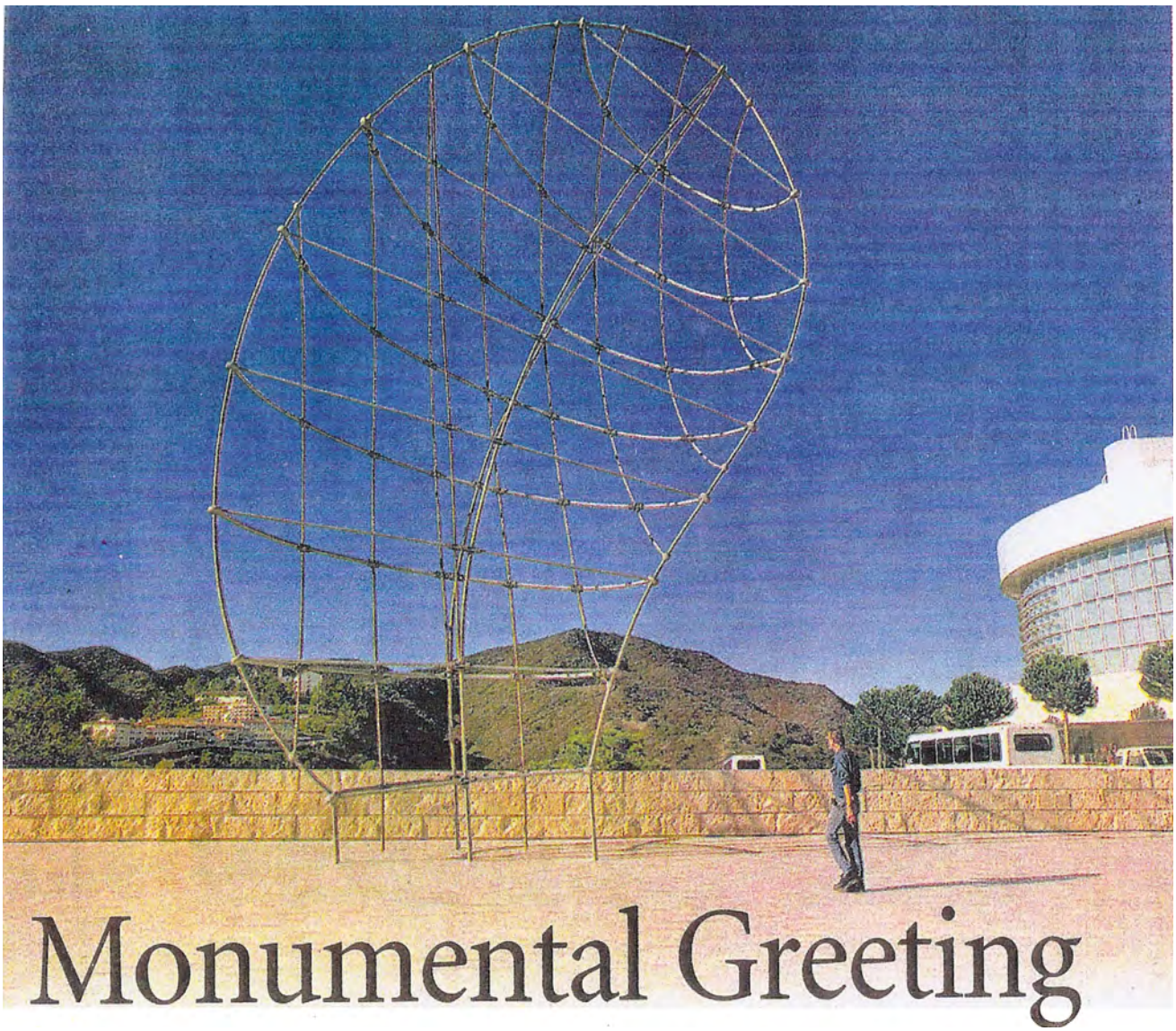
ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT



Monumental Greeting

Martin Puryear's 'That Profile' looks lighter than air but adds weight to Getty's tram plaza.

Knight, Christopher. "Monumental Greeting." *Los Angeles Times*, November 26, 1999.

Art Review

By CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT
TIMES ART CRITIC

In the difficult world of public art, the dismissive term "plop art" was conceived a generation ago in response to the proliferation of monumental sculptures that had begun to turn up in empty urban plazas. The witty zinger rightly denigrated the unreasonable expectations then held for such art: In an accelerating age of urban renewal, it was hoped art could overcome the bleakness and sterility of much mediocre architecture.

Plopping art in a plaza couldn't accomplish miracles, of course, but the baby promptly got thrown out with the bath. "Plop art" came to be negatively associated not just with cavalier expectations for the efficacy of art, but with the very idea of placing monumental sculpture in a plaza. Soon, the common wisdom was that it simply shouldn't be done.

As a sculptor, 58-year-old Martin Puryear has spent a good deal of energy and effort in recent years on proving that common wisdom false. At the beginning of the decade, a touring retrospective of his indoor sculpture eloquently showed how he'd developed a richly poetic lexicon of sculptural forms, materials and structural methods. Since then, his outdoor sculpture has been demonstrating with regularity that it also can make a powerful mark on the landscape.

"That Profile" is Puryear's newly unveiled monumental sculpture commissioned for the tram arrival plaza at the Getty Center. The fourth major commission by the Getty Center from a living artist, it joins terrific predecessors by Robert Irwin, Edward Ruscha and Alexis Smith, matching their high level of accomplishment.

"That Profile" is an open framework form made from sandblasted steel tubes bound at the joints by thick strands of knotted bronze. Rising more than four stories tall at the north end of the plaza, the sculpture creates a visual union of art and engineering—an image certainly suitable for this bravura hilltop site.

The famous modular grid employed throughout the entire Getty complex by architect Richard Meier here forms the structural basis for Puryear's abstract sculpture. Standing on six legs set directly into the travertine plaza, the skeletal sculpture seems to rise up out of the Center's rectilinear grid and billow into a contrapuntal organic form. (Imagine a fisherman's net cast toward the sky, or perhaps an enormous woven basket upended.) Weighing several tons, it's visually lighter than air.

The silvery-gray sculpture, placed several feet before the low travertine wall at the plaza's end, is distinctly frontal. From the plaza side its "front" is flat; from "behind" it swells gently outward. This gracefully curved rear grid echoes the curved and gridded window facade glimpsed on the nearby Williams Auditorium.

On a formal level, this careful siting is critical to the sculpture's success. So is the remarkably suggestive image Puryear has conceived—an image that cleverly plays with the sun-washed location.

What's the profile in "That Profile"? Looking at it from the cascading steps of the museum across the plaza, the billowing form indeed recalls the shape of a human head, but one whose generalized schema brings to mind a flurry of multiple associations.

Facing west toward the Pacific, the tall, graceful, slightly elongated oval bears a distinct resemblance to the regal bronze heads of Ife, Nigeria, produced in that former religious capital between the 12th century and the 15th century. The linear pattern on Puryear's monumental head even provides a visual echo of the linear scarification marks that grace those refined and exquisite forebears.

Chronologically, Ife's prominence as a religious and political center immediately preceded the rise of Tuscany as the epicenter of the Italian Renaissance, and it is there that a second referent can be identified for Puryear's piece. This one comes from painting.

Think of Piero della Francesca's archetypal profile portraits of Battista Sforza and Federico de Montefeltro. Like "That Profile," which rises up into an azure firmament before the Santa Monica Mountains in the distance, Piero's portraits of the countess and the duke show their absolute profiles set against an immense continuous landscape, which unfolds beneath a luminous sky. Almost Pharaonic in bearing, like their Ife predecessors and Puryear's new sculpture, these heads create a quiet but intense sense of grandeur.

Finally, in concept if not in style, Puryear's colossal sculptural head standing on a Modernist plaza brings to mind Picasso's colossal head designed for the Chicago Civic Center in 1964. (Born in Washington and now living in upstate New York, Puryear moved to Chicago in 1978 to teach at the University of Illinois; he lived there throughout the 1980s.) Although the Chicago "Head of a Woman" is composed mostly of planar forms, Picasso, together with Julio Gonzalez, earlier pioneered the style of linear, open-framework sculpture extrapolated so gracefully in "That Profile." And the Spaniard's famous artistic fusion of European and African traditions is reflected from a different perspective in Puryear's lovely sculpture.

Significantly, the fanfare surrounding Picasso's Chicago Civic Center commission is what jump-started the subsequent proliferation of monumental sculptures for urban plazas in America—the kind that eventually got dismissively tagged as "plop art." Not only has Puryear's distinguished body of work over two decades synthesized diverse traditions into spare, elegant, resonant objects, but sculptures like his wonderful commission for the Getty help restore to prominence a buried tradition.

In a second-floor gallery inside the Getty Museum's west pavilion, a concise exhibition illuminates the Puryear commission. Guest curator Lisa Lyons has deftly selected and installed two earlier sculptures that establish precedents for "That Profile," which is represented by the wire presentation model Puryear made for the commission.

Among several prints and drawings, "Rune Stone" (1966), an etching the artist made while still a student at the Swedish Royal Academy in Stockholm, offers a surprisingly early anticipation of the new sculpture's form. (The poetic allusions embodied by the mysterious inscriptions on these ancient stones are also relevant.) Finally, artist Lynn Davis photographed the fabrication of the monumental sculpture at a Massachusetts foundry; she brings the same burnished refinement to these gorgeous documentary images as she does to her well-known photographs of heaving icebergs and ancient Egyptian monuments.

• *"That Profile," Getty Center, 1200 Getty Center Drive, (310) 440-7300, exhibition through Jan. 9. Closed Mondays; parking reservations required.*

Knight, Christopher. "Monumental Greeting." *Los Angeles Times*, November 26, 1999.

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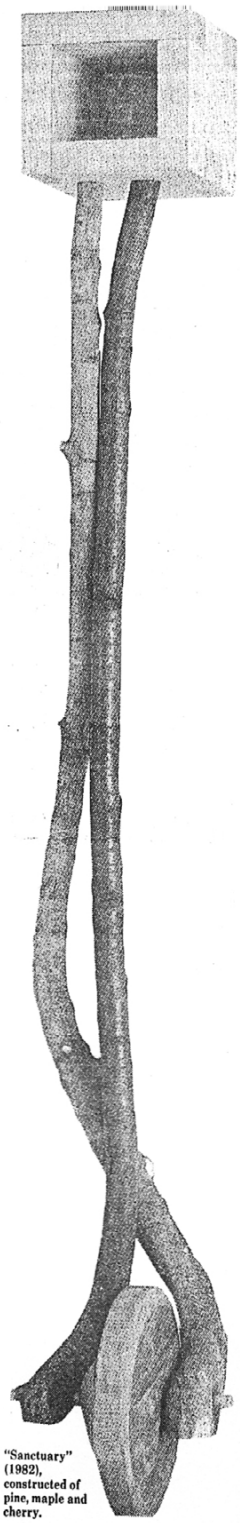
The Washington Post



"Sanctuary" (1982), constructed of pine, maple and cherry.

Martin Puryear at last night's opening reception at the Hirshhorn.

BY HARRY NALTCHAYAN—THE WASHINGTON POST

Art

He Sawed & Conquered

Sculptor Martin Puryear's Homecoming at the Hirshhorn

By Paul Richard
Washington Post Staff Writer

Martin Puryear's retrospective, which opened last night at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, is a homecoming in triumph. Puryear has, at 50, the makings of a master. It was here that he was born and raised, and here that he received his college education, his first gallery exhibits and his first museum shows. Not since the 1960s, and the bursting into fame of Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland and the painters of the Color School, has a modernist from Washington earned such well-deserved acclaim.

Yesterday was Martin Puryear Day in Washington. The mayor so proclaimed it, perhaps a little hokily. For Puryear's work evokes such quiet mental voyaging -- to distant times and distant lands, to the Arctic and the Orient, to Africa and Sweden -- that claiming him for Washington seems, at best, a stretch. Still, something of this city -- its disdain for sudden fashion, its mix of black and

Richard, Paul. "He Sawed & Conquered." *The Washington Post,* February 5, 1992, pp. B1, B10.

Sculptures

ART, From B1

white, its reverence for precedent -- is apparent in the way that he has changed the mood of contemporary sculpture, and maybe even nudged the history of art.

What makes him different is his hand. Puryear makes his sculptures -- of cedar, oak and hickory, of poplar and of ash -- with planes and saws and spokeshaves, with a cabinetmaker's skill. Somehow he's restored an unfamiliar warmth to the look of current art.

In 1989, as the sole U.S. representative at the Sao Paulo Bienal, Puryear was the artist awarded the grand prize. He's won a MacArthur Foundation "genius" prize, a Guggenheim Foundation grant, a sojourn at the American Academy in Rome and many other honors. His fame appears secure.

It's been 30 years since New York sculptor Tony Smith telephoned a welder and ordered a six-foot cube of steel plate. "Die" is what he called it. That cube, while darkly hinting at both dice and death, did much to kill the prominence of sculpture made by hand. That chill is all around us now.

Countless artists since -- dismissing messy handiwork, celebrating "concept," denigrating craft -- have been content to make their objects, or have others make them, of scavenged junk or store-bought goods or industrial materials, as if the modern world demanded distance from the workshop, as if merely thinking was all that was required to make a work of art.

Puryear has small interest in what he has described as such "executive activity." In each of his grand sculptures -- there are 38 on view -- one feels the man himself, his patience and his labor. "I have a hard time thinking of myself as dictating to others how to do my work," he's said. "And I think it has to do with where I come from in society, where I fit in society, the fact that my people were always executors, workers, their hands were always busy, their backs were always bent."

He is part geometrician. The pure Euclidean beauty of circles, squares, cones and cubes flickers in his sculptures. He's a modernist as well, at ease with the tradition of Jean Arp and Brancusi. Yet the busyness of Puryear's hand, and the bending of his back -- and his willingness to learn from the purpose of his tools, the soul of his materials, the knowledge of his muscles -- has aligned his work with artists whose names he never knew.

Ghosts surround his objects. While confronting their strong presences one gets the eerie feeling that patient, long-dead craftsmen -- the carvers of West Africa, the boatwrights who made Viking ships, the yurt builders of Mongolia, the carpenters of Kyoto -- are standing by your shoulder, looking at them too.

While other sculptors of our age often ask us to confront the media world, the telephone or the evils of the age, one often gets the feeling that Puryear is instead musing without grief on wildlife, on nature. "Nature," Puryear has said, "can be as visually interesting to me as art. ... A zoo can be as stimulating as an art museum."

His show is filled with birdlike forms, with crests and beaks and talons. Their scale gives these creatures, if creatures is the word, astonishing immediacy: Most are as big as you are. The Hirshhorn's painted "Timber's Turn" of 1987 (the "tern" homonym is intentional) seems to lift its pointed tail like a seabird on the waves. "Sharp and Flat" (1987) juts its neck so energetically it can almost be heard singing. An untitled bird-form near it -- part solid, part translucent, it's made of tar on steel mesh -- suggests a long-necked, coal-black swan with its hidden head tucked underneath its wing. Yet these objects never fully feel like beings seen in the wild. Their mortises and dowels, their wood grains and planed surfaces, always call the mind back to the process of their making. With their complex evocations, their strategies and lures, they're more decoys than birds.

As a child in Washington, Puryear dreamed of catching falcons. He's the eldest of seven children. His mother, Martina, a schoolteacher, taught at Eckington Elementary; his father, Reginald, worked for the Post Office. Puryear is a voyager. He's lived in Washington, in Brooklyn, in Nashville and Chicago. He now lives with his wife, the former Jeanne Gordon, a pianist and artist, in a house he helped design and build in Upstate New York. It was after graduation from Catholic University that he started roaming. His many years of travel, and his years as an outsider, can be sensed within his art.

After two years in the Peace Corps -- he taught English, French and biology in the village of Segbwema, Sierra Leone -- he headed north to Stockholm, to the Swedish Royal Academy of Art. While in Scandinavia, he often left the city to travel in the wilds of Norway and of Lapland. He's since traveled by canoe though the just-as-wild landscape of Alaska. He carved his own wood paddles. The skill of Puryear's hand has been evident since childhood (he made guitars in college). Though his graduate studies in art at Yale University might well have urged him onward to plastic or aluminum, he kept returning to the wood shop, even though he understood that "there's something about making wooden things by hand that now seems almost obsolete."

And yet one can't help feeling that wood has somehow saved him, that the spirit of the stuff itself has

Richard, Paul. "He Sawed & Conquered." *The Washington Post*, February 5, 1992, pp. B1, B10.

somehow linked his work to other lands and ages. The art of Martin Puryear, despite its mood of newness, seems to sing remembrance. It's not nailed to the present.

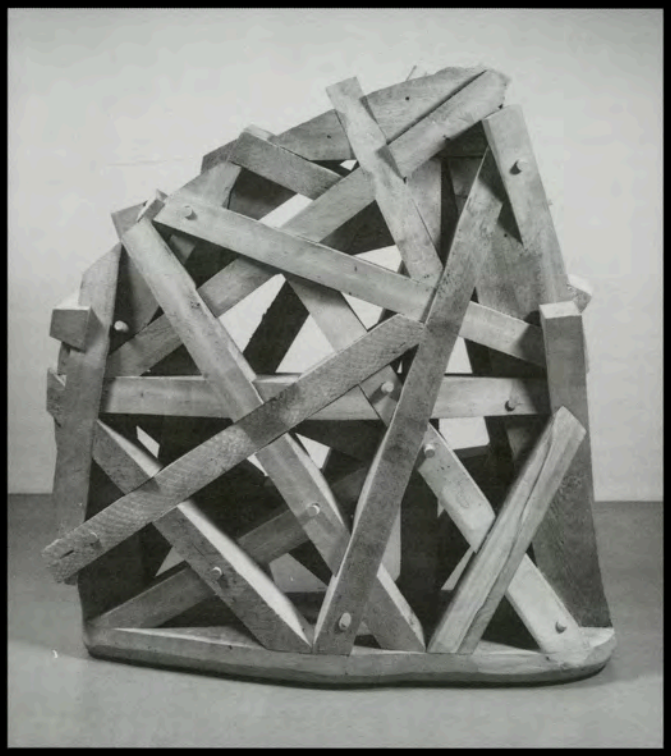
Too many of his contemporaries, searching desperately for "relevance," have felt obliged to goad their wan or coy or angry art "beyond the aesthetic." Puryear has picked another path. He is unashamed of beauty. His poetry is allusive, his surfaces seductive. And his processes are seen. His art is never slam-bang fast. It's slow as aging wood, slow as growing trees.

Puryear's touring retrospective was organized for the Art Institute of Chicago by Neal Benezra, who has left that institution to become the Hirshhorn's new chief curator. His catalogue is fine; so is his installation. Puryear's retrospective will not visit New York -- that fashion-ridden town just doesn't seem to get him -- but it will travel to the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and to the Philadelphia Museum of Art, after closing at the Hirshhorn on May 10.

Richard, Paul. "He Sawed & Conquered." *The Washington Post*, February 5, 1992, pp. B1, B10.

ARTFORUM

Martin Puryear in the American Grain



Judith Russi Kirshner

As martin puryear's work has evolved, from the ruggedly anthropological to the subtly refined, from the exotic to the erotic and psychological, the artist has adhered to only one style a broadly derived variant of Modernist abstraction. Nevertheless the work is conceptually sophisticated, addressing Western constructions of the "primitive" at the same time that it invokes virtuoso craftsmanship and the poetry of natural materials—ash, ponderosa pine, red cedar. Deftly negotiating between craft and fine art, Puryear's art conserves distant traditions and reaffirms timeworn values; though his sculpture has become a sign for "primitive," the work is not.

Puryear has consistently distanced himself from the stylistic and topical concerns of mainstream esthetics. His logical artistic inheritance is Minimalism, yet his acknowledgment of that movement's importance signals only his receptivity to a dynamic of reduction, geometry (of a modulated kind), and economy of form. Like the mathematician in William Boyd's novel *Brazzaville Beach*, Puryear seems "preoccupied with the conviction that the abstract precision of geometry and measurement really had nothing to do with the imprecise and changing dimensions of living things, could not cope accurately with the intrinsic ruggedness of the natural world."[1] His work is more individualistic than that of the Minimalists proper, more expressive, if in an austere and subtle way. Though his touch is usually camouflaged by his surface treatment, his art is also more involved with hand work than is Minimalism—his procedures are often drawn from carpentry and boatbuilding. Finally, he appears to have an aversion to the kind of mass or serial production associated with Minimalist artists.

Puryear's narrative installations and highly finished (albeit sometimes unfinished-looking) works were never really even post-Minimal either, despite techniques and a biomorphic syntax that occasionally sweep him into categories alongside Jackie Winsor, Robert Therrien, and Heide Fasnacht. Actually his equivocations between abstraction and referentiality are conceptually more akin to the classical balancing

Kirshner, Judith Russi. "Martin Puryear in the American Grain." *Artforum,* December 1991, pp. 58–63.

