



Artist Mel Kendrick on seeing the other side of things

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By –
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An "alternative perspective" is what artist Mel Kendrick has offered for 40 years. Special correspondent Jared Bowen of GBH Boston takes us to the Addison Gallery of American Art in Andover, Massachusetts to see why Kendrick's art has such staying power. It's part of our arts and culture series, "CANVAS."

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Jared Bowen:

The name of this show is Seeing Things In Things, which is essentially what artist Mel Kendrick has been doing since the 1970s.

Where we might see a plain old birch tree, he sees it from the inside out.

Mel Kendrick:

The only way I could do this was cutting it into many small pieces and then removing the core, and reassembled it exactly the way it grew in the tree. The wood grain is matched up all the way through.

Jared Bowen:

For most of his career, Kendrick has always gone out on a limb, dismantling them, actually, along with trees and logs, so that they can be reassembled.

Mel Kendrick:

On all these pieces, you can match up the holes and see what's going on. But it always brings up the whole question. It's like, what am I making?

(LAUGHTER)

Mel Kendrick:

What am I making? Why is this interesting to me?

Jared Bowen:

They're questions that have sustained Kendrick through a 40-some-odd-year-career, charted out here in his first ever retrospective at the Addison Gallery of American Art.

Kendrick came of age as a New York artist when minimalism reigned. Where artists like Frank Stella stripped art down to its barest forms, Kendrick was building it back up, in other words, going against the grain.

Mel Kendrick:

I was heavily influenced by the artists I was meeting, the older artists. And I kept trying to break through to find something that was my own.

Jared Bowen:

So he stayed with sculpture, something the art world had written off by the time he had a significant early career show of his small works in 1983.

Mel Kendrick:

I literally went into that show and I thought, OK — I could get emotional about it — OK, I have done all that I can do. And if they don't sell, if no one likes them, I will give them all to my friends.

Didn't turn out that way.

(LAUGHTER)

Allison Kemmerer:

I really can't think of anyone I would compare him to, which is what makes, for me, this show so exciting.

Jared Bowen:

Allison Kemmerer is the curator of the show, really a show of shows, where each gallery offers a different body of work.

Allison Kemmerer:

As you wander through, you will participate in this show. These works demand physical engagement. They suck you in.

You're asking yourself, what is this? You need to walk around them to fully understand them and process them.

Jared Bowen:

Often the answer, despite Kendrick's best efforts, is that these are beings of some sort, with their craggy legs and humanistic forms.

Allison Kemmerer:

Mel is adamant about avoiding any link to the representational world. But of course, we all see that. I imagine Nemo the insect like full-room sized sculpture as when we turn off the lights at night, is making his rounds around the museum, I mean it's all about motion.

Jared Bowen:

And made in motion. Kendrick never sketches, draws or designs his sculptures beforehand.

Allison Kemmerer:

He sees wielding the chainsaw much like wielding a pencil, um, in that the shapes that he um sort of enforces on to wood curves and arabesques and holes are not things naturally um akin to the material. It's more a painterly drawing process.

Mel Kendrick:

If I make a mistake, whatever a mistake is, something I don't like, I stick it back together with glue, and then I keep on. So, I'm incorporating all those elements. And that, to me, is drawing.

Jared Bowen:

The clues to Kendrick's how-did-he-do-that process are everywhere, the traces of paint, the ties, the armature, all locked into these single blocks of wood.

Well, what about your relationship with wood? Is it a relationship? Have you mastered it at this point?

Mel Kendrick:

I like to say I'm a very bad carpenter.

(LAUGHTER)

Mel Kendrick:

But I started in construction. When I arrived in New York, I knew nothing about wood. So it's really the whole thing built up from literally building, building walls, building kitchen cabinets.

Jared Bowen:

Wood does have the starring and frequently towering role here, and with appearances in his woodblock prints and photography. But, occasionally, we find cameos by concrete and rubber.

Mel Kendrick:

This is sort of an architectural rubber. And I love the color, the amber. And it satisfies something in me to see the inside.

Jared Bowen:

How often does beauty matter in your work?

Mel Kendrick:

Beauty, as a concept, is not something I go through.

But I think it's one of those intangible things, because how do you know what's beautiful if you have never seen it before? But the amber is beautiful, the light coming through it. I mean, these pieces near a window, it's fantastic.

But in no way that I think this could be deemed a beautiful object.

(LAUGHTER)

Mel Kendrick:

I think it's a very disturbing object or a very funny thing.

Jared Bowen:

And therein lies the beauty of Mel Kendrick, seeing the other side of things.

For the "PBS NewsHour," I'm Jared Bowen Andover, Massachusetts.

Judy Woodruff:

It does pull you in. Thank you for that.