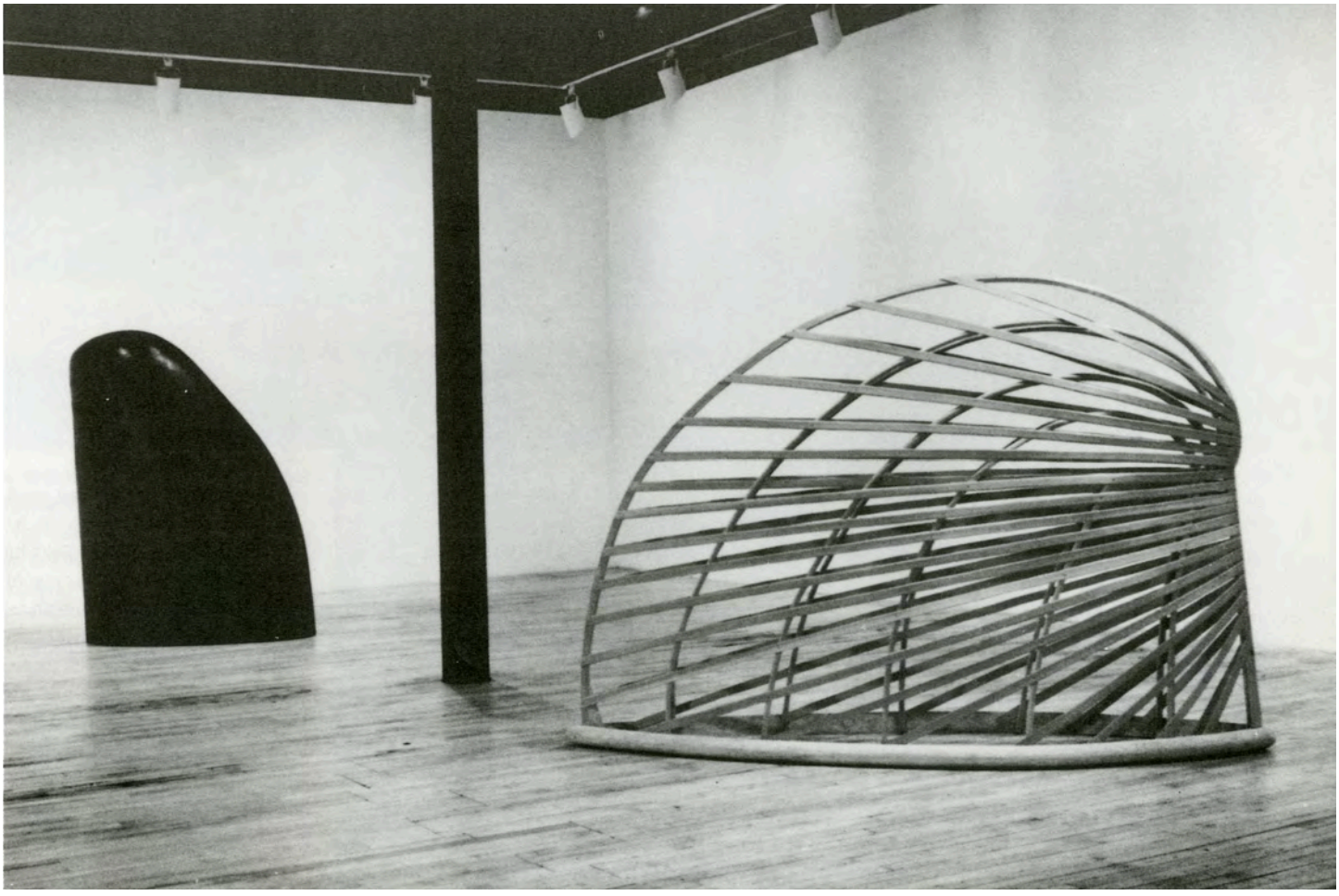
acts of Joel Shapiro and Jene Highstein, his eccentric organicism more like that of Richard Deacon. If Shapiro's figures balance between abstraction and human gesture, Puryear's forms hover between natural and ethnographic associations. Often a work appears like a closed container, say, or a vault, only at a second glance to seem an empty vessel, an open basket.If early forms resemble ship hulls, cages, and huts, later objects are less guarded and more available, like giant pods, decoys, or tombs. Abstraction is the open-ended vessel accommodating these idiosyncratic composites.

It has been suggested that Puryear's method is basically intuitive, fusing this formal vocabulary with an impressive knowledge of nature and other cultures and with his technical command of woodworking. Though the rationalist rigor of Minimalism echoes in the precision and discipline of his fabrication, he insists on an emotional response from his audience. Here viewers confront material culture rather than abstract creation; artifact and esthetic object are conflated.

Central to this work is the idea that 'labor is meaningful and pleasurable. As Peter Boswell notes, Puryear appreciates the anonymity of the craftsperson but leverages it to build unique works of art; he understands and mines the productive contradiction between these two positions.[2] A craftsman's marks are most often invisible as signs of authorship, but in Puryear's sculpture the imprints and traces of tools may become artistic signatures, and emphasize the maker as well as the thing made.[3] Audiences primed by the loaded brushstrokes of the various expressionisms may read emotion and meaning in the staple marks and glue around the seams of a taut lamination such as *Lever #1*, 1988–89, and one can't help but be aware of the physical strength, and thus of an identifiable authorial presence, that has manipulated the work into its rounded contours.

Many of Puryear's sculptures actually suggest measuring tools, or straps and containers, valorizing if not fetishizing labor. The kinds of work and skills that he simultaneously refers to and uses are gendered, alluding both to an outdoorsy, woodsman ethos of hunting and trapping and sometimes to basketry techniques associated with women. In both cases, the techniques in question are more often than not marginalized as crafts. It is remarkable that Puryear preserves the unacknowledged integrity of these crafts, that he transfers them to the realm of art, that his technical skill is so assured that he often conceals it, producing finishes

Opposite: **Martin Puryear, *Thicket*, 1990,** basswood and cypress, 67 x 62 x 17". Collection of the Seattle Art Museum. Below, left to right: **Martin Puryear, *Self*, 1978,** painted red cedar and mahogany, 69 x 48 x 25"; and ***Bower*, 1980,** pine and Sitka spruce, 64 x 95 x 27".



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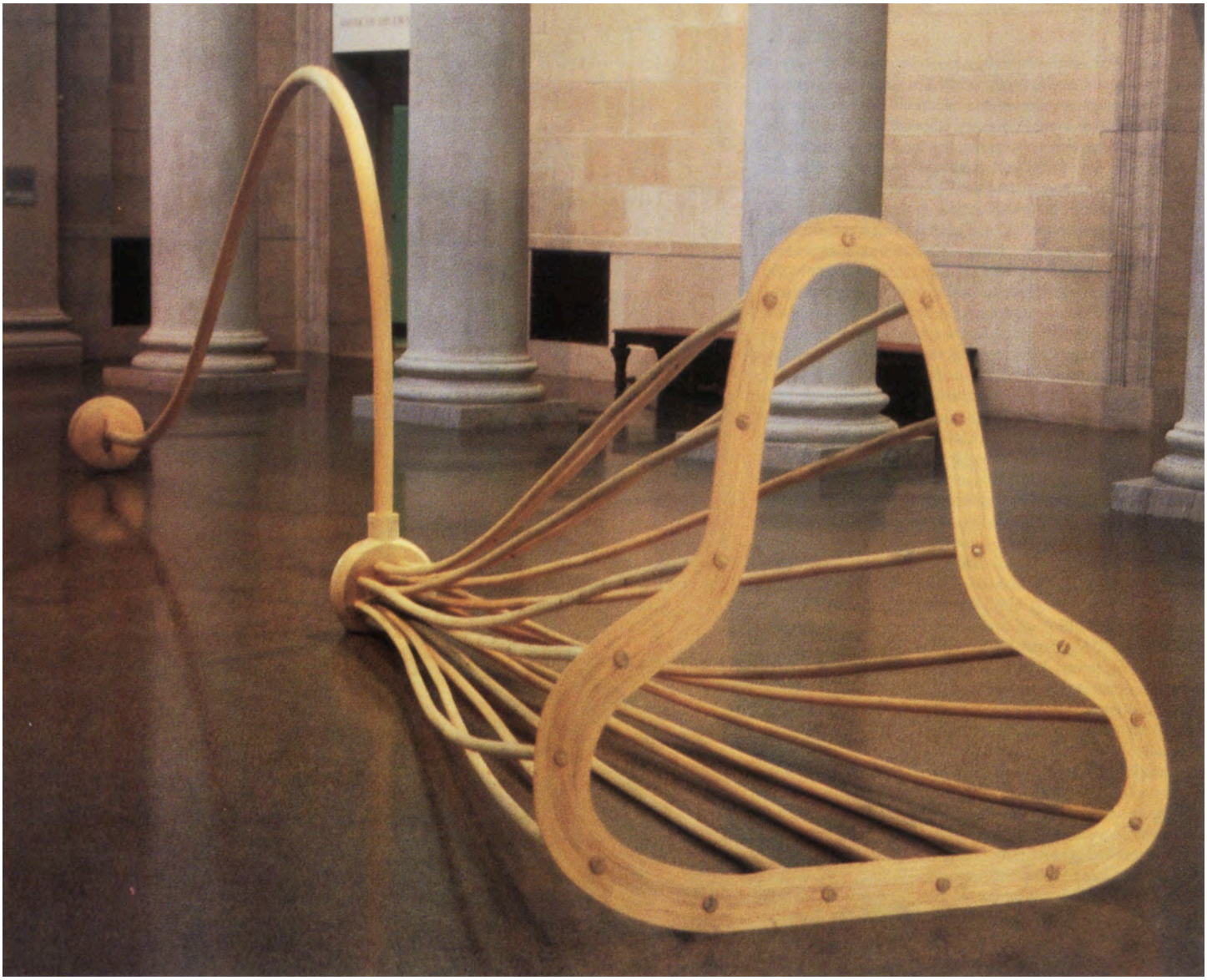

Above: **Martin Puryear, *Lever #2*, 1988–89,** rattan, ponderosa pine, ash, and cypress, 71" x 24' 5" x 55". Collection of the Baltimore Museum of Art.
Opposite: **Martin Puryear, *The Charm of Subsistence*, 1989,** rattan and gumwood, 85 x 66½ x 9½".

and connections that look natural. And even this conceit provides another dimension of authenticity, for in the end it is art and not craft that has brought the sculptor celebrity.

As a young man, Puryear served in the Peace Corps, and he later studied with a renowned Swedish cabinetmaker, James Krenov. His nostalgia for "good," ennobling labor, a romance that may recall the political ideals of the Russian Constructivists, began early, then. And he has not shied away from an emotional allegiance with workers, particularly African-American workers, not executives but executors: "Their hands were always busy, their backs were always bent. It would be very hard for me to turn into the kind of person who is giving orders for the work to be realized by somebody else. I guess I don't trust that."[4] Yet although, in a Marxist framework, the caption "handmade" may imply some of the virtues said to inhere in nonalienated labor, Puryear's handmade work builds on a conceptual dichotomy that reflects the values of capitalist society. For terms like "made to order" and "handmade" connote value and aura. Not only is time a luxury that only the wealthy can afford, but the time-consuming procedures necessary to hand-build unique, large-scale works of art can only be understood today in the context of an economy that trades in time and symbols to convert everything into a commodity. Puryear borrows time from this capitalist economy, slowing down the production process. The singularity of his fabrications, then, is extremely complex, located at an intersection of aspirations derived from high culture and of identification with social class.

All this is literally spliced together with notches, staples, and glue. Puryear is a one-man cross-cultural program of bricolage. His work

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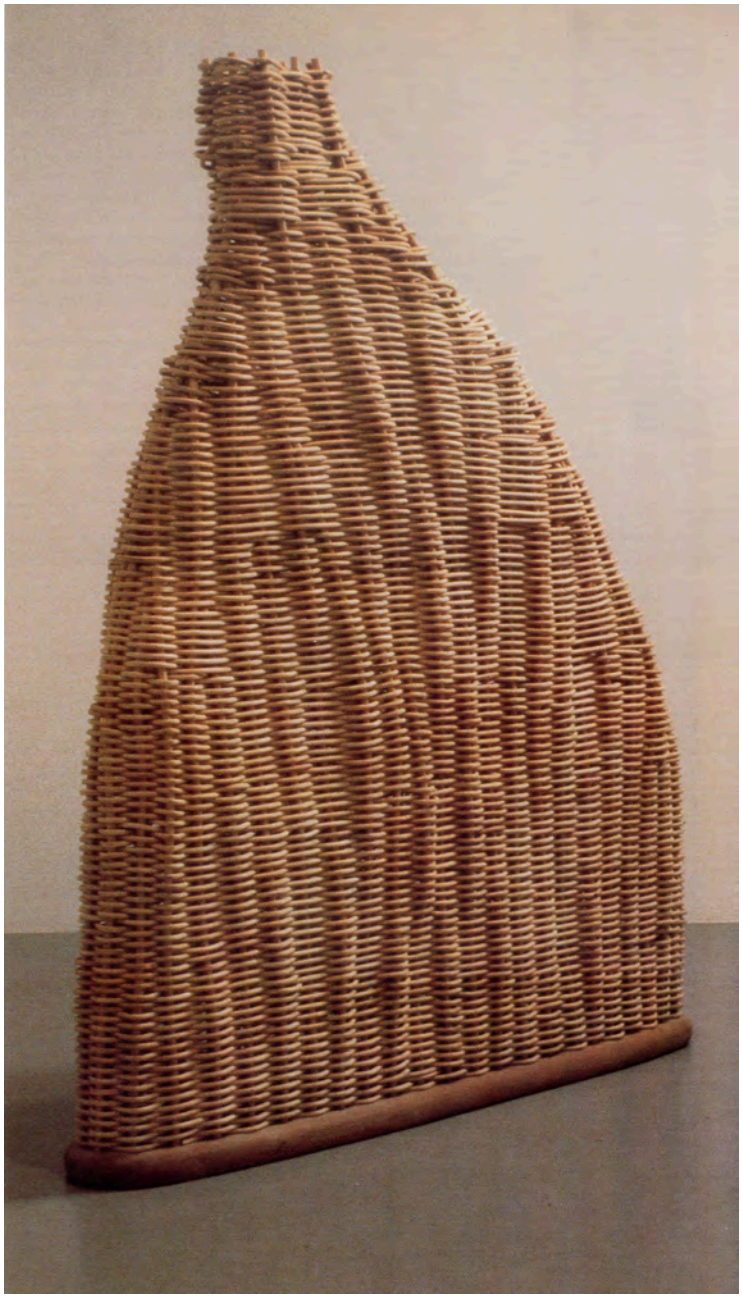
has affinities with that of Constantin Brancusi, the original primitive sophisticate, whose artisanal identification reinforced his attachments to folkloric tradition. The tendency of Brancusi scholars to claim him as a Romanian mystic, and thus to pry him away from Modernism's streamlined internationalism, is reminiscent of various Puryear critics' desire to read this artist's handicraft as a primal link to pre-Modern origins of difference.[5] The biography tells us that Puryear learned these techniques in Africa, Sweden, and New Haven, but his most recent work reveals only his skill, ambitious spatialization, and eccentric imagination.

Puryear's sculptural vocabulary is of three basic types: organic natural forms, implements, and containers. These he recombines in hybrid assemblages, incorporating both wall and floor. Within these categories he has a fondness for joining two opposites in a balance, for example line and mass, thin and fat, open and closed, dark and light, male and female, so that a linear element may serve as a belt or base to outline and restrain curves bulging into volumes, or intricate joinery may cover a simple shape with a complex pattern. Puryear experiments to see how thin-skinned a body can be before becoming a skeleton, how an edge becomes an entity, how a boundary gains substance. He calls on unorthodox combinations and ingenious but incongruous connections: a pointed wooden beak becomes a turquoise plume on an openwork metal cage in Seer, 1984; twisted rawhide strips in rows on the wall suggest a linear narrative in *Some Lines for Jim Beckwourth*, 1978.

Puryear will capitalize on accidental and procedural details, the colors and patterns of contrasting grains and texture, the marks and imprints of tools left on the surface. Conflating materials and finish, he parallels Anselm Kiefer's strategic, symbolic deployment of media such as straw and lead. Poplar, pine pear, maple, oak; Honduras mahogany, Sitka spruce, hickory, basswood, cypress.The sheer physicality and presence of raw and milled wood contribute to the empathic power of Puryear's art along with its insinuation of something vaguely known or remembered.

Puryear's early career as a painter only partially explains the counterfeit membranes—rawhide, tar, mesh—and painted, denaturalized converings in some of his pieces. Rosalind Krauss has demonstrated the significance of decentered sculpture, and certainly the Modern contribution of a hollow core is fundamental to Puryear's project.[6] In part through the broad hint of its title] his 1978 sculpture *Self*—a cedar-and-mahogany hump rising nearly six feet from the floor, and stained black—has become a Puryear signature. The piece operates on the level of metaphor, since its contour and its density do not necessarily coincide. In Puryear works of this family, and there are at least seven that rework the biomorphic shape of *Self* (like steps on the way to an ideal proportion), one is rarely sure how the immediate, tactile surface relates to the internal structure. To a large extent these exteriors, embroidered with



unmotivated details of fabrication, intentionally misrepresent. Almost allegorically, they demonstrate the deception of appearance. This aspect of Puryear's sculpture sharply distinguishes the work from the flat positivism of Minimalism at the same time that it bends repetition, a standard Minimalist tool, into an instrument for constant variation of types. In Sol LeWitt's *Variations on a Cube*, 1974, the variations focus on the basic geometric form. In Puryear's art they are dictated by the choice of materials, which in turn determine fabrication techniques (usually blades, rarely power tools).

What appears substantial and solid in Puryear's oeuvre is typically hollow. Many of his sculptures play on counterfeit volumetric situations defined by linear configurations, or containers over hollow cores. Calibrated to human scale, *Self* and its kindred works radiate a certain disconcerting vitalism and expressive range; they surge forward like the prow of a ship. Perhaps the earliest incarna-

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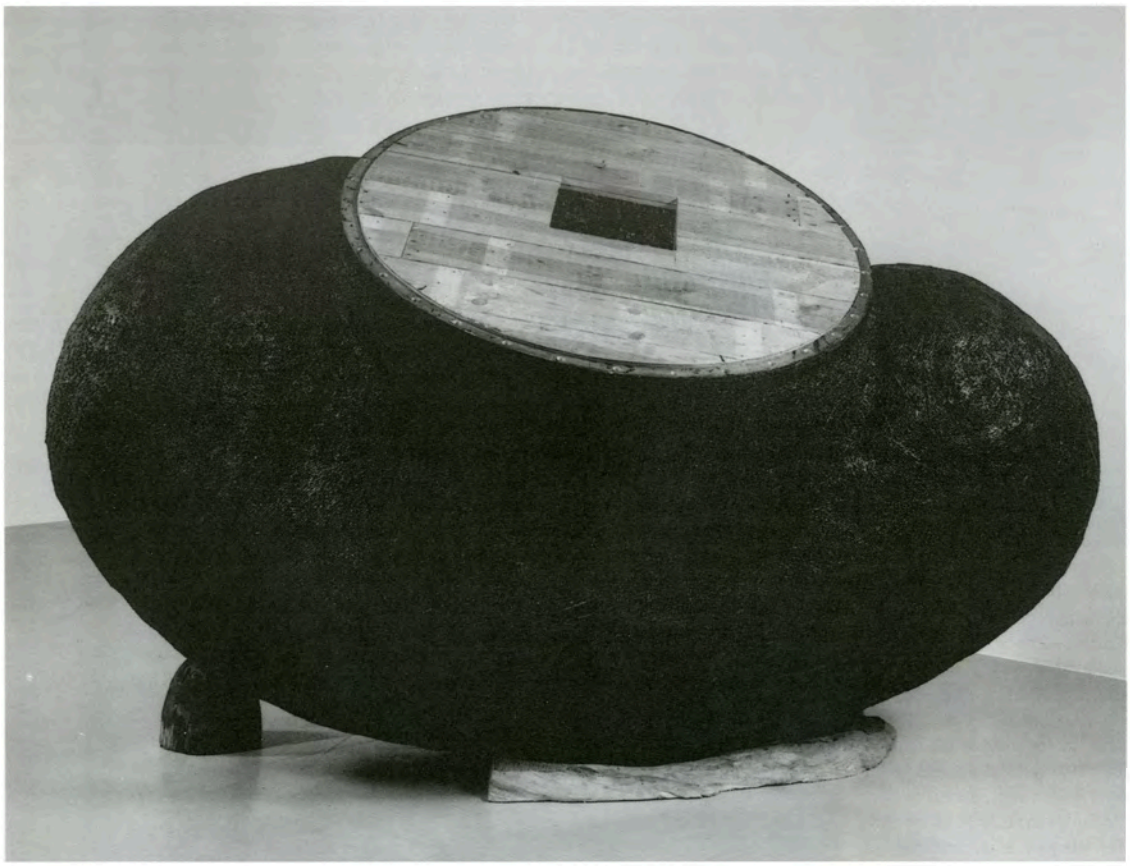
tion of this image is an etching Puryear made in Sweden in 1966, but the form also relates to a stone the artist collected later in Alaska. *Bower*, 1980, is an openwork lattice version; in Seer, the shape is translated into a metal crinoline. *Cask Cascade*, 1985, is faceted vertically and painted black, while *Old Mole*, 1985, repeats the pointed finial of *Cask Cascade* but is built from red-cedar strips, irregularly wrapped, like the bundles of obsessive string-savers. In 1989, Puryear built a narrow, angular version called *Noatak*, after the Alaskan river, sheathed with wide slats of red-cedar veneer, as well as an idiosyncratic flask-shaped rattan version titled The *Charm of Subsistence*. A 1990 variation, *Thicket*, has rough four-inch-thick basswood and cypress beams notched together in a random pattern of diagonals; straining against its recognizable silhouette, it looks as if it had been assembled by an Arts and Crafts artisan gone cubist. It is the bones to the skin of *Noatak*, a bold three-dimensional diagram of process and material producing form.

Like brancusi, Puryear has produced a series of geometrically simplified bird shapes, in various materials from lathe-turned wood to iron. Puryear's birds are falcons, and he occasionally installs them like Egyptian canopic jars in his exhibitions of a full-sized yurtlike piece called *Where the Heart Is (Sleeping Mews)*, 1981–90. This estheticized demonstration of a nomadic shelter (the work has the same anthropological urgency as the early *Cedar Lodge*, 1977) refers both to primitive culture, for example in its bronze throne, and to his own biography, for he has been fascinated with falconry since childhood. The Arctic gyrfalcon's seasonal change of plumage, from white to black, to suit its environment becomes emblematic of the artist's nomadic destiny. By the same metaphor, the yurt becomes a mobile studio.[7] Puryear acknowledges his interest in Audubon's illustrations and his recollection of a 17th-century Mogul painting of a falcon in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts as a point of departure for this installation. Alluding to "transcendental homelessness," natural camouflage, and the paradox of the tamed bird of prey (with implicit analogies interrelating artist, artwork, and patron), Puryear conflates the psychic and the rustic, the art-history archive and personal memory, at the same time that he fulfills the viewer's yearning for the primitive, the last gasp of authenticity.[8]

Bird forms appear again in the "Decoys and Stereotypes" group, 1987, where the decoys referred to are the hunter's painted wooden models of ducks and other prey. Reminiscent of Brancusi's *Leda* of 1920, with its thrusting funnel-shaped neck and smooth round body, Puryear's eccentric sculptures rear up five and six feet from wide bases. But where Brancusi attempted to reimagine the mythical rape so that the woman rather than the male god Zeus becomes a bird, Puryear merges genders as he blurs genres. Brancusi carved his birds in wood and marble and cast them in bronze. Puryear's "Decoys and Stereotypes" are unpolished, variable from all sides, and completely diverse and unpredictable. They follow a group of smaller inventions, "Boy's Toys," 1984, that share their long necks and full bodies but are closer in shape to oilcans and obelisks. The "Boy's Toys" reveal a sense of humor and a willingness to mock the pretensions of abstract monumental sculpture. Their ironic tone engages issues of gender and of phallic iconography in contemporary sculpture and in the artist's own work, where stereotypically female, open forms are



Martin Puryear, *Maroon*, 1987–88, steel mesh, tar, pine, and yellow poplar, 76" x 10' x 78". Collection of the Milwaukee Art Museum.

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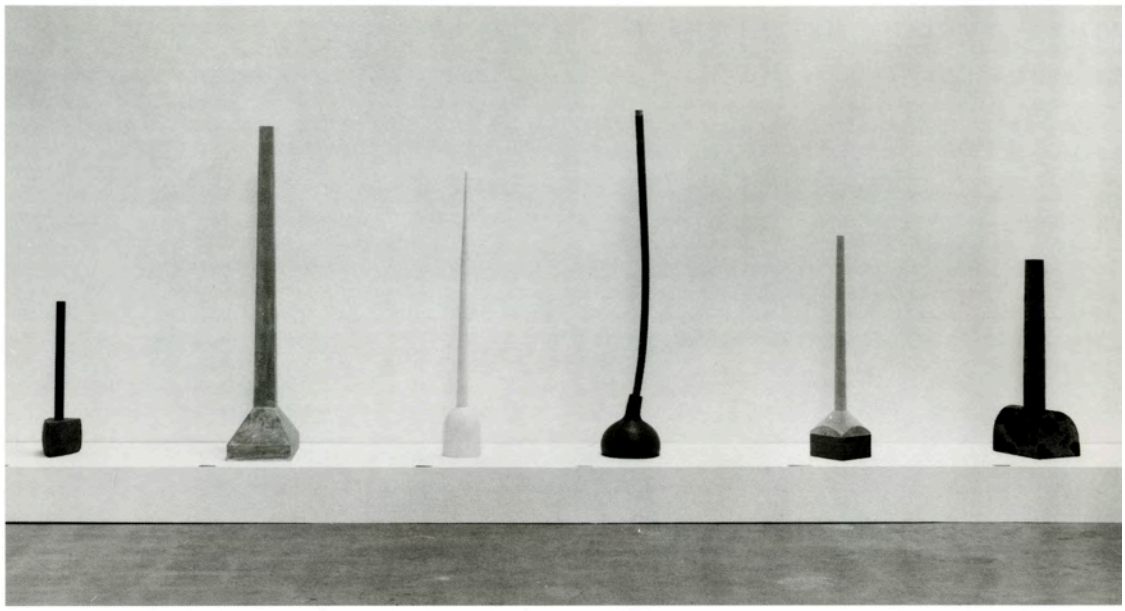
often merged with massive, vertical, stereotypically male forms. But their sense of playfulness explodes in the "Decoys," where the scale in relation to the hunter's model is almost Oldenburgian. Paint not only camouflages but creates moods and disconcerting juxtapositions: stained dark green, *Empire's Lurch*, 1987, is brooding and muscular; the white *Verge*, 1987, becomes bridal (like Brancusi's pristine white *Maiastra* of 1910–12), and the unpainted *Sharp and Flat*, 1987, looks as casually fabricated and domesticated as a knotty-pine rec room. The most recent "Decoy," *Diameter*, 1990, has been flattened to a round steel plate with a short neck protruding like a periscope. The lingering sense of the woodsman evaporates and is replaced by the controlled elegance and multiplying nuances that Puryear extracts from a series of elemental shapes.



Martin Puryear, works from the "Boy's Toys" series, 1984. Installation view.

When Puryear made these pieces, scale had already become a central issue in his work. *Desire*, 1981, for example, a giant wheel 16 feet in diameter, claims grandness through its expansiveness, while the woven cone to which it is linked realizes a relationship of perpetual dependency and estrangement. The bean-shaped element at the base of *To Transcend*, 1987, swells to gigantic proportions, like an outsized chestnut, in *Maroon*, 1987–88; despite its cartoon scale and swollen tar-covered contours, its position and ovoid shape recall Brancusi's *Newborn* of 1915. Puryear can graft carefully pitched architectural scale onto vaguely recognizable objects, so that a belt becomes a fence, a strap, a wall. At the same time, he has a talent for making spatially aggressive work look delicate—*Lever #2*, 1988–89, for example, is over 24 feet long and takes the stage like a giant Venus's-flytrap on its side, but is tempered by the grace of its sinewy blond curves. Finally, scale helps Puryear escape from predictable formal dualities and oppositions, the sheer size of his objects animating a network of significance. It is scale, for example, that effects the trans-formation of anatomically suggestive shapes into sculptures that are hybrid and associative but definitely objects. From one angle, Lever *#1* may look like a figure with a small waist and flared torso, from another a bird form, but the body easily becomes a boat, or perhaps a sarcophagus, and the neck its lid. More to the point, the lid is 14 feet high. There is no easy way to contextualize this towering cedar shape, which rears up from its footlike base with the snap of an animal at bay.

During the '80s, Puryear's work embodied a rebuke to or a refuge from the media-based metacritical constructions of post-Modern artists—the refuge, if you like, of anachronism. He has described his work as providing "an element of...fantasy, escape, imagination, retreat. It is an idea of otherness."[9] Urgent voices of "otherness" are being heard more frequently in the '90s, and have already evoked a heated critical dialogue as well as a predictable backlash. Puryear is often included in exhibitions of African-American artists, and has occasionally used titles that allude to other cultures and to figures from African-American history. Yet he is uncomfortable with ethnic, national, or racial categories and formulas and has removed himself from today's overt political expressions of racial community and social agendas.

Given the increased attention to multicultural expression, and the growing number of attempts to explore and in some cases to exploit the visual representation of the identity and subjectivity of different peoples, the timing of the Puryear retrospective currently at the Art Institute of Chicago is fortuitous. Not only does it celebrate an accomplished career but it offers us an opportunity to test the "otherness" imputed to this artist's work, and the overlap of individual biography and cultural identity. Eschewing ideology,

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protecting his privacy, and emphasizing individualism at the expense of community, Puryear has become a celebrity and a role model, winner of a MacArthur grant and the first prize of the 1989 São Paulo Bienal. He is one of the few African-American artists to receive this kind of national and international fame. Descriptive terms such as "original" and "conservative," "traditional" and "handmade," and validating terms such as "maverick" and "exceptional," have created an adjectival wall around his sculpture, foreclosing anything much beyond formal interpretation. Insights and intentions drawn from his interviews, rehearsed, analyzed, and repeated, have become significant in inverse proportion to their fragmentary character; they have been made to imply ethical and political concerns not necessarily legible in the sculpture. And Puryear's African and Swedish sojourns, which took place more than 20 years ago, have been granted disproportionate emphasis as constitutive moments of esthetic consciousness (though the drawings and etchings he made at the time do supply a kind of authoritative notebook of sources, endowing his work with an ethnographic authenticity).

Obviously Puryear's African, European, and Japanese sabbaticals are by now recollections mediated in three-dimensional forms, continually recaptured and reinterpreted by the artist, who becomes a fieldworker of his own experiences, crafting his artistic identity from a broader category of cultural unity. His sculptures have been analyzed as considered translations of the cultures he has studied and visited, almost as souvenirs of those trips he made—as if these remarkably porous constructions were instruments of cultural tourism, and ultimately projections of Western fantasies about exotic geography. But just as much at stake in this work are some myths of American identity. One senses a nostalgic impulse on the part of his audiences, in fact, to search his art for evidence of a reinvention of America, this time acknowledging its appropriations from other cultures, and premised on the desire to conserve the integrity and values connoted by skilled labor and to resist a sci-fi, high-tech future. With the accelerating depletion of the world's natural resources, these odd constructions and esthetic traps are more than ever at home in a museum, as invented relics of what American culture once represented. Talismans to artistic originality, they linger in an ideal of redemptive wilderness.

Judith Russi Kirshner is a regular contributor to *Artforum* and the director of the School of Art and Design at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

NOTES

1. William Boyd, *Brazzaville Beach*, London: Sinclair-Stevenson. Ltd., 1990, p. 86.

2. Peter W. Boswell, "Martin Puryear," in *Sculpture: Inside Outside*, exhibition catalogue, Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, and New York: Rizzoli, 1988, p. 197.

3. See ibid., p. 189.

4. Martin Puryear, quoted in Dwight Y. Gast, "Martin Puryear: Sculpture as an Act of Faith," *The Journal of Art* 2 no. 1., New York. September/October 1989, p. 7.

5. See, for example, Robert Storr, "Martin Puryear: The Hands' Proportion," in Neal Benezra, *Martin Puryear*, exhibition catalogue, Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, and New York: Thames and Hudson, 1991, pp. 132–33.

6. See Rosalind E. Krauss, Passages in *Modern Sculpture*, Cambridge, Mass.: The M.I.T. Press. 1977, p. 106.

7. See Kathy Halbreich, "Connections: Martin Puryear," exhibition brochure, Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1990. n.p.

8. See Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellects*, Modern Lives, Chicago: at the University Press, 1990, p. 188.

9. Puryear, quoted in Alan Artner, "A Sculptor's 2 Sides: Martin Puryear and his public and private art," *The Chicago Tribune*, 1 February 1987, section 13, p. 14.

The retrospective "Martin Puryear" opened last month at the Art Institute of Chicago and remains there until 5 January 1992. It then travels to the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C., 5 February–10 May; the Museum of Contemporary Art. Los Angeles, 26 July–4 October; and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, 8 November–3 January 1993.

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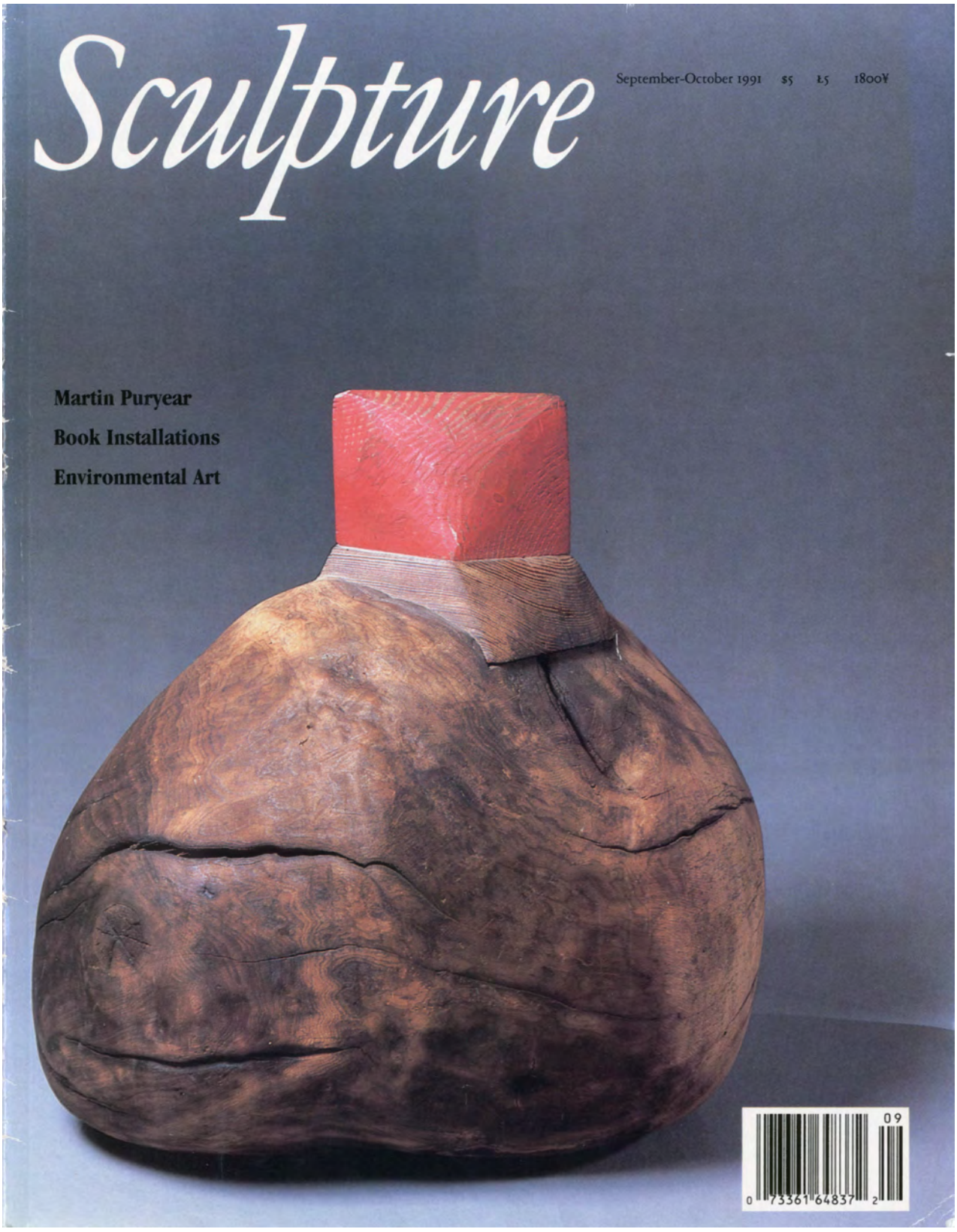

Melrod, George. "Martin Puryear: The Art of the Decoy." *Sculpture*, September/October 1991, cover, pp. 30–37.

Martin Puryear: The Art of the Decoy

George Melrod

Martin Puryear's Grand Prize at the São Paulo Bienal in 1989 marked a significant event in both the career of the artist and in the annals of American art. Not only was Puryear the first black American to win selection as representative of his country at a major international exhibit, but his work represents a craftsmanlike, hands-on approach to materials that is distinctly at odds with the mass-produced aesthetic of the appropriationist era. Though Puryear's work addresses many of the same issues as that of other post-Minimalists—issues like cultural fragmentation and a loss of identity in a mass culture—it does so from a far less cynical point of view. Instead of merely "taking," Puryear steeps his globally selected motifs in a deep well of personal analysis. But like the tradesmen he emulates, Puryear subsumes his ego to the process of "making."

The objects that finally emerge, for all their aesthetic presence, represent a disciple's tribute to each object's individual processes of construction. His stubborn workmanship expresses a celebration of labor, forged with a Zen-like sense of concentration. Like Brancusi before him, Puryear has taken the tools of the craftsman to fashion objects of sublime abstraction, to such a degree that his work has been disparaged for its beauty. However, his art is informed by a deep yearning for belonging, giving it a subversive subtext that belies its outer elegance. Anguished yet consoling, Puryear's sculpture is no more "art for art's sake" than Chekhov's stories are prose for prose's sake.

In confirmation of the artist's new-found renown, a major retrospective of his work will open at The Art Institute of Chicago in November of this year. Over the course of the next year, it will travel to the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C., to The Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles and finally to the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Each of Puryear's complex, tactile works demands the viewer's thoughtful consideration. By assembling so much of it in one place at one time, this show provides singular cause for celebration.

Born in 1941 in Washington, D.C., Puryear is of the same generation as other post-Minimalists who gained note in the 1970s. As a boy, he attended a segregated public grade school and developed interests in ornithology, falconry and archery, as well as a talent for making things. After studying biology and art in college, he joined the Peace Corps and was assigned to Sierra Leone in West Africa. Acutely aware of his identity as an American examining African culture, Puryear consciously decided to study with the local carpenters and cabinetmakers, rather than replicate religious tribal artifacts whose inner meanings were inaccessible to him. Moving on to Stockholm's Royal Academy of Art, Puryear traveled around Sweden and gained further insight into Scandinavian skills of joinery, basketry and furniture making. When the artist arrived at Yale in 1969, he found himself suddenly cast into the cauldron of Minimalism.

The all-pervasive object fetishism of Minimalism stood in stark contrast to the emphasis on function and process of traditional crafts, something the artist much admired. Indeed, Minimalism's cool, industrial ideology represented the polar opposite from the hands-on, almost antiquated sensibility of the craftsman.

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Left: ***Self***, 1978. Cedar and mahogany, 69 x 48 x 25 in. Collection of Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, in memory of Elinor Ashton. Courtesy The Art Institute of Chicago.

Below: ***Rawhide Cone***, 1980 (original 1974, destroyed 1977). Rawhide, 51 x 63 x 32 in. Courtesy The Art Institute of Chicago.

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Above: ***The Spell***, 1985. Pine, cedar and steel, 56 x 84 x 65 in. Courtesy The Art Institute of Chicago.

Opposite: ***Maroon***, 1987–88. Steel, tar, pine and poplar, 6½ x 10 x 6½ ft. Collection of Milwaukee Art Museum, gift of Contemporary Art Society. Courtesy The Art Institute of Chicago.

While Minimalism defined the art object as the impersonal product of a technological society, craft demanded the laborious efforts of a skilled pair of hands. While Minimalism set the art object on an untouchable pedestal, craft approached the "object" as a tool for living. As Puryear's art evolved over the next 20 years, both of these opposing philosophies had to be addressed. From their conflicting dialogue, Puryear's own voice eventually emerged.

Many of his works from the 1970s navigated the discourse between natural material and geometric form. Yet even these early pieces are charged with a sense of rootlessness and a longing for connection. Among these experimental works are laminated strips of willow and works employing rope or skin, as in the 1974 *Rawhide Cone*. One early technique Puryear came to favor was mounting strips of wood, finished in various degrees, along a wall for viewers to read, as in *Some Tales* (1975–77) and *Some Lines for Jim Beckwourth* (1978). Evoking a passage through space and time, these pieces further allowed Puryear to refine his craft of finishing wood.

Perhaps the culmination of this period is his 1980 installation (also at The Art Institute of Chicago) titled *Equation for Jim Beckwourth*, in honor of the black frontiersman who helped explore the American West. Incorporating a wall of gnarled sapling branches, a rawhide cone and other shafts of wood, the display centered around a dark pine block capped with a parabolic dome of earth. The simple wood marker—caked with cracked black earth—is at once a memorial to a neglected black trailblazer and a recognition of the weight and substance of his skin color. That Beckwourth had a white father and eventually became a Crow Indian chief, confirms the search for identity underlying his physical pathfinding.

In the late '70s the strips of wood evolved into a series of circles, which Puryear continued to investigate for several years. Frequently incomplete, as in *Dream of Pairing* (1981), or verging tantalizingly on completion, as in *Primavera* (1979), the rings brought a new, subtly spiritual intensity to the nature-artifice rondo. For the artist, they provided a precise surface to explore the application of color.

At the same time, Puryear's compulsion toward establishing place markers led to a sequence of shelters and fins. These fins—which at once resemble keels or rudders in their rigid directionality, and cowls, such as might be used to hood a falcon—presage

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some of the complex themes that inhabit the artist's later works. The hollowness at the core of so many of these pieces bespeaks not only the existential longing for a center that is at the root of Puryear's oeuvre, but gives the work a very tactile sense of liberation and containment that contributes greatly to its physical presence.

Self (1978), a smooth, asymmetrical, black conical shell, remains among the most handsome and revealing of his early works. The piece is at first glance solid and massive, but it is in fact composed of thin layers of cedar and mahogany, which enclose a hollow core. Shaped vaguely like an egg or a rocket nose cone, *Self* seems very much a container of some potent, unrealized entity. Coated with a self-consciously thin, inexact patina of black paint, the piece represents one of Puryear's early meditations on the veneer of blackness and the struggle to define selfhood beneath skin color. That the "self" in question is never defined lends the work an unexpected magnanimity, inviting the viewer to identify with, and perhaps find emotional refuge in, its casing.

Taken as a group, these fins provide insight into two of Puryear's signature traits: his tendency to assemble large forms out of smaller elements and his tendency to approach each object as the exemplar of a different trade. For example, the elegant *Bower* (1980) evokes the craftsmanship of a boatbuilder, even as its flowing, ribbed curvature seems more organic than hand-wrought. The mortar-and-fieldstone *Sentinel* (1982), set outdoors on the campus of Gettysburg College in Pennsylvania, implies masonry as it echoes an awareness of its Civil War surroundings. *The Charm of Subsistence* (1989), made of rattan and gumwood, clearly mimics the basket weaver's craft, although the open nipple at its top hints at aspirations toward fulfillment that defy utility. At once gravestones and mileposts, these works all act as stelae commemorating a passage through time, while simultaneously seeking to establish a sense of place.

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Not a linear artist, Puryear has evolved on several planes at once, particularly in the mid-'80s, and to categorize his works as belonging to any one group inaccurately impugns their individuality. Some pieces—such as *Cask Cascade* (1985) and *Old Mole* (1985)—resemble horns or perhaps birds' heads. Others, such as *Greed's Trophy* (1984), resemble nets or cages. *Seer* (1984) juxtaposes both motifs, setting a tusklike horn of brilliant teal atop a wire cage. *The Spell* (1985), composed of two conical volumes sitting one within the other on the floor, is among the artist's most potent images. A formal tour de force, it is at once angular and sensuous, an empty cornucopia drawing the viewer into its geometric whirlpool.

In his invocations of shelters, the artist employs many of the same motifs and themes, in particular fusing representations of sanctuary and enforced mobility. *Cedar Lodge*, installed in 1978 at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., presages the formal thrust of *Self*. Made of red cedar, fir and rawhide, the conical shelter is sheathed in rings and resolves in an open dome of arcing wooden strips. *Where the Heart Is (Sleeping Mews)*, first built in 1977 and rebuilt several times over the next decade, is modeled on a yurt (a nomadic Mongolian dwelling). The identical, lathe-produced wooden gyrfalcons caged within the structure echo this imposed nomadism. Symbolizing an undifferentiated "race," they also serve as a wry commentary on the issue of perceived racial uniformity.

Each work, for all its incompleteness, meets the gallery floor in some sort of base, grounding it, at least temporarily. Not so *Maroon* (1987–88), one of the artist's most important works, made primarily of tar and wire mesh. Shaped roughly like a giant bean or egg sac, the enormous work is set on its side, so that its circular, wooden base is turned at an upward angle. The name, *Maroon*, invokes the term used to describe

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colonies of escaped slaves, who were stranded in the Caribbean in the 1700s. The implicit analogy is that the African-American community today is equally stranded and, perhaps, just as artificial. Despite its brooding mien, the work exudes a swollen, biological ripeness that, merged with its enormity, suggests great fertility, like some vital seed ark that has been washed ashore. This fertility is brought to fruition in *To Transcend* (1987), in which an arcing shaft springs forth from a similar kidney bean form to resolve in a bowl-like crown as in a triumphal lamp.

Many of Puryear's works attempt to focus our attention, redirecting the object fetishism of Minimalism into a means of transcendent identification. Interestingly, in 1982 Puryear traveled across Japan on a Guggenheim grant, studying gardens, shrines and architecture. The resonances are evident in Puryear's outdoor pieces, including *Bodark Ark* (1982), a sweeping semicircular arc with a 200-foot radius, centered around a modest bronze throne, and *Knoll* (1983), a spiraling, circular rise of concrete, surrounded by plantings. Gently choreographing natural landscapes into precise, artificial foci for meditation, these works indirectly suggest Japanese rock gardens, even while they superficially eschew refinement.

In the late 1980s Puryear pursued a series of works with raised necks and oblong bases, which he premiered at the David McKee Gallery in New York in 1987 as "Decoys." This group, which continued to mature through his São Paulo exhibition two years later, represents his most complex and multilayered work to date. On the surface, these pieces resemble duck decoys or birds. But as their name implies, the works are more accurately avian Trojan horses, alluring and deceptive, deflecting attention from their interior payload of identity. Like Darwinian prototypes struggling to adapt to an unwelcoming social environment, they are at once a part of a piece and brilliantly, insistently individualistic.

If these sculptures imitate birds, however, they house other powerful metaphors. Their heads raised alertly above the gallery, the pieces express intense sexuality, both in terms of longing for union and boasting inner potency. At the same time, they also evoke ships, or tools with raised handles—an apt analogy, given Puryear's equation of physical labor with catharsis.

What is perhaps most impressive, however, is the way that each work is so unique in conception and design. Beyond simply individualizing them by craft, Puryear imbues each work with its own distinct personality. The pensive *Untitled* (1987) loops shyly in on itself with a ringed neck, like a glossy black swan that still sees itself as an ugly duckling. *Timber's Turn* (1987), triangular and rough, made of raw planks of mahogany, cedar and fir, teeters on an uneven base, as if in acknowledgment of migratory slave boats. *Lever #1* (1988) is taut and formal, its handlelike head guiding an almost coffinlike body, its blond cedar hull flecked with metal staples.

Opposite: from the "Decoy" series, São Paulo Bienal, 1989. Installation view. Background: *The Charm of Subsistence*, 1989. Rattan and gumwood. Foreground: *Lever #2*, 1988–89. Rattan, ponderosa pine, ash and cypress. Photo: Sarah Wells.

Left: *Timber's Turn*, 1987. Mahogany, red cedar and Douglas fir, 87 x 61 x 48 in. Collection of Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C. Courtesy David McKee Gallery, New York.

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***Lever #1*, 1988. Red cedar, 169 x 134 x 18 in. A. James Speyer Memorial, with additional funds provided by UNR Industries in honor of James W. Alsdorf, Barbara Neff and Solomon Byron Smith funds. Photo: Thomas Cinoman, courtesy The Art Institute of Chicago.**

Poised keenly at attention, *Untitled* (1989) resembles a giant, scuffed door wedge, but despite its grittiness, glides forward with undeterred nobility. Perhaps the most dramatic piece of all is *Untitled* (1988), an alluring biomorphic net, throwing its head forward like some primordial being casting bait, as if to pull itself nearer to some goal or metamorphose into a higher stage of existence.

If the earlier "decoys" were stark and angular, the works from 1988–89 are more curvaceous, with the grace of their physique that much more realized, the arc of their longing that much more refined. Many of these later pieces also examine qualities of coloration, as if their very darkness were part of the deception, camouflaging their animate essence. Set together, Puryear's decoys are a vivid menagerie of adaptation and yearning and a sensual celebration of media and craft.

While Puryear's allegory deals specifically with the issue of blackness, the metaphor can be extended to the American experience as a whole. Demographers predict that by the year 2020 over half the population of the United States will be nonwhite. However, as a nation of immigrants, we are all already exiles of a sort. It is a testament to Puryear's craft that he manages to pinpoint the unique poignancy of the black American experience and at the same time define it as archetypally American. Although the sense of displacement and striving to fit in are particularly apropos to the black community, Puryear's search for place and identity and belonging are equally applicable to the diaspora of all Americans—white and nonwhite alike. But then Puryear goes a step beyond, locating the essence of the individual self as existing beneath—and independent of—the veneer of color. In the end, it is this underlying, existential universality that lets his work connect on such a deep, essential level.

Thus, those who would emphasize Puryear's use of "tribal" or non-Western motifs, or his singularity as a black artist, ultimately do him a disservice; Puryear's work is not the result of someone striving to integrate African themes into Western art, but the legacy of an American artist striving to understand the nature of his exile and recover his identity as an individual through the process of making objects.

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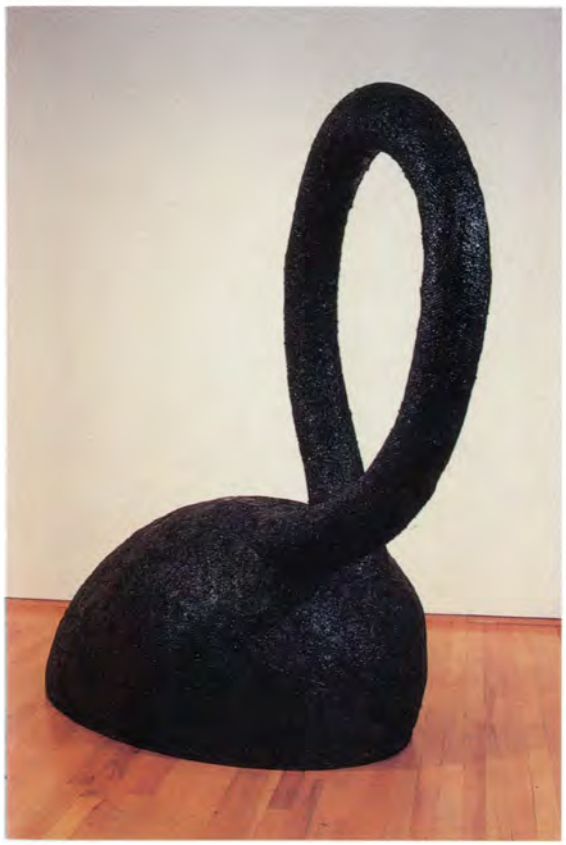

Top: ***Sharp and Flat***, 1987. Pine planking, 64 x 73 x 42½ in. Collection of Mr. and Mrs. H. W. Anderson, California. Courtesy David McKee Gallery, New York.

Bottom: ***Untitled***, 1987. Wire mesh covered with tar, 65½ x 76½ x 35½ in. Courtesy David McKee Gallery, New York.

Ironically, what makes Puryear's sculpture so expressive of its time is that the cultural pluralism—or "atomization"—that he highlights and seeks to transcend in American society mirrors the atomized nature of the contemporary art world. In his exceptional attention to process and artful balance between natural media and formal artifice, Puryear sets a rigorous standard to which the majority of the sculptural community can only aspire. Navigating a course between refined abstraction, process art and subjective vision, he has laid a map that will surely prove to be vital to the next generation of post-Minimalist sculptors.

In the meantime, like some modern-day Noah staving off a flood of cultural white noise, Martin Puryear doggedly builds his arks of identity. While the voyage is his own, he has left the doors ajar so those of us similarly cast adrift may take solace in his modest offer of sanctuary.

"Martin Puryear" will be on view at The Art Institute of Chicago November 2–January 5, 1992. It will then travel to the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C. (February 4–May 10), The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (August 2–October 11), and the Philadelphia Museum of Art (November 8–January 3, 1993).

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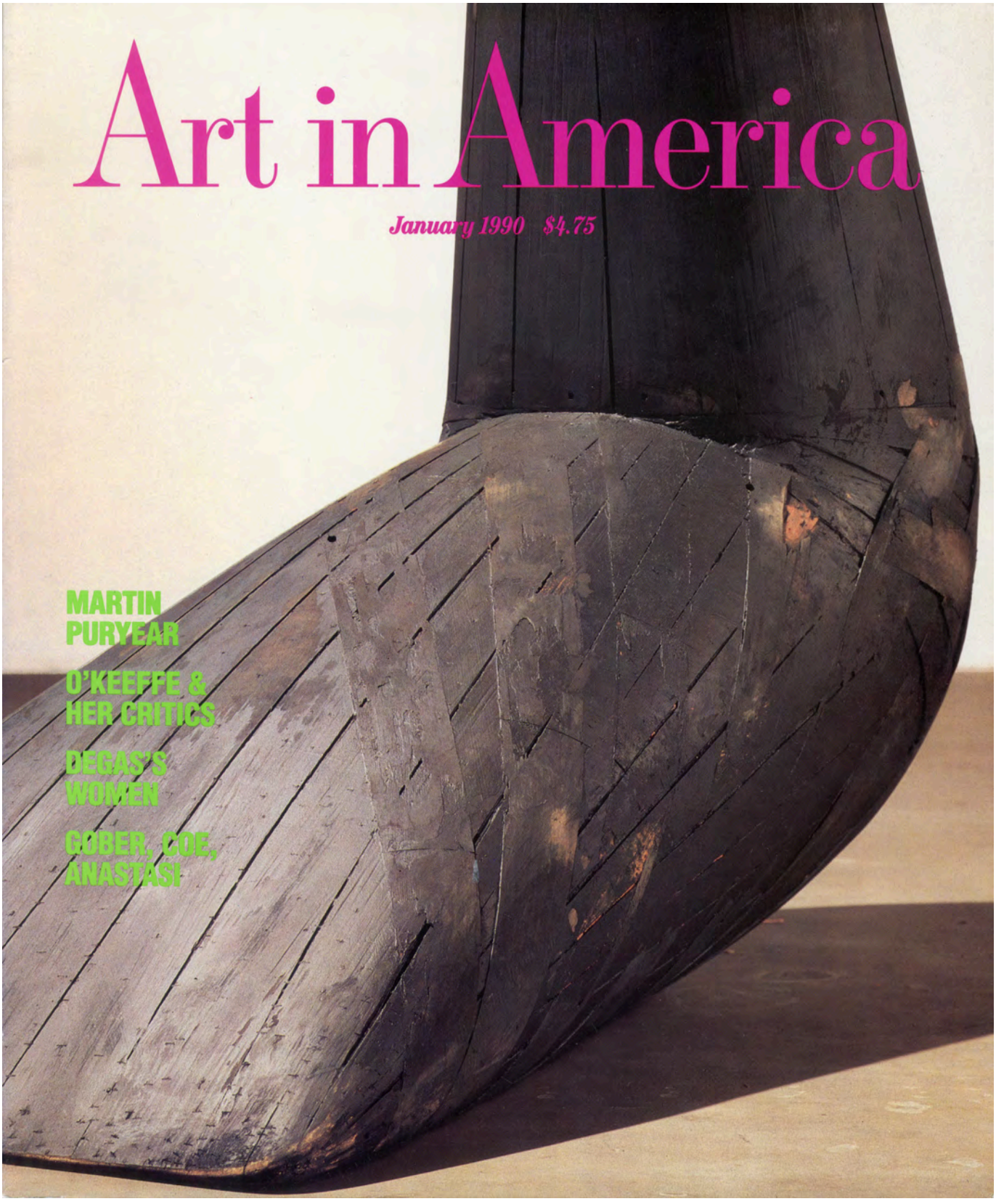

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Martin Puryear's installation, 1989, which won first prize at the 20th São Paulo Bienal. Photo Thor Crespi, courtesy USIA.

Intuition's Disciplinarian

Drawing on an unusual range of Western and non-Western sources, sculptor Martin Puryear creates works of sophisticated facture and enigmatic presence.

BY NANCY PRINCENTHAL

At once esthete and craftsman, Martin Puryear figures prominently among contemporary sculptors. Recently the U.S. representative at the São Paulo Bienal (which ended on Dec. 10), where his exhibition of nine sculptures was awarded first prize by the Bienal jury, he is also the recipient of prestigious Guggenheim and MacArthur fellowships. With characteristic reticence, Puryear says he is chary of accepting the role of mentor for the currently flourishing group of abstract organic sculptors. "I never wanted to be part of the consequent series of sculptors of the '80s,"[1] he insists. But the "elegant austerity"[2] of his work, its strength, inventiveness and surprising variety, are such that a wide range of younger sculptors reveal either a strong affinity with or an outright indebtedness to him.

By age, Puryear, who was born in 1941, can be viewed as a Post-Minimalist. Certainly he shared in a loosely collective rebellion against the hyperrational forms and insistent physicality prevalent in '60s sculpture. But his career has developed more slowly than those of many of his colleagues of the same generation, such as Joel Shapiro and Jackie Winsor, and his work has begun to

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Untitled, 1988, rattan, ponderosa pine, ash, cypress, 71 by 293 by 55 inches. Courtesy Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles.

receive wide exposure only in the last few years.

His most recent gallery show, last spring at the Margo Leavin Gallery in Los Angeles, was comprised of five freestanding sculptures. As in his previous appearance at David McKee in New York, where he presented a series called "Decoys," there was a subtly expressed aquatic theme, with works hinting at a bird's neck, a duck's foot and a ship's rudder. As is true of much of Puryear's recent work, these sculptures all

Puryear is best known for a kind of form that is sweeping and simple, with a hint of latent functionality, elegant despite the scruffy surface which bears the tracks of staples used in the lamination process.

possess a reserve and a stately grace that is too seductive for some tastes. The scale is also slightly unnerving, since the new works (they are all untitled) have a delicacy of form and an attention to detail more common in smaller sculptures; these pieces all measure over six feet in at least one dimension.

The largest of the group (24 feet in length) is also the most ethereal: an unpainted construction joining a fluted, conical rattan cage to a long swooping wooden neck, which meets the floor with a little round knob. This sculpture takes hold of the considerable space it occupies not by mass but by motion. It functions more insistently as a gesture—it vaguely suggests a swan dipping its beak in the water—than as a form. Another sculpture, made of lead-gray painted pine, also recalls a long-necked bird, but this time with a more obdurate presence: its narrow, sharply arched body is firmly anchored to the floor, the final curve of its neck lifted proudly in the air.

Two of the new sculptures suggest aspects of boats—a natural association for Puryear, who has observed boatbuilding techniques all over the world as an outgrowth of his long-standing interest in woodcraft. One sculpture, again gray

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Puryear grew up in Washington, D.C., the eldest of seven children of a postal worker and a teacher. He attended Catholic University of America, switching from biology to graduate in 1963 as an art major with an emphasis on painting. In 1964-66 he served with the Peace Corps in Sierra Leone, teaching English, French, art and biology.

Untitled, 1985, Honduras mahogany, 27¼ feet circumference; installed at the River Road CTA Station, Chicago. Courtesy David McKee Gallery.

Sentinel, *1982, mortared fieldstone, 10½ by 8½ by 3½ feet; in Gettysburg, Penn. Courtesy David McKee Gallery.*

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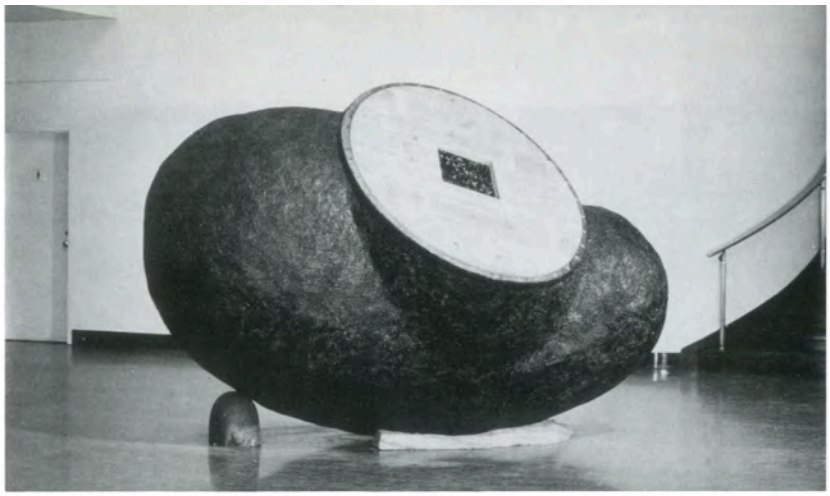
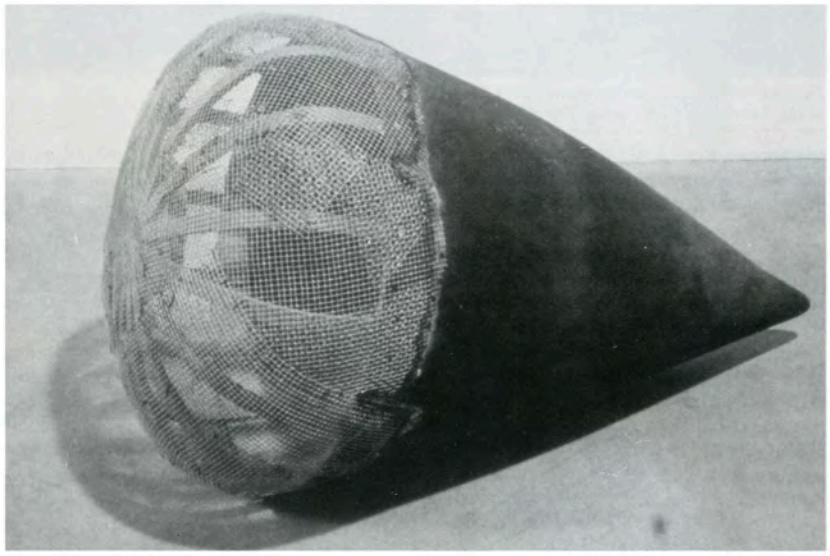
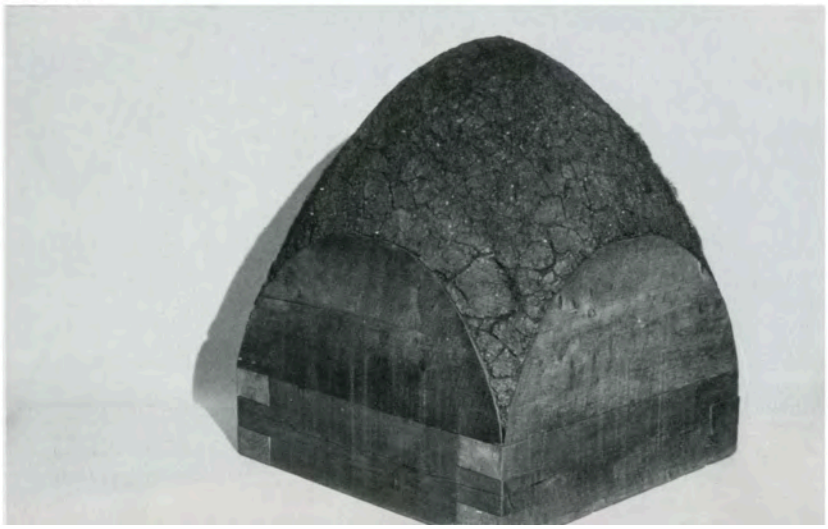


Maroon, ***1988, wire mesh, tar and wood, 90 by 103 by 67½ inches. Installed at the Brooklyn Museum last season.***



Mus, ***1984, painted wood and wire mesh, 44 by 26 inches. Courtesy Jamaica Arts Center.***

For Beckwourth, ***1980, earth, pitch pine, oak, 40 by 34 by 34 inches.***



This period in Africa was crucial for the young black artist's development. Although he continued to draw and make woodcuts, his experience there of local woodcraft helped to turn his attention to the possibilities of wood sculpture. Puryear then went north to study sculpture and printmaking at Stockholm's Royal Academy of Art. During his two-year stay in Sweden he studied Scandinavian woodworking techniques and began to assemble his first wood sculptures. After returning to the U.S., Puryear completed his education at Yale, earning an MFA in 1971. He subsequently taught at Fisk University and the University of Maryland, and in 1982 a Guggenheim award enabled him to spend a year studying another non-Western culture: that of Japan, and in particular Japanese domestic architecture and gardens. Puryear was 46 before he had his first solo show in New York, at David McKee Gallery in 1987—though by that time all four major Manhattan museums had shown his work.

Puryear's two years in Sierra Leone no doubt stimulated the feeling for tribal art that can be indirectly sensed throughout his sculpture—in his attitude toward working process, for instance, or in his near-animistic regard for the wholeness of the finished form. And some of the references in his work to non-Western experience and artisanship are quite explicit. There is, for example, the series of installations from 1978–80 dedicated to the legendary black frontiersman Jim Beckwourth and the highly regarded 1981 installation "Where the Heart Is," inspired by the yurt, the domed portable dwelling used by nomadic Mongols.

Yet despite Puryear's obvious interest in many artistic and cultural traditions, his art has seldom attempted to establish direct connections with tribal or ethnic models. Puryear has made his reputation instead as one of the leading contemporary interpreters of organic form. This identification has been underscored by his assertions that "nature can be as visually interesting to me as art" and "a zoo can be as stimulating as an art museum." Nevertheless Puryear's enthusiasm for nature has definite limits. Recalling a month-long trip to Alaska, the artist remarks, "Everything out there was very open, and I began to impose order on it. The landscape, as incredible and expansive and free as it was, was not an esthetic experience. I did not feel nourished as an artist."

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The tension between the impulse to defer to nature and the desire to resist or master it is, in fact, evident throughout Puryear's work, and nowhere more so than in his attitude toward materials and craft. "How an object will be fashioned has always been, for me, part of the conceptual process," Puryear has said. His sensitivity to the materials he works with and his close involvement with technique are integral to his sculpture. An unremitting concern for the integrity of wood, for instance, is visible to the practiced eye in such details as planed rather than sanded surfaces; Puryear prefers the former because they are cleaner and more intact, though still slightly textured. Roberta Smith criticized Puryear's work in 1984 for what she called its "excessive craftsmanship."[4] While Puryear acknowledges that his dexterity has sometimes been seen as a liability, he insists on the value of craft to his work. "I enjoy and need to work with my hands," he has said. "They give you a measure of the extensions of the mind and body. . . . As I work on a particular piece, it evolves slowly into its own unique statement of invention."[5] What interests him most, he explains, is the "congruence of principles that exert themselves in nature as well as craft." The way that an individual art work develops, he thinks, might rightly be called an organic process.

A tension runs throughout Puryear's work between the insinuatingly graceful and the unabashedly awkward. The kind of sensuous surface appeal that marks his sculptures of joined and laminated wood, for example, is conspicuously absent from many other of his works, like those made of a compound of tar and wire mesh that is a favored boatyard material. This opposition was highlighted in a 1988–89 installation at the Brooklyn Museum. It paired Puryear's 1981 *Desire*, an elegant wooden structure combining a latticework bell jar and an enormous spoked wheel, with *Maroon*, a

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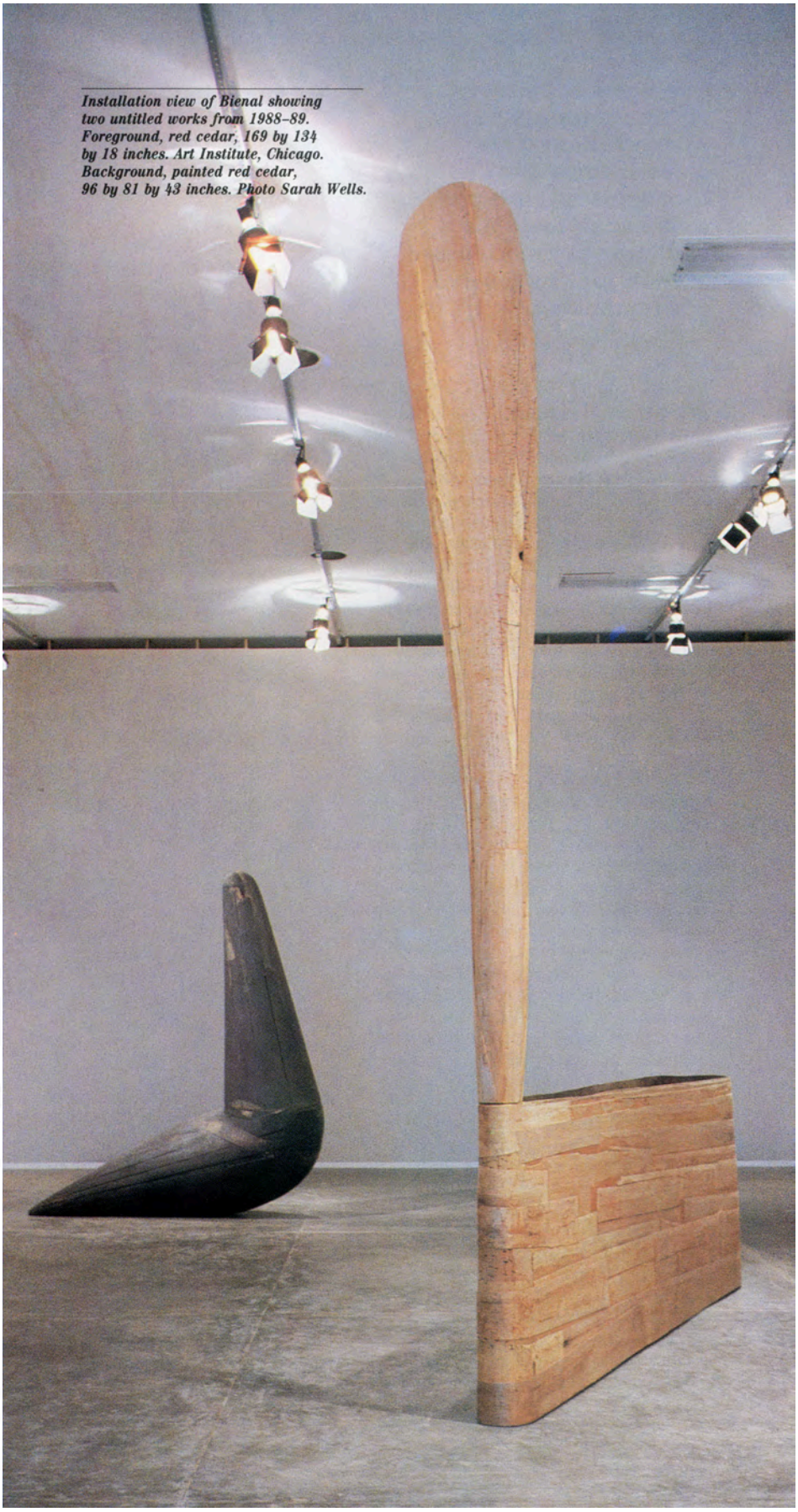

Installation view of Bienal showing two untitled works from 1988–89. Foreground, red cedar, 169 by 134 by 18 inches. Art Institute, Chicago. Background, painted red cedar, 96 by 81 by 43 inches. Photo Sarah Wells.

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tar-and-mesh sculpture made for the exhibition.

As big and ungainly as a beach trawler, *Maroon* is an oval of permeable tarred mesh, chocked with two mismatched pieces of wood. It has a single, wood-faced square aperture which opens into an interior that, though literally black as pitch, is devoid of both terror and romance. What it has in abundance, instead, is a kind of rugged, entropic energy that seems to taunt the blocked rotation of *Desire*, the other piece, whose lovely wooden wheel is rendered immobile by an axle fixed to the finial of the latticework cone. Both works share the auratic sense of presence that informs so much of Puryear's work.

There is another long-standing opposition built into Puryear's sculpture—that between open and closed forms. The contrast between *Desire* and *Maroon*, for example, is like that between the open armature of the shell-shaped *Bower* (1980) and the self-contained *He* and *She* (1979). This distinction between self-enclosed works and those that seem emergent or exploratory also seems related to the continued play between Puryear's freestanding sculptural works and the wall pieces that sometimes (as in "Where the Heart Is") serve as their formal counterparts. In his attenuated wall sculptures, as well as in his schematized latticework pieces, Puryear seems to defy the hermeticism of the closed forms that so often marks his work. Some of these wall sculptures (such as the two included in the 1989 Whitney Biennial) are spare linear constructions that waver and circle across the wall; at first glance they seem as much drawn as built. Nonetheless these linear pieces retain a compelling physical presence. As the art historian Jonathan Crary wrote of Puryear's early wall sculptures, "It is perhaps misleading to talk about drawing, since that can imply a sculpture rooted in pictorialism, whereas Puryear's . . . line does not function illusionistically. . . . The material presence of the assembled objects remains primary."[6]

Puryear's sensitivity to the materials he works with and his close involvement with technique are integral to his sculpture. His work has been criticized, in fact, for "excessive craftsmanship."

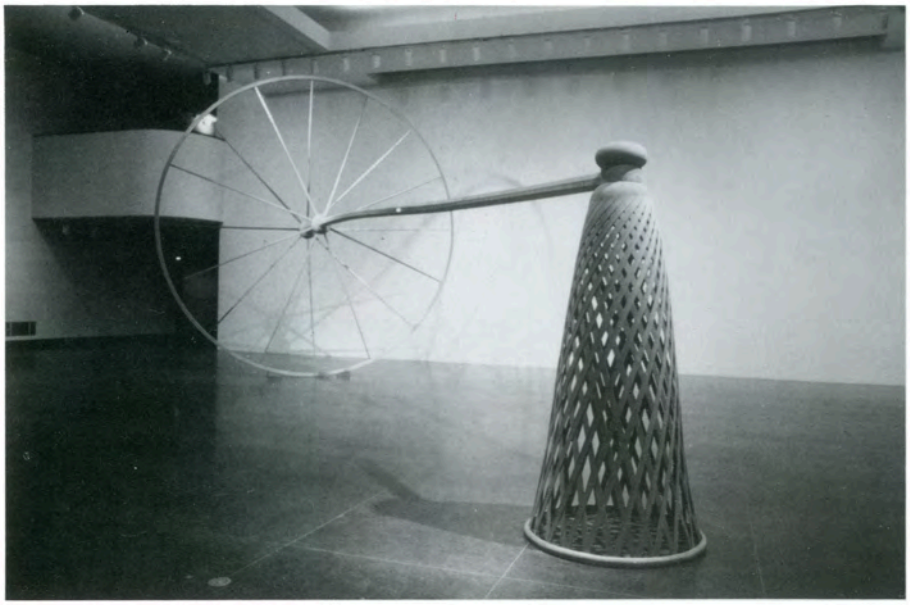
At the time of the Museum of Modern Art's 1984 exhibition " 'Primitivism' in 20th-Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern," curator William Rubin's un-

Princenthal, Nancy. "Intuition's Disciplinarian." *Art in America*, January 1990, cover, pp. 130–37, 181.

apologetic bias toward viewing tribal art in formal, Western terms provoked a sharp reaction, especially from artists and theorists who insisted on acknowledging the full range of impulses at work in the art of other cultures. This argument was anticipated by Kirk Varnedoe in his catalogue essay examining the resurgence of "primitivism" in contemporary art. "Early modern artists," he wrote, "pulled tribal art, figuratively, out of the ethnological and natural-history museums; the new primitivists have pushed Western art back into those same domains."[7]

The emphasis Varnedoe placed on the importance of extravisual considerations in the contemporary approach to non-Western art has increasingly become a commonplace. And like the other artists Varnedoe included in his discussion, such as Eva Hesse and Jackie Winsor, Puryear's interests certainly go beyond the merely formal. The eerie, almost shamanistic sense of presence that emanates from Puryear's work has repeatedly been singled out by critics, and often explained in light of the artist's firsthand experience of tribal art and the impulses that inform it. Yet Puryear's work must also be considered in relation to the organic strain of high modernist sculpture—the work of Arp, Brancusi, Noguchi and Bourgeois. Puryear's accomplishment is to keep such sources in constant, allusive play with other, non-Western references, all the while asserting his own highly idiosyncratic sense of sculptural form.

Puryear works slowly, with near-ritualistic attention to fabrication. His work tends to be hermetic. It does not address a mass public, and he seems little interested in art with an overt social agenda. Yet there is a certain oracular quality to much of his work that may help to explain his long-standing interest in sculpture's social function, evident in public projects he has completed in Chicago, New Orleans, Minneapolis (see *A.i.A.*, Dec. '88). He has also recently agreed to develop public works for Georgetown University and for the Stuart Collection of the University of California at San Diego (see *A.i.A.*, Dec. '89). Nevertheless, because he feels that hand labor is so essential to his own creative process, Puryear is considering putting on hold those public projects that he feels he cannot carry out alone. "But," he adds, "I'm not closing the book on public art. I'm very interested in public commissions that are truly public—that are geared more toward the people who enjoy them than the people who commission them."[8]



Desire, ***1981, wood, 10 by 20 by 24 feet. Installed at the Brooklyn Museum, 1988–89.***

1. Jonathan Crary, "Martin Puryear's Sculpture," *Artforum*, Oct. '79, p. 28.
2. Martin Puryear, interviewed by the author, Mar. 14, 1989. Unless otherwise indicated, quotes from the artist are from this interview.
3. Puryear quoted in Elaine King, *Martin Puryear: Beyond Style, The Power of The Simple*, exhibition catalogue, Pittsburgh, Carnegie Mellon University Art Gallery, 1987.
4. Roberta Smith, review of the exhibition "Martin Puryear" at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, *Village Voice*, Sept. 4, 1984, p. 85.
5. Puryear quoted in *Martin Puryear: Beyond Style, The Power of The Simple*, op. cit.
6. Jonathan Crary, "Martin Puryear's Sculpture," op. cit., p. 29.
7. Kirk Varnedoe, "Contemporary Explorations," in *'Primitivism' in 20th-Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, ed. by William Rubin, vol. 2, New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1984, p. 661.
8. Puryear in conversation with the author, July 28, 1989.

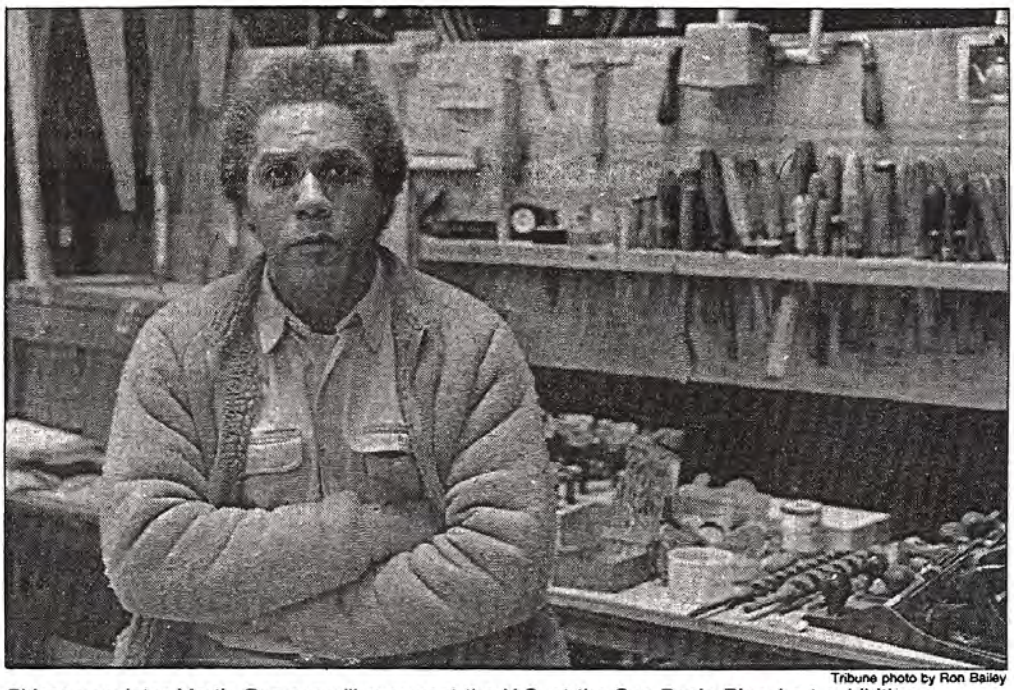
Author: *Nancy Princenthal is a free-lance critic who lives in New York.*

Princenthal, Nancy. "Intuition's Disciplinarian." *Art in America*, January 1990, cover, pp. 130–37, 181.

Chicago Tribune

Arts Page 12 Section 13 Chicago Tribune, Sunday, October 1, 1989

Art



Tribune photo by Ron Bailey

Chicago sculptor Martin Puryear will represent the U.S. at the Sao Paolo Bienal art exhibition.

Shaping up

Sculptor Puryear lets his works do all the talking

By Alan G. Artner
Art critic

This will be a banner year for sculptor Martin Puryear.

In July he received a $295,000 grant from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and later this month he will travel to Brazil as the sole representive of the United States at the Sao Paulo Bienal, one of the oldest and most prestigious international art exhibitions.

The last time Chicagoans represented America at Sao Paulo was in 1973, when 12 painters and object makers known as Imagists brought their particular brand of ironic humor. Puryear is the first artist from Chicago to carry the national standard alone.

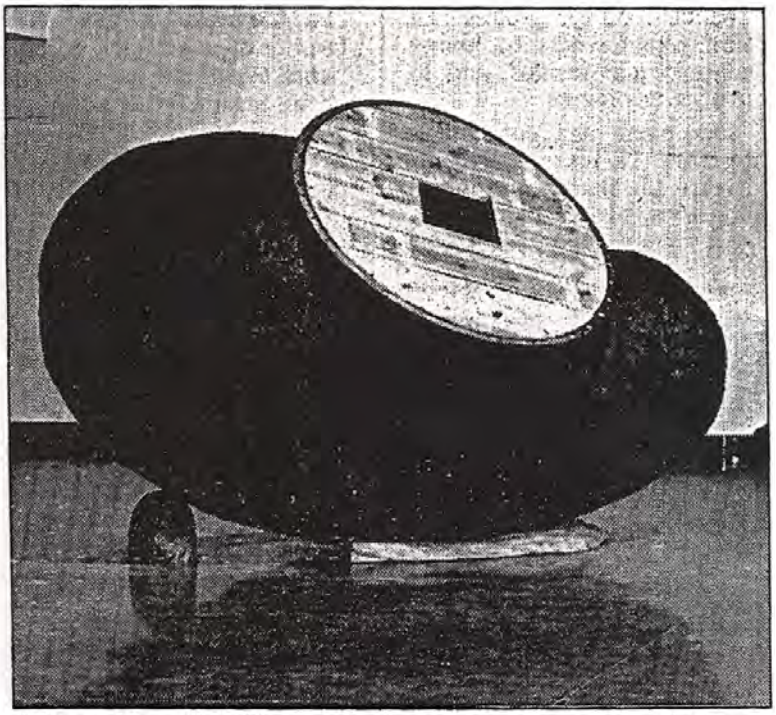
Little of this would surprise anybody who knows Puryear's work, for its achievement already has been recognized far beyond Chicago. Yet, in today's art world, where public relations often counts for more than achievement, his going to Sao Paulo has the character of a wonderful anomaly.

Puryear is, at 48, a private person who will speak about his work only hesitantly and about his life not at all. The exception was an interview in the New York Times two years ago, which taught him, he says, never to give another.

Then, too, he became known in New York from pieces in museums, having shown at all the major ones before his first solo exhibition at a Manhattan gallery.

Of course, the studio Puryear is building in upstate New York will one day bring him closer to the center of

Artner, Alan G. "Shaping Up." *Chicago Tribune*, October 1, 1989.



"Maroon" is a 1987-88 work in steel wire mesh, wood and tar.

American art activity than he is now. But in a way that seems consistent with his career thus far, his nomination for Sao Paulo did not come from a curator at a museum in Chicago *or* Manhattan but a small, community-based organization in Jamaica, N.Y.

"I first saw a really large body of his work in the traveling show that came to the New Museum in 1984," said Kellie Jones, visual arts director of the Jamaica Arts Center. "And it was impressive, beautiful, quiet, mysterious.

"What particularly drew me to selecting Martin for Sao Paulo is that his work is also very diverse. He does wall pieces, public pieces and, if you will, regular monolithic objects. He uses wood as well as rawhide, tar and wire mesh. So you can see someone working with a variety of materials and a variety of objectives but still with a singular vision. I found that especially interesting."

American participation in Sao Paulo results from a long-standing collaboration between the United States Information Agency and the National Endowment for the Arts in which the NEA provides expertise to judge proposals for international exhibitions such as Venice and Sao Paulo, and the USIA provides the funds.

A few years ago this collaboration became stronger with the appointment of a committee of art professionals who would serve three or four years, thereby giving more continuity than previous ad hoc committees.

At the time of discussing Sao Paulo last year, the committee was made up of ten prominent figures, nearly all involved with museums from New York to Los Angeles and Minneapolis to Miami.

Their first task was to provide the NEA with a list of people whom the organization might solicit for ideas.

"My recollection was that we sent out 60 or 70 letters to curators who had dealt with contemporary American art, inviting them to give us a proposal and a preliminary budget," said Andrew Oliver, director of the NEA's museum program.

"In the past, curators for the Venice Biennale, for example, were chosen partly on the basis of their association with a large institution that had the infrastructure of registrar services and shipping. But this time we realized we did not want to commit ourselves to ideas just coming out of major established organizations if there were appropriate ideas coming from elsewhere.

"Out of the mailing, we received something on the order of 20 responses. The committee then met again to review these applications and selected that of Kellie Jones, who was invited to draw up a much more elaborate budget and project description for the USIA because it's really their funds."

Jones' project included several large freestanding pieces—she and the artist later chose eight—and an illustrated catalogue. The ninth piece, a wall installation, Puryear would construct on the site.

"I built that into my proposal because I thought it would be exciting to have him work with local materials," Jones said. "Already Martin works with fine and distinctive materials from different parts of the world, so Brazilian wood would fit right in. And that part of South America is very big in the cattle industry, so there's the rawhide."

The installation may include some earlier pieces, for Puryear occasionally reworks them, adding or subtracting. The 1978 rawhide drawing "Some Lines for William Beckwourth" was, for example, shown with saplings, a mound of wood and earth, and a rawhide cone in 1980. The mound and cone now have reappeared as separate pieces, both going to Sao Paulo.

Similarly, "Maroon," a huge pod of wire mesh coated with tar, will be exhibited in Brazil on its own, without the 30-foot-long cornucopia that culminated in the pod when it was shown two years ago in Chicago. And one of the untitled pieces from 1988 has also been reworked.

On the other hand, the remaining sculptures in the exhibition—"Lever," "The Charm of Subsistence" and two untitled pieces—have undergone no change, remaining just as they were when the artist first showed them.

One of the happiest things about Puryear's work is its breadth, for while many of his pieces originated in Chicago, they have no Chicago self-consciousness. Their issues are sculptural issues that are part of an international language. And this allows them to travel well, commanding equal attention wherever they are shown.

Puryear has also considered the many differences between

Artner, Alan G. "Shaping Up." *Chicago Tribune*, October 1, 1989.

Kellie Jones of the Jamaica (N. Y.) Arts Center nominated the 48-year-old Puryear.

public and private art and has determined his vision accordingly. It would be uncharacteristic of him to create a formally successful piece of public art that was also a nuisance. So he shows a fundamental respect for viewers that carries over into his private, museum-oriented work.

Still, Puryear's art remains personal, looking like no one else's. And often its forms are so extraordinary that they seem to have appeared from thin air, perfect and whole. This is when art has the quality of magic.

"I guess we see the Puryear exhibition in Sao Paulo as really the beginning of a new age in these international shows," said Susan Flynt Stirn, program officer of the USIA. "The funding has been greatly increased [with the participation of the Rockefeller Foundation and the Pew Charitable Trust], and the selection process has been much more rigorous.

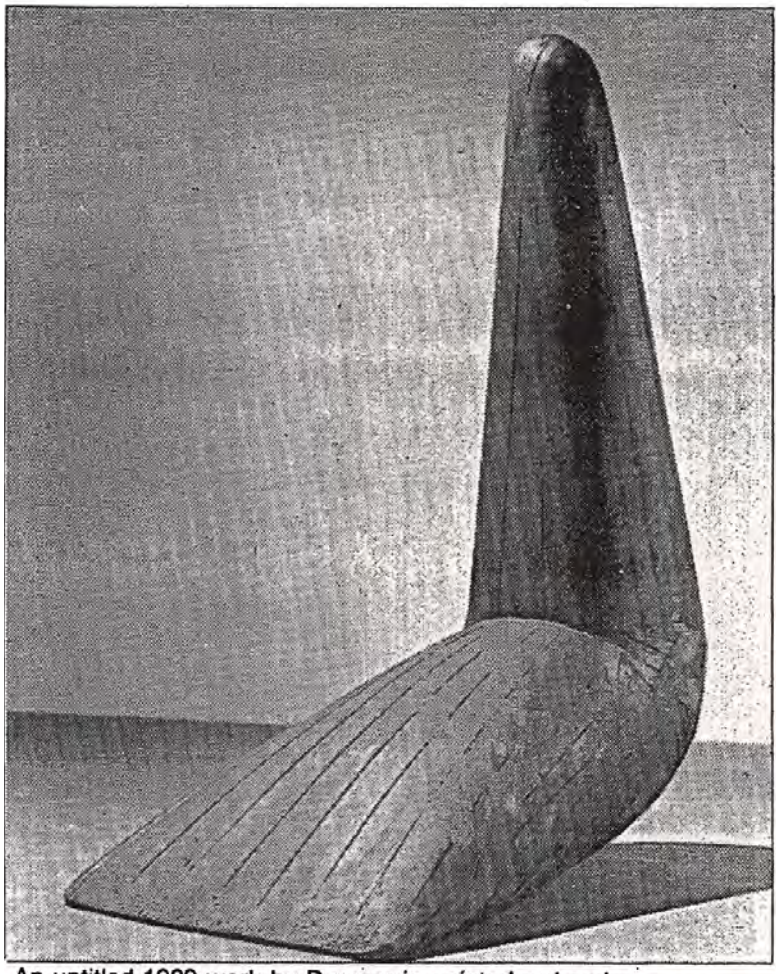
"Puryear was virtually a unanimous decision. So we are terribly pleased about the exhibition. I feel it's a real achievement in our overall effort for these international events."

Is it also important that Puryear is a black artist?

"Sure it is," said Jones. "It is very important. Other black artists have been in these exhibitions, but in a group context. So I think it's important for Martin to show as the first sole black representative of the United States. But it's important for Martin to show, in general.

"The best art, to me, comes from who you are, and being black is just part of who Martin is, but I wouldn't say it's visible in the work. I think he refers to a lot of other cultures. He's very inspired by Japan, having gone there as a Guggenheim Fellow. He's very inspired by Arctic cultures, having spent some time in Scandinavia. He has gone to Africa, as well, but I wouldn't say the African part is predominant in his work.

"His work is so much a mix of all these cultures with his own voice that you really don't know *where* the work comes from. You only know it's beautiful and mysterious and hard to figure out. But I think in trying to figure it out you think about a lot of things, and that's the most important aspect."



An untitled 1989 work by Puryear in painted red cedar.

The 20th Sao Paulo Biennal will open in Brazil on Oct. 14 and continue through Dec. 10.

Artner, Alan G. "Shaping Up." *Chicago Tribune*, October 1, 1989.

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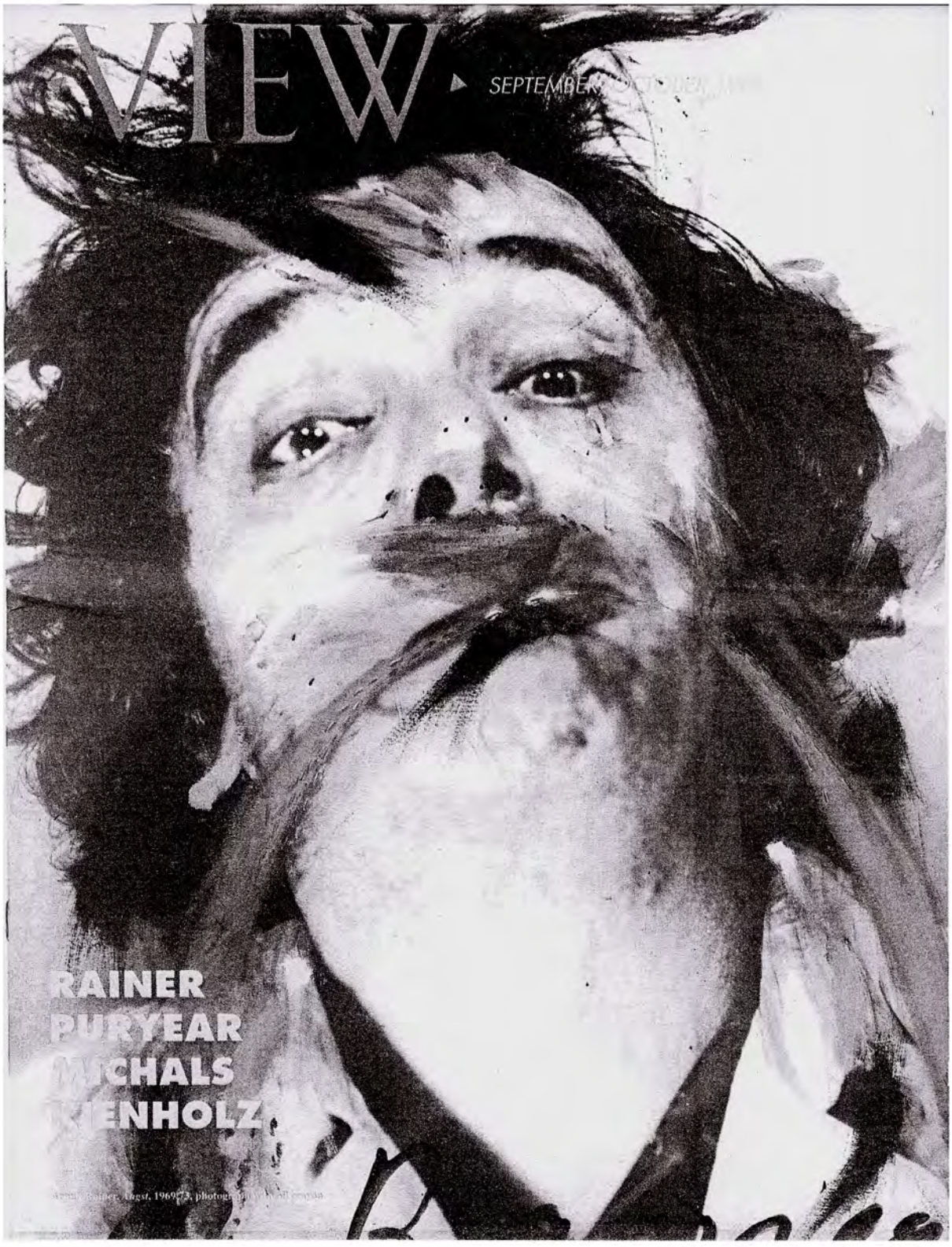
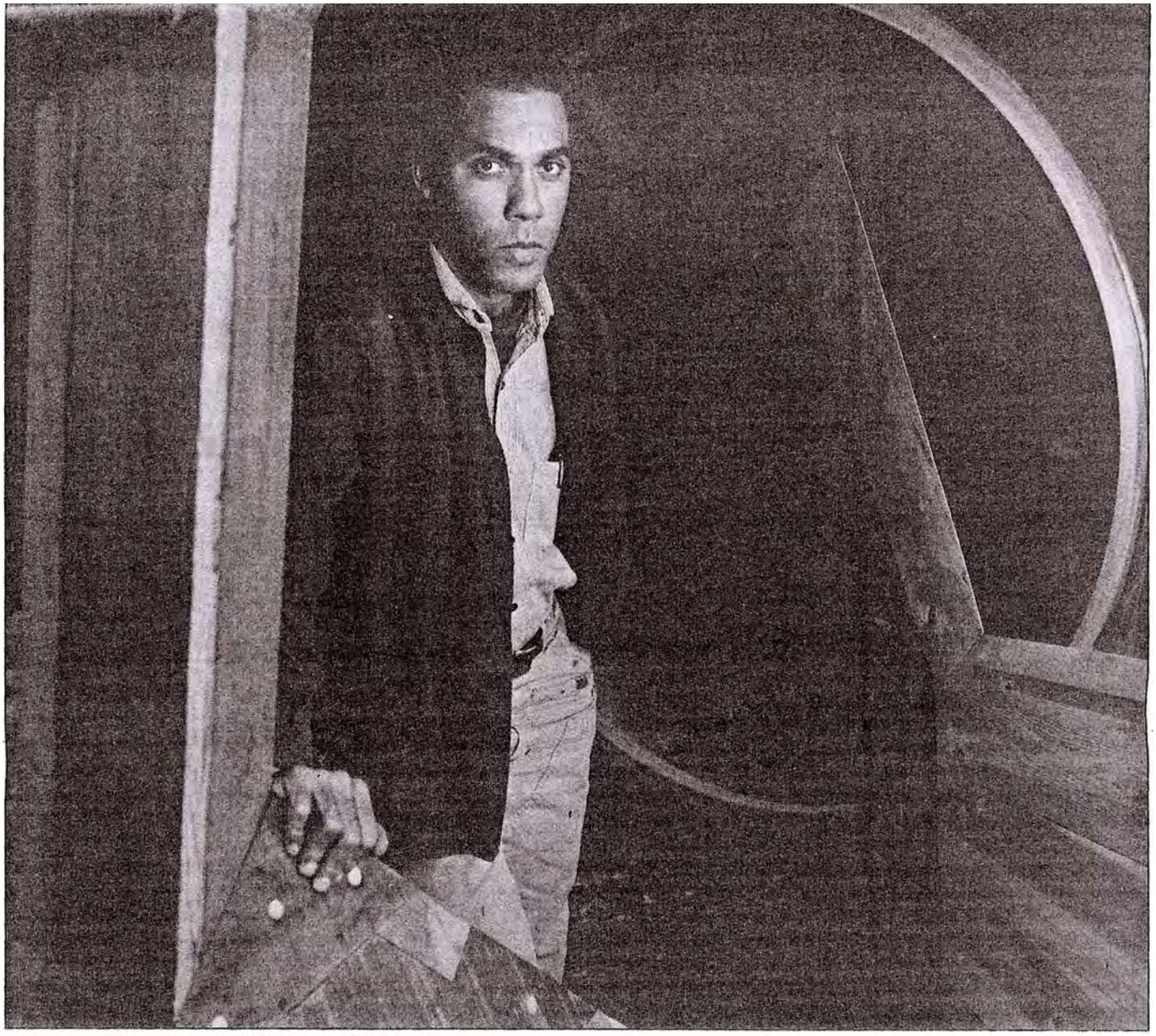


Gast, Dwight V. "Martin Puryear: Sculpture as an Act of Faith." *View*, September/October, 1989.



Martin Puryear, 1987, photograph copyright 1989 by Paul L. Meredeth.

MARTIN PURYEAR

SCULPTURE AS AN ACT OF FAITH

by Dwight V. Gast

Abstract sculptor Martin Puryear's powerful hand-crafted forms represent the United States this year in Brazil's São Paulo Bienal from October 14 to December 10.

Born in 1941 to a middle-class Black family in Washington, D.C., Martin Puryear studied biology and art at Catholic University. After graduation, he spent two years as a Peace Corps volunteer in Sierra Leone, where he taught English, French and biology. Then, for two years Puryear lived in Sweden, studying printmaking at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Stockholm and acquainting himself with Scandinavian crafts. In 1971 he received an M.F.A. at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut. Now a Chicago resident, Puryear made headlines this July when it was announced that he was awarded a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship, a five-year stipend often referred to as the "genius award."

Puryear's idiosyncratic work reverberates with various elements of

Gast, Dwight V. "Martin Puryear: Sculpture as an Act of Faith." *View*, September/October, 1989.

his unusual background. His interest in biology is discernible in the natural qualities of the materials he uses and in the birdlike forms he calls "decoys." His experience in Africa is echoed in his strong feeling for wood and carpentry. His observations of Scandinavian crafts inspired him early on to work wood into sculptural shapes. His graduate studies at Yale associated him with Minimalism, a pared-down monolithic style with which many critics continue to connect him. For his part, Puryear eschews categorization, describing himself as feeling like a "maverick" and an "outsider."

Puryear's work has taken many forms, from the curves and monoliths of his sculptures to the functional architecture and furniture of the public projects he terms "amenities," designed for New Orleans, Seattle, and Chevy Chase, Maryland.

Our interview took place in Chicago. Puryear, a lean six-footer, conducted me to his living space in a converted factory, where he and his wife, artist Jeanne Gordon, served herbal tea as they graciously talked about São Paulo.

Puryear and I then proceeded downstairs to his studio, a cavernous space on the ground floor, where the conversation remained gracious if more cautious as Puryear, an extremely private individual, talked about his art.

What pieces are you going to show at the São Paolo Bienal?

I've selected nine pieces, weighted toward the present moment, but going back as far as seven years ago, and I'm going to work on making an installation just for the Bienal. These pieces have a body and a neck, or a neckline extension of one kind or another. They're constructed and they are also very gestural at the same time, made of wood for the most part. One or two are made of wire mesh and tar.

One large piece I showed at the Brooklyn Museum — the big piece that's called *Maroon* which I started several years ago and have been working and reworking. I'm going to bring that down. That is going to be the biggest piece in my São Paolo installation.

What influenced the pieces that are going to be in the Bienal?

I don't know that I could isolate the work that I've selected as having had influences different from anything else I've done. What I can say is that at present I'm interested in realizing work that has a certain kind of independence from dogma and from theory and a capacity to speak in a way that I hope is visceral and direct, rather than needing a strictly historical or linear framework to be intelligible. A lot of latter-day historicizing is hard to swallow. I don't think art unfolds quite as neatly as some people would like.

How do you think it does unfold?

I think art is its own language. A lot of art being made today is nihilistic: it really elevates doubt and cynicism to quite an eloquent level. I can admire eloquence and articulateness in talking about art, but when you're confronted with the work, it's often amazing how much of a blank you have to draw. Even given the verbal support, it still just doesn't do it for me. I believe in experience much more than I believe in dogma or notions of historical connectedness. There are artists who amaze me in their ability to recite a genealogy of their work from the last great master of the twentieth century right up to their own studio without missing a beat. I just don't think it happens quite that clearly.

I believe that art is created by people, by quirky people who often, I think, put these jogs and switchbacks in the historical continuum that people always want to believe in. There are always convoluted and complicated cul-de-sacs that don't allow things to be read just as a linear evolution. There is something archaic, I guess, about working with your hands, because a lot of the most important activity artists are engaged in now is what you could call "executive activity." I think part of that has to do with social class. I have a hard time thinking of myself as dictating to others how to do my work. And I think it has to do with where I came from in society, where I fit in society, the fact that my people were always executors, workers, their hands were always busy, their backs were always bent. It would be very hard for me to turn into the kind of person who is giving orders for the work to be realized by somebody else. I guess I don't trust that.

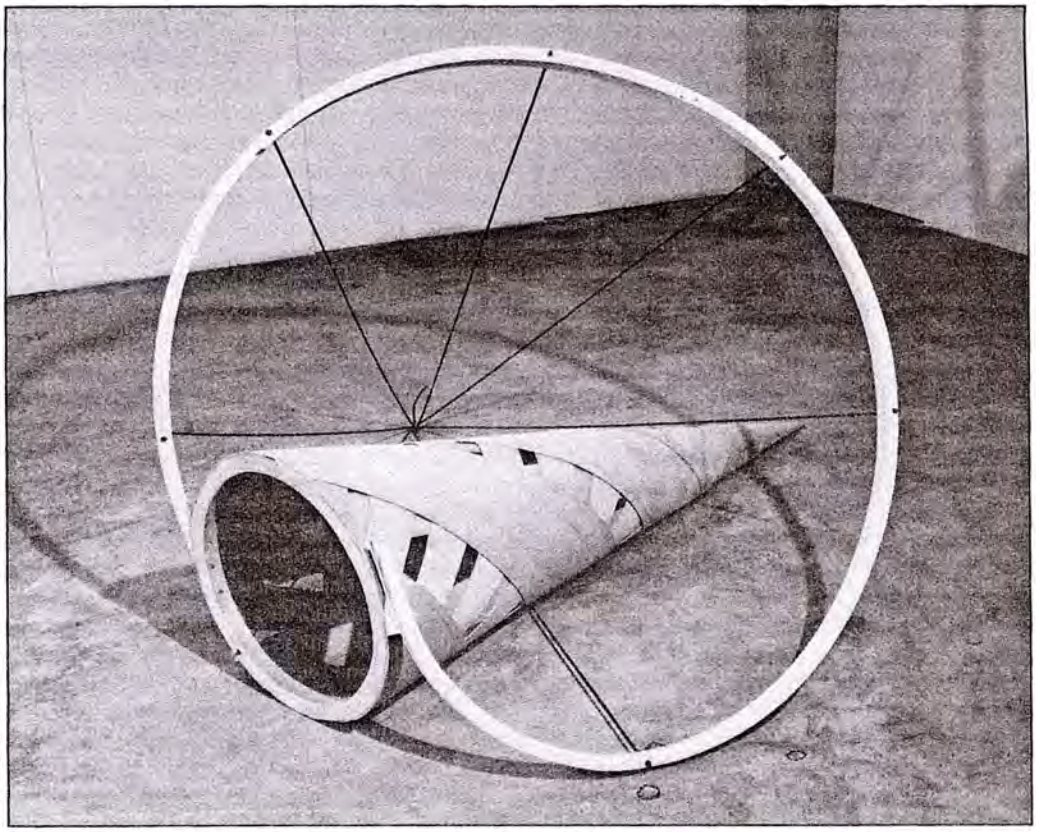
What do you trust?

I trust the experience of the work. I believe in work that defines itself and describes itself to the world, nakedly, without having a huge amount of theoretical interdependence. I know that in a situation as complex as we live in now it's a kind of ridiculous hope that art can still speak directly. I think finally it is a question of faith. I guess what I trust is my hands and my eyes and the eyes of other people.

Why do you trust your hands?

It has to do with a certain pride in the fact that one's hands are important. I'm trying to hold on to some kind of faith in maybe what's a very old-fashioned, direct way to make sculpture with your own hands. You could say I'm trying to remain a believer.

Recently seen at the 1989 Biennial Exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, Puryear's work is shown at David McKee Gallery in New York, Donald Young Gallery in Chicago and Margo Leavin Gallery in Los Angeles.



Martin Puryear, *The Spell*, 1985, pine, cedar and steel, collection of the artist. Courtesy Donald Young Gallery.

Gast, Dwight V. "Martin Puryear: Sculpture as an Act of Faith." *View*, September/October, 1989.

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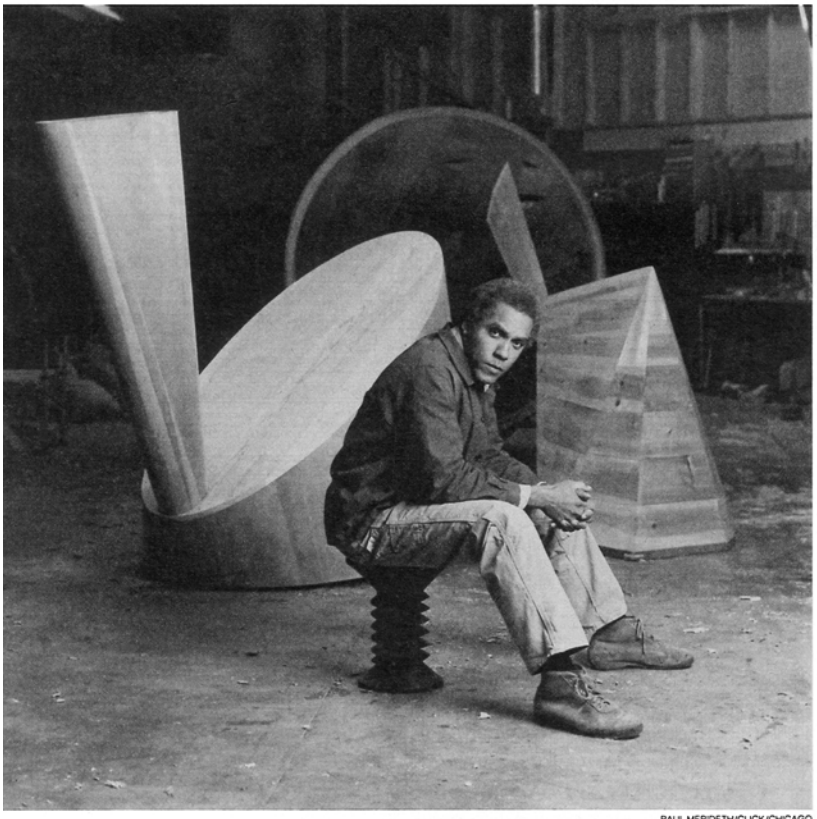
The New York Times Magazine

MAVERICK SCULPTOR MAKES GOOD

Martin Puryear – a major artist, stubbornly going his own way.

By Michael Brenson



PAUL MERIDETH/CLICK/CHICAGO

The sculptor with two of the "decoys" that will be in the McKee Gallery show this week.

I'M BASICALLY KIND OF A MAVERick," Martin Puryear says. "I've always felt — and maybe this goes way, way back to my earliest years — I really feel like an outsider. I never felt like signing up and joining and being part of a coherent cadre of anything, ideologically, or esthetically, or attitudinally. I never felt compelled to do that."

At a time when artists arrive suddenly, unleashing a storm of publicity and taking over New York for a season or a few years, Martin Puryear is a breath of fresh air. The Chicago-based sculptor describes himself as a "builder, a maker" and a long-distance runner. His belief that the race will continue to be run by his work long after he is gone has made him wary of success and fame.

This extraordinarily versatile 46-year-old artist may be the least known of all major contemporary sculptors. He is surely the first artist ever to have been included in exhibitions and installations at all four major Manhattan museums, as well as at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, *before* having his first solo show in a New York gallery. On Thursday, that will change when an exhibition of his work opens at the David McKee Gallery, on 57th Street.

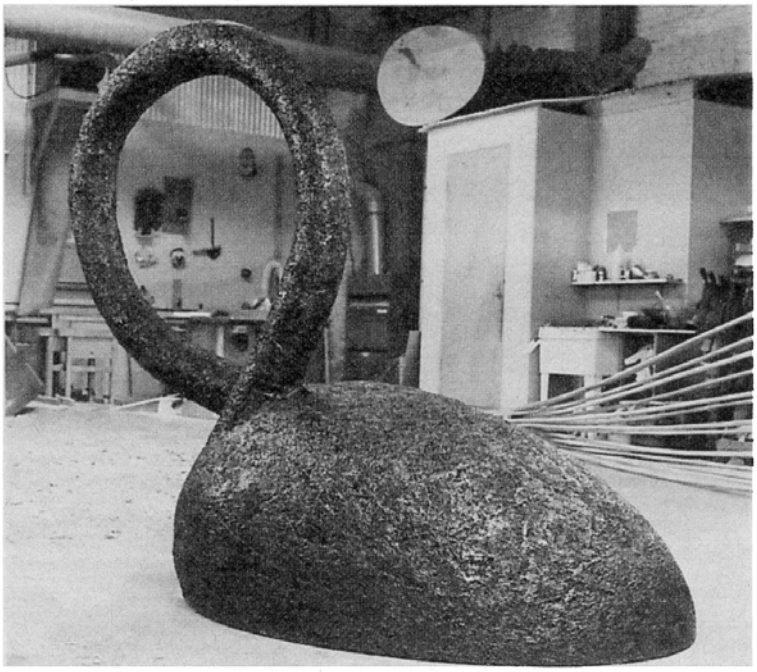
Puryear's independence is hard-won. He has always resisted what he feels others expected him, and blacks in general, to be. Many contemporary artists are determined to forget the past. For Puryear, it is essential to remember. He has developed a way of working that moves backward and forward at the same time. His sculpture is immediate, right there. It is also eternally restless.

Unlike many prominent contemporary sculptors, who prefer hard materials, such as steel and stone, Puryear works deliberately, with his own hands, in wood. His large, uncluttered studio is filled with hundreds of clamps, files and planes, as well as stacks of wood from all over the world. In and around

Brenson, Michael. "Maverick Sculptor Makes Good." *New York Times Magazine,* November 1, 1987, pp. 84, 88–93.

SCULPTOR

Continued from Page 84



PAUL MERIDETH/CLICK/CHICAGO

Puryear's fascination with birds is reflected in his sculpture.

the center of the concrete floor, the parts of his sculptures are cut, joined and assembled. Sculptural ideas are leaning in the corners and hanging on the walls — opened, like bottles of wine, and left alone to breathe.

Puryear's sculptures of rings, arcs, nooses, huts and guardianlike figures do not insist. They pulsate and lock in softly, promising regularity and stability, delivering metamorphosis and change. His circles and arcs chart trajectories of movement; the works are in some way about movement, but they are also about place. They may seem to fly and roll through space, but they are not about speed. "I think my work speaks to anybody who has the capacity to slow down," he says.

Puryear's lack of dogmatism reflects the range of his interests and his "somewhat nomadic" existence. He has lived in Sierra Leone, as well as Sweden and Japan. He has lived in Washington, Nashville and Brooklyn, as well as Chicago, where he moved in 1978. He travels constantly, in a variety of ways. Suspended like a mobile from the ceiling of his studio is the canoe that he and his brother Michael, a cabinetmaker, used in 1981 for a monthlong trip down the Noatak River, in Alaska.

Puryear looks at sculpture, architecture, painting and furniture, and he is fascinated by trades such as shipbuilding and patternmaking. He speaks with respect not only about artists with impeccable modernist pedigrees — Constantin Brancusi, Robert Morris and Sol LeWitt — but also about realists like Stanley Spencer, Lucian Freud and Andrew Wyeth, as well as Old Masters like Paolo Uccello and Pieter Bruegel.

These manifold interests are concentrated in works of expansive simplicity. "Self" was made in 1978, just after Puryear's studio in Brooklyn, where he had lived for four years, burned down. The sculpture is a highly polished, 5-foot-9-inch-tall black monolith, roughly conical in shape, with one side at a right angle to the floor. The closed, upright, irregular mass seems fixed, almost stuck to the floor, but it also seems to turn in different directions and climb through space. Its mountainous, hutlike, phallic shape could have risen from the ashes of a tribal fetish, or tumbled out of a Chinese painting.

As impersonal as the sculpture may seem, it is extremely quirky. Like so many of Puryear's works, it seems pure and simple, but it is in fact a bizarre hybrid, a bundle of surprises and oppositions. Its eccentricity has a great deal to do with the way it was made. Monolithic sculptures have traditionally been heavy, carved from blocks of stone. "Self" is hollow and *(Continued on Page 88)*

Michael Brenson is an art critic for The New York Times.

light. It is a wooden shell, constructed by crisscrossing layers of red cedar and mahogany in a shipbuilding technique. Although the work may seem inevitable — to have emerged suddenly, all of a piece — it was, in fact, assembled layer by layer, piece by piece.

"Self" is essentially private, even autobiographical, but "River Road Ring," installed in 1985 in the River Road subway station near Chicago's O'Hare Airport, was made for the public. It is 27 feet 6 inches in diameter, suspended like a halo, or a ceremonial tribal crown, above the escalator and entrance. "It's a conduit," Puryear said. "It's an image of what that station is on the line. It's a hollow tube that goes back in and comes up and puts you in the direction in which you want to go. One end points toward O'Hare, the other toward Chicago."

Here, too, from each angle, the work changes — rotating, opening up and flattening into a straight line, shifting from circle to ellipse. The ring appears seamless, intact, but it, too, was constructed, built with innumerable pieces of laminated mahogany. Because this large ring, its two ends overlapping slightly, like two ends of a string waiting to be tied, is in fact hard wood — because a round form was constructed by bending and assembling material that would not seem to lend itself to a circular shape — the sculpture is edgy, disquieting. The halo seems so taut that it could snap.

In both "Self" and "River

Brenson, Michael. "Maverick Sculptor Makes Good." *New York Times Magazine,* November 1, 1987, pp. 84, 88–93.

Road Ring," Puryear has employed geometric shapes so generalized that they seem to belong to no one. Yet they are unmistakably his. Each sculpture seems organic and contrived, predetermined and chosen. There is a sense that the shapes are the only ones possible, but they are the result of a long sequence of conscious decisions. Both free will and determinism seem, almost miraculously, to have been embraced. So do craft and "high art"; African, Asian and Western art, black and white. In Puryear's quietly subversive sculptural world, separatist notions of any kind are inconceivable and anachronistic. His work does not so much argue as assume that everything is now tied together, whether anyone wants it to be or not.

MARTIN PURYEAR was born in Washington, in 1941. He is the oldest of seven — five brothers and two sisters. His father, Reginald, is now a retired post-office clerk and supervisor. His grandfather was a Baptist minister from Virginia; he went to Nova Scotia to serve a black congregation and stayed. (Nova Scotia was a haven for fleeing slaves, and until the 1960's had the largest black population in Canada.) His mother, Martina, is a retired teacher. The children grew up in a household in which culture mattered.

Puryear is 6 feet tall; without an ounce of fat. Although he rarely appears to be in a hurry, he seems almost incapable of acting without purpose. He is warm and guarded, discreet and firm. His eyes are always animated. There is a bit of a kid in those eyes, something whimsical, cagey and mischievous, but also supremely confident. His eyes make him seem mobile no matter what the rest of his body is doing.

Sometimes he glides, but other times he rolls from heel to toe in a way that makes a point of his black urban roots. His feeling for public art is, in part, a response to his need to make art that people he grew up with can understand. He is very familiar with the history of black artists in the United States, and when he feels their predicament is not respected his voice softly bristles. Like his sculpture, Puryear's manner is so easy that the slightest shift in intonation can seem like an earthquake.

Puryear's forms and craftsmanship flow from black history. His elegant sculptures, resting quietly on a floor or wall, can suddenly reveal themselves as nooses, whips and traps. "I've been reading a lot by Langston Hughes lately," he said. "It's been really, really pleasurable for me, because he loved people, he really, really loved people, and he was a very secure black person."

Puryear's work has an almost oracular quality. No matter how many components a floor piece has or how many parts seem to have been splattered against a wall, the works seem to have emerged with a rush. They may stop, start and change direction, a sculpture shaped like a top may seem too large and another like a shrine may seem too small, but everything presents itself with the seamless narrative flow of a storyteller. The immediacy of presentation may also suggest the breathless, musical cadences of a black preacher.

Puryear lives with the artist Jeanne Gordon, his wife of one year, in a converted factory bought and renovated by five artists in the north end of Chicago. He made most of the couple's furniture — including sofabed, Japanese screen, potrack and wooden bathtub.

Puryear's inclusiveness has made him a key figure in contemporary sculpture. On one side are the Minimalists and their heirs. They make work modeled in some way on Minimalism's absoluteness, economy of shape, rejection of the artist's touch and insistence that art define itself in relation to its environment. On the other side are artists exploring an almost dizzying array of sculp-

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tural approaches, from organic abstraction to unfamiliar treatment of familiar materials, to various forms of figuration.

Puryear has obvious links with sculptors such as Scott Burton and Siah Armajani, who feel no affinity for the tradition of heroic, individualistic sculpture. Burton and Armajani are working to lead sculpture further from the studio and gallery by making public art, for specific sites, that functions as furniture and architecture.

Like them, Puryear makes large-scale functional works. He calls them "amenities" — making a clear distinction between his public, functional work and his "sculpture" — and they are easy to be around. Puryear has designed "amenities" for New Orleans and Seattle. Working with the architect Leo A. Daly, he has designed the fountain, benches, pavilion, and a system of arbor and trellises at the Chevy Chase Garden Plaza, in Maryland, a project expected to be completed next spring.

Other contemporary sculptors are involved with nature and the earth. They range from artists like Michael Heizer who draws upon and shapes the landscape, to Mel Kendrick, who carves wood sculptures that retain something of the coolness and "objectness" of Minimalism, to Petah Coyne, who gathers wood and soil and assembles them into highly personalized effigies.

In the remarkable "Bodark Arc," at the Nathan Manilow Sculpture Park in University Park, Ill., Puryear has used a wooden arch and bridge, and a ceremonial bronze chair, to draw the earth into a bow and arrow shape — representing a collaboration between African and American Indian culture. Puryear's sculpture is filled with references to nature: "Vault" looks like a tree trunk that has been reincarnated as a head and a safe deposit box. "Sanctuary" resembles a birdhouse on wheels.

One of Puryear's essential dialogues has been with Minimalism, which he encountered as a graduate student at the Yale Art School. Puryear has learned from the Minimalist sense of precision, economy and proportions. He admires Donald Judd's "cogency of thought." And the power of Puryear's work, like Richard Serra's, has a great deal to do with spatial imagination. Like Serra, Puryear has the ability to make sculpture that is known by the body before it is articulated by the mind. Puryear's gestures and armatures can be experienced as extensions of skin and bones.

But Puryear rejects the dogmatism of Minimalism, its resistance to associations and its rejection of craft. The impersonal working methods are what made him realize that he was "absolutely not a Minimalist."

He explains: "The hand means too much to me. The risk-taking in the process of building and making something means too much to me.

"I never did Minimalist art, I never did, but I got real close. . . . I looked at it, I tasted it and I spat it out. I said, this is not for me. I'm a worker. I'm not somebody who's happy to let my work be made for me and I'll pass on it, yes or no, after it's done. I could never do that."

IN SHORT, PURYEAR IS VERY definitely a post-Minimalist, and he is a key bridge between the 1960's and 80's. In his ability to work privately and publicly, to make sculpture for himself, driven by his obsessions, and to make work that is accessible to the public, he has managed to combine a traditional view of sculpture as something made by an individual working in the studio, and a view of sculpture as something made in collaboration with others for a community.

In some artistic and academic circles, the idea of the heroic individual, creating himself from scratch, has been fiercely attacked. One reason so many artists have their work fabricated is that its impersonality and often its smooth reflecting surfaces tend to call attention not to the individual artistic self, but to conditions surrounding the work.

Puryear believes both in anonymity and in the self. He is drawn to folk artists. "I have a certain kind of nostalgic belief in anonymity," he says. "I mean these folk artists who spend their whole lives working without even knowing that they're artists, and they have this kind of compulsion. Somehow there's a part of that that I take a lot of solace in."

But he also believes that art can come only from the individual. "I taught for two years at Fisk, which is a black college in Nashville," he said, "and there were times when I found it hard, or a struggle, let's say, to encourage students to find themselves, because they were so busy being members of a group.

"My encouragement was to find the you in there. That's what's going to have to make the art; not your history, not your culture. Those things are reflected. They're never going to go away. That's in your nature. It's in who you are. But there's a you in there that's even more crucial than that, and you've got to find it and you've got to release it."

Labor has become a source of deepening conflict for Puryear and for art in general. Any artist working on a large scale almost has to have that work realized by others. The time involved in making his work means Puryear cannot keep up with the ideas that now race through his mind.

"I am finding out that I don't want to get involved in enormous commissions, in building them myself," Puryear said. " 'River Road Ring,' that was a mammoth undertaking, months and months to screw in clamps, of laminating layers, months and months of it, and it was so monotonous that it wasn't work in which I profited from the ruminations involved. My mind was tied up, my hands were tied up, and I couldn't get real busy with new ideas at the time.

"And still I had this compulsion to control it, to not give it up to anybody else. And I couldn't have afforded to have specialists — people who had that kind of specialized knowledge, building it. I could afford my own labor. I couldn't afford somebody with the same level of skill. It's a strange situation."

PURYEAR'S INDEPENDence can be found in other black sculptors. Mel Edwards, Betye Saar and Houston Conwill are also hard to classify. Conwill's installations, using simple shapes, elaborate and interpret history and myth. In his "Lynch Fragment Series," Edwards uses the syntax of steel sculpture to compose an accusatory lyric poem about violence, vigilance and transformation. In Saar's intimate boxes and installations, domesticity bristles with superstition and danger.

The work of these artists is marked by a fierce pride, belief in evocation, respect for craft, and feeling for the expressive potential of sculptural language. Most important, there is a deep attachment to memory. In contrast, major mainstream artistic

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developments of the last 20 years, including Minimalism, have generally insisted on focusing attention on the present and future. This alone would explain why Puryear could go only so far with Minimalism, and why he and other black artists remain outsiders.

Puryear began as a painter. "I was lucky enough as a really little kid to see a guy painting a portrait on my block, a black guy painting in oils a portrait of somebody right out on the street. And I was just transfixed to see in it an absolute likeness. I remember it was like grisaille, it was black and white, it was like monochromatic. ... I couldn't have been more than 6 years old, but I just couldn't believe it, it just ... and it was a black guy, painting another black person, with his easel and paints and everything and a palette, right in front of the apartment. And it just blew something open in me."

At Catholic University, in Washington, Puryear first majored in biology. Today, he finds inspiration in zoos as well as in galleries and museums. For example, he is fascinated by birds. Puryear calls the works in the David McKee Gallery show that opens this week "decoys" (they all feature bases and long necks).

In his junior year of college, he changed his major to art, and was exposed to the abstract, so-called color-field paintings of influential Washington artists such as Kenneth Noland, who was teaching at Catholic University. "In a sense I had to work my way through abstraction," he said. Now he sees "students who accept that as a given from a very early age and who start out making abstractions. I had to really fight my way there, out of my habits of a very meticulous realism."

The importance of Puryear's two years in Sierra Leone as a Peace Corps volunteer, from 1964 to 1966, can hardly be overemphasized. When he went there, he had made carvings in wood and stone, but he was primarily a painter. There was a tradition of black American painters, including Romare Bearden and Jacob Lawrence, but there was not a comparable tradition of black sculptors.

The years in Sierra Leone provided him with a rich source of imagery, shaping his feeling for wood, for crafts, and for a particular approach to craftsmanship — that of the carpenter, not the carver.

The villagers treated him both as a foreigner and almost as a brother. "The name for me was the same as for Europeans," he said. "They had a word, pronounced 'pumwei,' which meant European or foreigner or white man. It was very clear to me that I wasn't one of them.

"On the other hand, I'm not sure whether it was because of my personality — I was friendly and took pains to make friends — or whether they were more open to me because of my race, but I know that I had some very, very close relationships while I was there. I felt I was really privileged."

He found he could hold onto his roots by working with wood. "I became close to some carpenters, some woodworkers there," he said. "That was pretty moving to me, to see people working without technology. I was taught a lot by just watching them work. That's where I was first exposed to people who worked with wood with any real skill.

"I saw some carvers but I didn't relate to them quite as much as to the carpenters. I guess I had a feeling that the tribal carving of art was something that was really theirs. And I almost didn't quite trust that I could get close enough, because it was generally a secret thing. Magic has to do with secret rituals, most of all."

It is hard to imagine a sculptor more sympathetic than Puryear to the metaphorical and sculptural possibilities of wood. "I'm real aware that I'm working something that has recently been alive," he said. "Wood's moving all the time, as you work. It's shrinking and swelling all the time."

What enables him to combine, juxtapose and piece wood together is joinery. "It's really a science of penetrations," he says. "It's a beautiful science, really. And it's something that I've enjoyed looking at, to see how different cultures deploy it. I mean, there are some givens that are the same for Egyptian beds and doors, through European fine furniture making, up to the present day."

That timelessness is essential. "I really feel it as I work," he said. "I think it's the thing that maybe gives me a feeling of a certain amount of legitimacy, given the fact that this is such a technological society that looks away from all that stuff. It's like, how in the world can you justify this way of working today? And yet, the connection to the past, there's value to it, for me."

In art, the attitude toward craft is inseparable from the attitude toward memory. "Memory is a real crucial key to where the work comes from, like a genesis, or some kind of seed, or origin. The process of working, for me, releases it, and a lot of the time, by working, by labor, by physically developing something and changing it and manipulating it, I think there's something that gets folded back into the work. It's like cooking."

The paradox here is crucial. On the one hand, Puryear's involvement with wood and craft is extremely traditional. On the other hand, the way he constructs and assembles wood, using techniques that also reflect some of the most celebrated methods of avant-garde art, including Constructivism and assemblage, is largely responsible for the freshness and freedom of his work.

AFTER THE PEACE CORPS, Puryear spent two years in Sweden, studying printmaking at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, in Stockholm; his sister Rachelle, a printmaker and weaver, has lived in Sweden for the last 13 years. He made etchings and explored Scandinavian crafts. And he began for the first time to work "constructively," cutting and weaving strips and pieces of wood into sculptural form.

Sculpture was the only medium that could accommodate all that he had seen and lived, and the complexity of his history. "The difference is so great when you go into the third dimension," he says. "It's not simply a two-dimensional thing expanded. It's like an infinitely multiple view, an infinitely multiplied sense of possibilities, spatial possibilities. That's what interests me."

And what Puryear has been doing over the last 20 years is of interest to a larger and larger audience. He has helped construct a bridge that had to be built. On one side is the absoluteness, conceptual clarity and matter-of-factness of the 1960's, on the other the internationalism and pluralism of the 80's. He is not going to abandon the past. Nor is he going to abandon the modernist imperative of transformation and change. His work is taut, and it is elastic. To compose all this into a controlled, unbroken song is no small feat. ■

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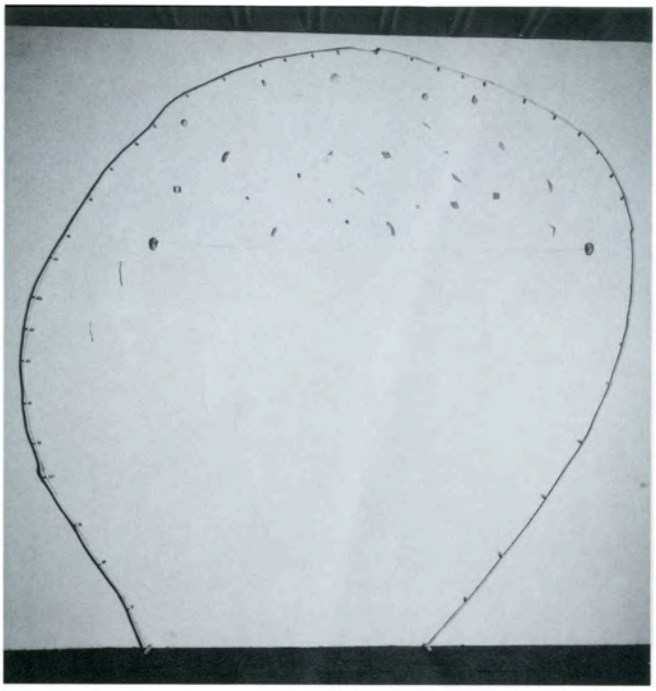
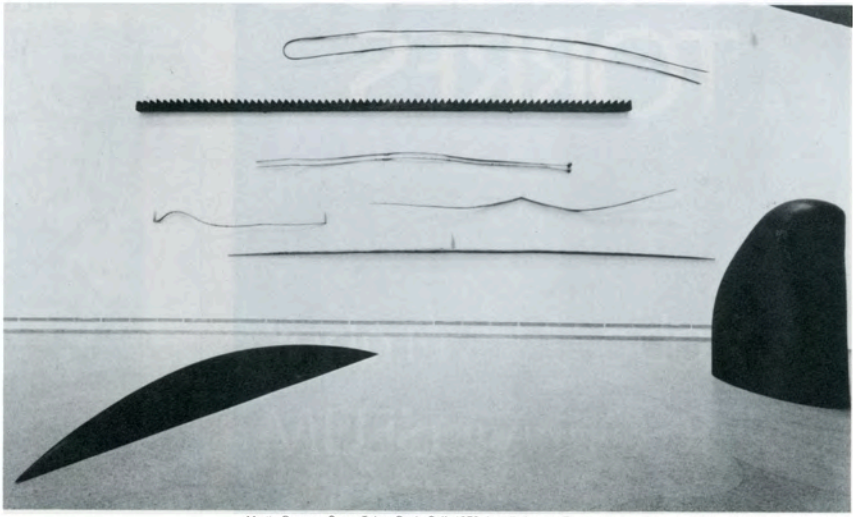


Martin Puryear, *M. Bastion Bouleversé*, 1979, hickory, Alaskan cedar, deerskin, installation at the Whitney Biennial, 18 x 17'.

MARTIN PURYEAR'S SCULPTURE



Martin Puryear, *Some Tales, Bask, Self*, 1978, installation at "Exxon: Young American Artists" (Guggenheim Museum).

Jonathan Crary

While aspects of Martin Puryear's sculpture seem traditional, even conservative, his work is part of important developments in contemporary art. He maintains the stance of both an artisan and a carver who pares down his material to a formal core, but the work he produces demands to be confronted outside of conventional sculptural terms. A no-nonsense craftsman's esthetic is applied to the creation of ambiguous, multivalent objects that resist analytic categorization. His art is an experience of an extraordinary refinement bordering on a kind of mannerism, yet it generates a confluence of meanings and effects coinciding with, and going beyond, its own lyricism and stylishness.

There is no consistent look to Puryear's work, no obvious route of development; no formal ideas repeatedly appear. In the last two years he has produced, for example, a large geometrical piece, *Equivalents*, 1979, the quasi-organic forms of *She* and *Her*, 1979, sparse wall pieces, such as the one at the 1979 Whitney Biennial, and explicitly architectural structures, like his *Cedar Lodge*, 1979. His approach to problems is distinctly nomadic, not bound by a need to exhaust the possibilities or implications of a given idea, or to establish an immediately recognizable signature. This is hardly to say that Puryear's work lacks rigor or is unfocused. Instead of common forms, what unifies his recent art is a specific attitude toward the nature and degree of his interventions on materials: it is a consistent economy of reduction that proceeds close to, but never beyond, a limit that would jeopardize the plurality of the work.

All his art bespeaks a keen sensitivity to the tactile qualities of his materials (almost always wood, but also substances like deerskin and rawhide). The range of woods used is large, often types with exotic, resonant names. Each piece manifests a craftsman's science of knowing the surfaces, textures, adaptabilities, the potentials, of a given wood. And no encounter with his work can bypass this pleasure of the maker, the handworker, the purely intensive activity of joining, fitting, smoothing: that excess in a work that "exceeds any structural functioning"(Barthes).

Despite Puryear's preoccupation with the physical properties of his materials, they do not determine how a piece is built. The connection between process and materials is not grounded in any constructive logic. Sometimes there is even a subtle dissonance between how something is made and the stuff used to make it. Except for his geometrical pieces Puryear's work process is not made explicit. It is not clear whether the meanderings of his branchlike forms result from his own manipulations or from the natural state of the wood, whether they have been assembled or found in one piece. What emerges from such objects is a kind of natural artificiality, in which the artist's own improvisations are not really distinguishable from the original shape of his materials. There are no obvious distinctions between what is worked and what is unworked.

Often Puryear's pieces have the logic of an assisted readymade, that is, a limited modification of a found object, such as the loop of Untitled, 1978, a long thin branch onto which carved "handles" have been

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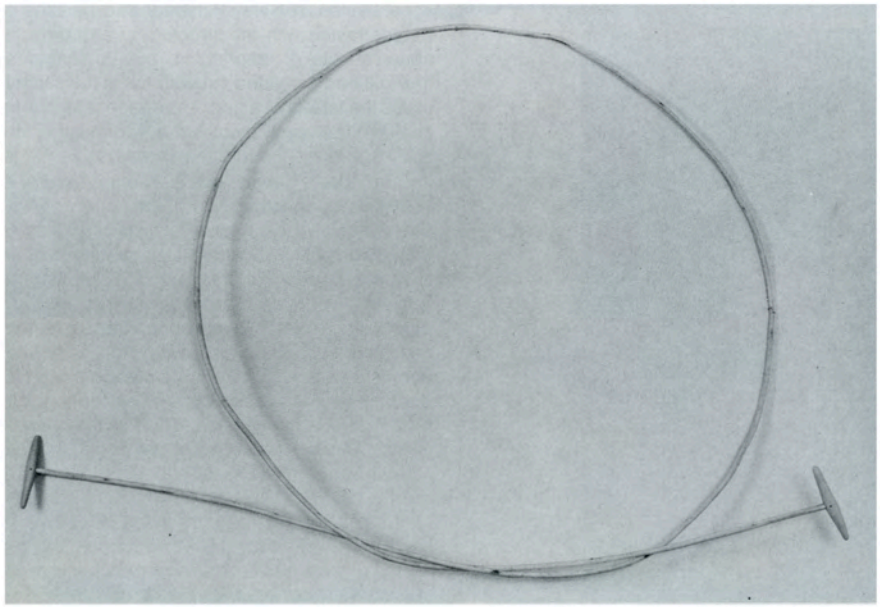
attached, or the curving branches of *Some Tales*, 1978, into which bladelike and spiked forms have been fitted. So his objects are not just the result of physically working on materials, but also of a process of selection and combination. In any case, Puryear's production is never a rational or immediately accessible procedure; his working method seems at once intuitive, gestural, esoteric.

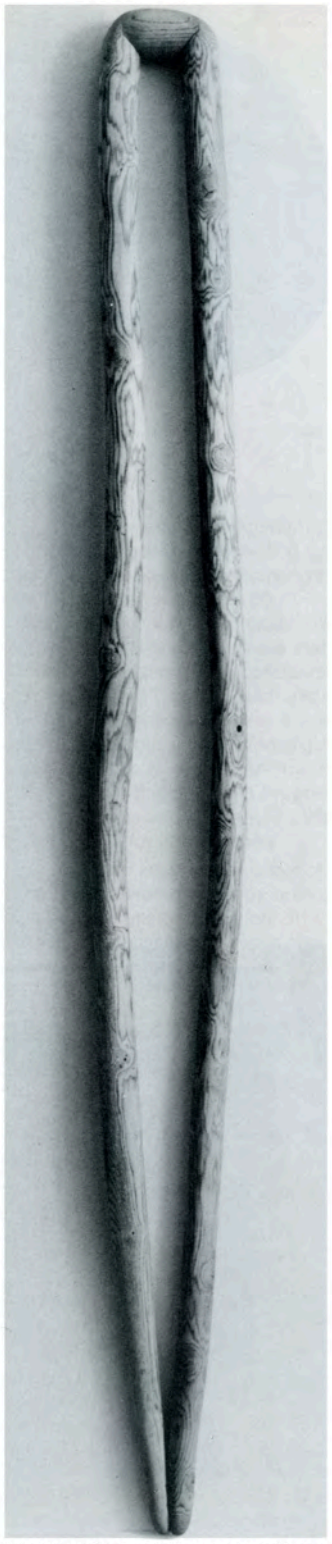
It is possible to discuss Puryear's work in the context of a nature/culture opposition, although this kind of reading should not dominate an experience of it. Many of his pieces seem to be about discovering how raw material or natural forms can be converted into cultural objects with a minimum of operations, how even slight reductions or additions can cause qualitative transformations in the meaning and function of objects. But proximity to a raw state ought not to be mistaken for what some have seen as "primitivism" in this artist's work. On the contrary, there is something exceedingly refined about the elegant austerity of means with which he warps or loops a given piece of wood. At the same time, his partial modifications of material tie into certain developments in other current art. Speaking in terms of outdoor sculptural projects, Kirk Varnedoe has discussed a shift in the attitude of artists toward enivironmental work: instead of the ambitious, monumental gestures of people like Smithson and Heizer, work now tends to be quieter and on a humbler scale. There is interest now in initiating a kind of collaborative relation between artist and nature, rather than the large-scale inscription of marks or cuts on the face of the earth. Works by Alan Saret and Michael Singer come immediately to mind, where forces of wind, water or light become active, equal partners in the generation and perpetuation of the work. Puryear is close to this sensibility, seeking not to dominate materials but working for a dialogue with original forms and processes of growth.

Most of Puryear's work is so simple that it can be read at once, taken in as a whole or as a single fluid movement. Yet while his shapes may be given immediately, there is often a gap between the simplicity of the form and the way it is built. A good example is *Equivalents*, 1979, where to read a cone and cube as gestalts is at odds with the crafted intricacy of their construction. At first this kind of log-cabin "minimalism" seems an ironic comment on 1960s sculpture, but it is really part of a specifically '70s sculptural practice, seen in work by Jackie Ferrara, Jackie Winsor and others. Often-noted features include a repetitive character of construction tied to a distinctly handmade look. It involves working with intrinsically simple shapes, then overlaying them with supplementary signs of the artist's physical activity and obsessiveness. A detached reading of elementary forms in "real" space is compounded with traces of a subjectivity, of an intensive production, with the residue of a kind of performance.

While much of Jackie Winsor's activity is essentially additive, Puryear usually concentrates on reducing his forms to surfaces and lines. His thinking never addresses itself to problems of volumes. Even in his works that in fact describe volumes, Puryear focuses on the surface, on its flows and seductiveness, on a mobile, indeterminant contour. His piece *She* presents two radically different contours, but the point is not visual trickery as we assimilate the contradictory viewpoints almost at once. What he does is to undermine our ability to imagine that the object has a stable or knowable interior. Wood is used as a pliable, even viscous material, like a skin or wrapping. With a kind of baroque sensuality, *She* becomes one total billowing zone of exteriority. It is like the upturned keel of ship, which we think of only in terms of its faces, not any

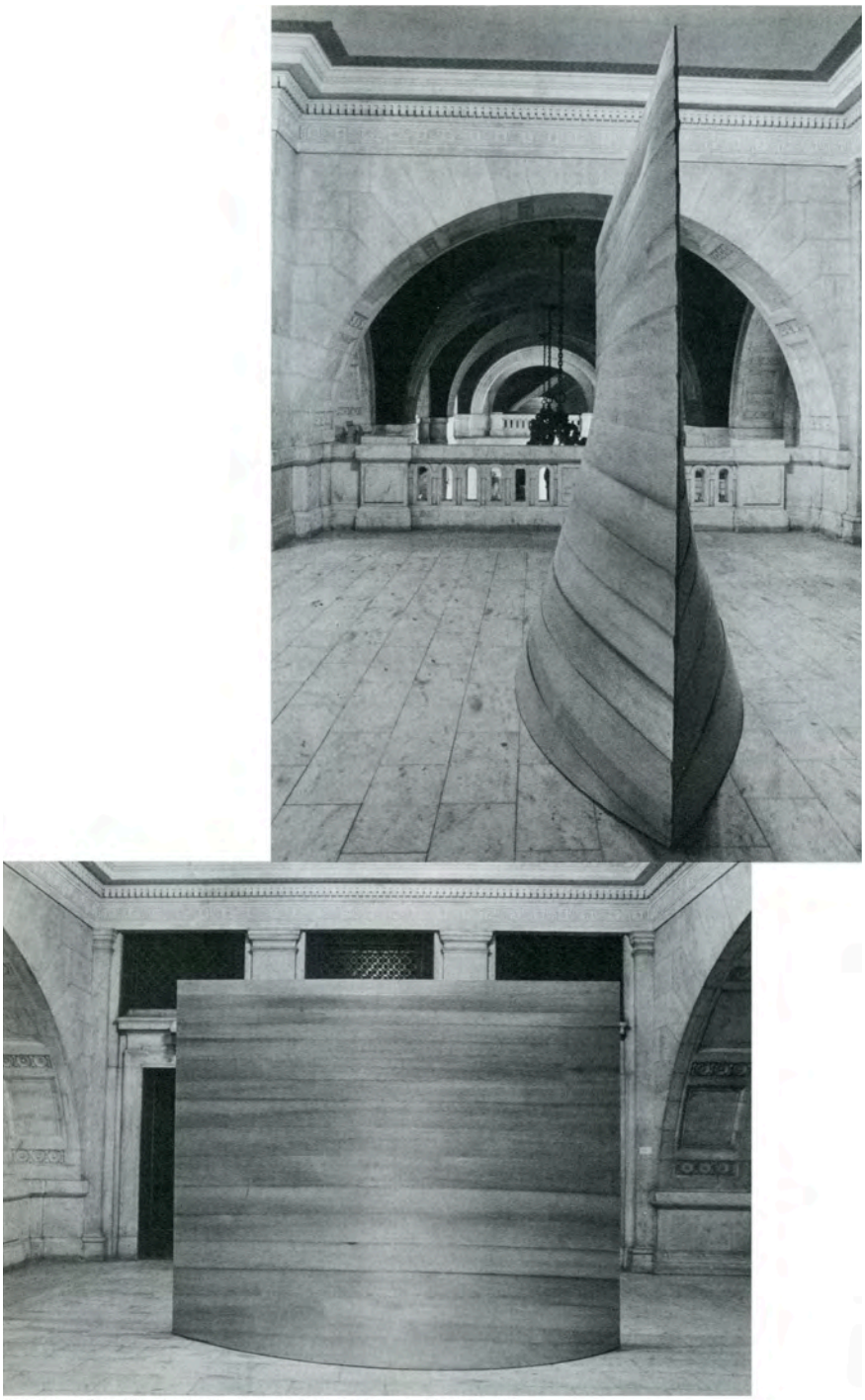


Martin Puryear, Untitled, 1978, hickory, Alaskan cedar, 60 x 78".



Martin Puryear, *Stripling*, 1978, mortised ash, 89" high.

Cary, Jonathan. "Martin Puryear's Sculpture." *Artforum*, October 1979, cover, pp. 28–31.



Martin Puryear, *She*, 1979, red cedar, Douglas fir, installation at U.S. Customs House, New York.

interior, of its sheer contact with water.

Puryear's wall pieces work more exclusively in terms of line. One of the richest of these projects is *M. Bastion Boulversé*, 1979. Line here has a number of functions. The large rounded frame can be read as (1) a line drawn on a flat surface; (2) as a boundary, like a low fence or corral, delimiting the field of tiny objects on the wall; (3) as an object standing next to a wall. Crucial to the work are two small dowellike pieces of wood that lie on the floor and out of which the rest of the work seems to spring. Though not conspicuous, they plant the work on the ground, thus letting it occupy the same floor space we do. The piece has the effect of being a closed private mural space, but the way it is based on the floor sets up a threshhold area which confuses the distinctions between a figurative space on the wall and the "real" space of the room. It is possible to read the wooden boundary line as a light tensile archway over a narrow zone next to the wall, allowing us an ambiguous, limited access to the field of the work.

While part of the work is lodged on the ground, we tend to focus on the dispersal of small, irregular pieces of wood and other materials high on the wall. The field seems to have been constituted according to a set of mysterious procedures rather than simply by a random scattering. It is a distribution of differentiated units that all seem to be part of one loose syntax; we see recognizable forms like cones and polyhedrons, and also unfamiliar shapes. It has the look of a field of signs, but its effects are nonsignifying. If the piece as a whole is related to human scale, we experience this territory as literally out of reach: its inaccessibility calls to mind the arcane delimitation of zones in Paul Klee's *Limits of the Intellect*, 1927.

The entire work becomes a play of literal support and apparent weightlessness, of rhythmic intervals and problematic enclosures. It sets up a multitiered space built out of a number of disconnected formal vocabularies. The way Puryear has organized it can be contrasted with the structure of a grid. Both are about effects of diagraming, but Puryear designs multiple and unrelated structurings of the same field, unlike the totality of a grid. The space of *M. Bastion* is confined yet open, mural yet environmental; in it no entities are positioned unequivocally.

An earlier wall piece, *Some Tales*, 1978, established another kind of open field, one defined solely by an accumulation of objects rather than by actual boundaries. It is tempting to consider this work as a kind of drawing, for, as in other pieces, Puryear's line has a hand-drawn quality. But it is perhaps misleading to talk about drawing, since that can imply a sculpture rooted in pictorialism, whereas Puryear is not subject to this limitation since his line does not function illusionistically or in terms of internal relations. The material presence of the assembled objects remains primary. On one hand, the various items in *Some Tales* ask to be read as cultural objects or artifacts: we cannot help but feel that we are looking at tools hanging on a wall. On the other hand, they seem basically decorative-abstract: we could even read the whole ensemble as some obscure kind of musical notation. The title tends to confirm a narrative dimension in our experience of the work: each object

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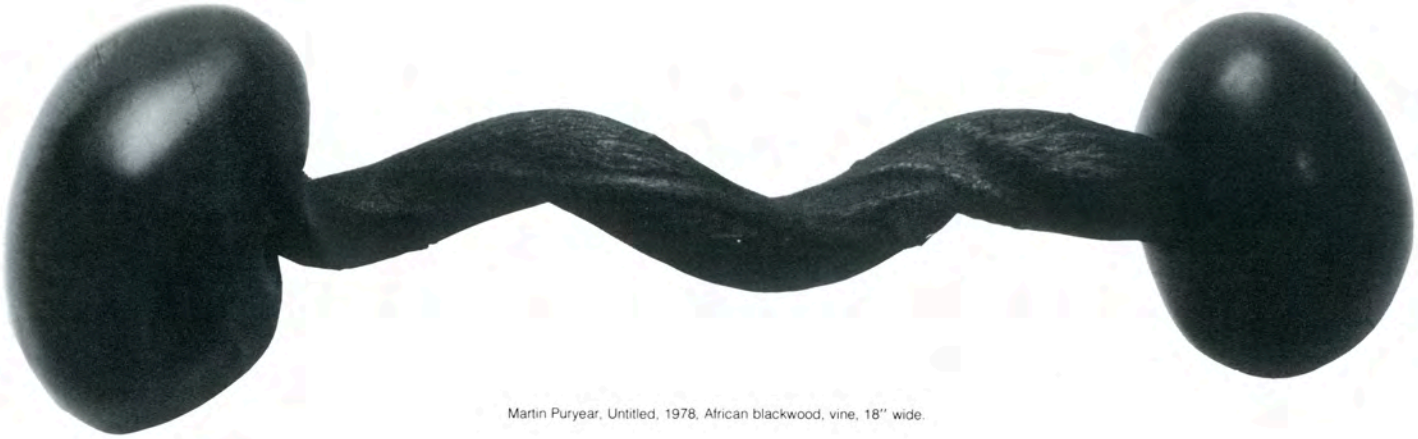
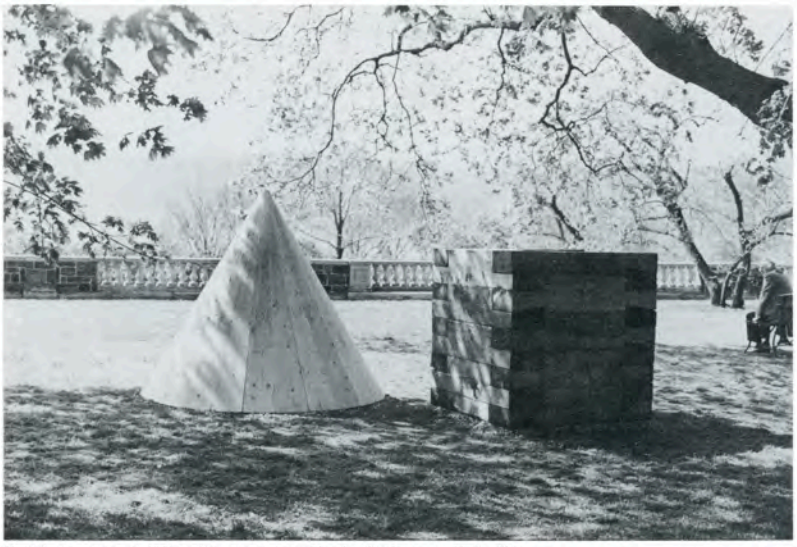


Martin Puryear, Untitled, 1978, African blackwood, vine, 18" wide.

is latent with numberless uses, and together they all make up a web of intertwining histories. Some seem like the armature from which elements like blades or netting are missing, others as if they have ceremonial uses. They are all redolent of the earth, somehow linked with primal activities like hunting, agriculture or fishing.

It is important that these elements only partially signify tools or implements, which they do through an indefinite kind of connotation. By avoiding any explicit references, they do not raise the same sort of issues as, say, the sleds of Salvatore Scarpitta. Puryear's work simulates the experience of functional objects, their texture and potentiality, without ever actually designating them, for his forms exist equally as pure figures, linear flourishes. The shifting space thus established relates to some central experiments in modern painting. Michel Foucault's reading of Paul Klee suggests one way of approaching Puryear's wall pieces: the creation of "an uncertain reversible floating space . . . the juxtaposition of figures and the syntax of signs. In the interlacing of one and the same fabric he presents two systems of representation . . . a space without name or geometry by intertwining the chain of signs and the network of figures"(*October*, Spring 1976). As an aside: it is interesting that Klee's modernism seems more relevant to painting in the late '70s than it ever might have in the '60s.



Martin Puryear, *Equivalents*, 1979, hemlock, dovetailed cube 54 x 54 x 54", staved cone 7'3½" x 6'3".

Some of Puryear's work remains close to formalist notions of sculpture, particularly pieces that are essentially autonomous objects. Much of his work, however, especially his wall pieces and architectural projects, is more elusive and raises a number of positional questions about what territory a given work inhabits, issues recently discussed by Rosalind Krauss. This is artwork that straddles or transgresses several different realms and is uneasily categorized as "sculpture" mainly for convenience.

Specifically, Puryear is close to number of contemporary artists whose work combines a rough-hewn elegance with the setting in motion of a field of conscious and half-conscious associations, through the practice of a kind of open referentiality. It is work that creates physical conditions under which an amalgam of objects and spaces can be experienced without ever representing any specific objects or spaces. Just as Puryear does not have models from which his "tools" are conceived, Alice Aycock is interested in the *effects* of various architectural situations, rather than referring to any recognizable precedents. Her increasingly ornate structures are immediate and concrete environments that generate convergences of memory, anxiety, desire. A number of other artists could be mentioned: Alice Adams' overlapping historical and architectural associations, which we experience in a fragmented series of half-recognitions; Barbara Zucker's conjunction of mechanical systems with decorative and delicate allusions to flowers, clothing. An important sector of '70s art has followed a path not unlike that of architecture. "Post-modern" architecture's reaction against the International Style can be seen as analogous to the development of '70s artists away from formalist art of the 1960s. In both cases there is a move toward semantic complexity and enrichment, to hybrid forms and intermingling of codes. Metaphoric thinking becomes central, but only in terms of a plurality of significations. ■

Cary, Jonathan. "Martin Puryear's Sculpture." *Artforum*, October 1979, cover, pp. 28–31.