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‘Mel Kendrick: Seeing Things in Things’ Review: Process Over Product

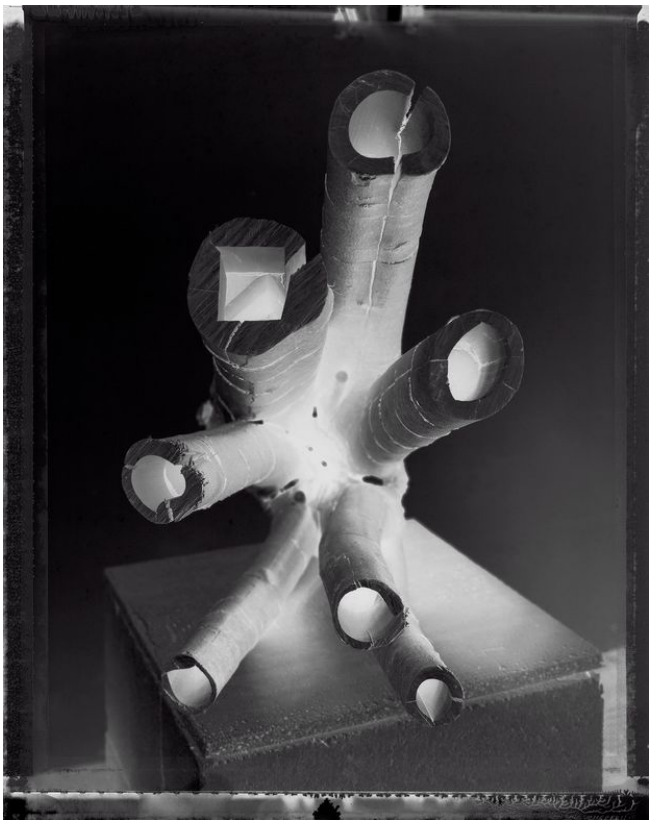
A jam-packed survey at the Addison Gallery of American Art showcases the sculptor’s distinctive application of Minimalist sensibilities to mostly natural materials.

By Lance Esplund

Here on the grounds of the Phillips Academy, while looking at the two large outdoor installations commissioned for “Mel Kendrick: Seeing Things in Things,” an artist accompanying me picked up and gave me a small, weathered tree branch. Shaped like a hand with outstretched fingers, its “palm” was dark and honey-colored and its “back” was bleached almost white. She was illustrating a point about the surprise and unpretentiousness of nature; and offering it as a palate cleanser to the nearly 90 abstract sculptures, most carved out of wood, we had just seen in Mr. Kendrick’s retrospective inside the Addison Gallery of American Art.

Born in Boston in 1949 and an Andover alumnus, Mr. Kendrick later studied with Minimalists Robert Morris and Tony Smith. Despite the fact that he works primarily in wood, a substance he evidently values for the pure, abstract beauty of its natural material, rather than metal, he’s often described as a Minimalist because of the reductiveness of his forms and his zealous embrace of process.

Process is a muse Mr. Kendrick doggedly pursues. And the evidence and range of his studio practice take center stage at the Addison. It oftentimes involves the meeting of a large tree stump with an unruly chainsaw; or the application of understated primary and secondary colors, ink, lamp black, graphite and plaster; or casting his carvings in amber-hued rubber; or photographing small, three-dimensional artworks in black-and-white and blowing up the negatives, like enormous X-rays; or making mural-size woodblock prints or cast paper “woodblock drawings,” which bridge printmaking and relief sculpture.



Many of his works, such as a series of “Black Oil” sculptures from 1991-92, on view here, each began as a wooden block, which was cut up into pieces, further altered and then reassembled, “like a jigsaw puzzle,” Mr. Kendrick explains in a 2019 interview, “but made by someone who doesn’t understand jigsaw puzzles, or who isn’t obeying the rules.”

It’s when he obeys something resembling rules, however, that Mr. Kendrick’s work is most clear and rewarding. It’s then that his Minimalist sensibility wins over his tendencies toward the frenetic, crowded and baroque—art as jigsaw puzzle gone purposefully awry.

Sometimes, Mr. Kendrick’s process is fruitfully palpable. Midway through this jam-packed exhibition of more than 100 objects—the first survey dedicated to Mr. Kendrick, who collaborated on the show with curator and Addison interim director Allison Kemmerer —is a row of seven untitled mahogany abstractions from 2007, all lined up diagonally like sentries across the gallery floor. Each sculpture, about 32 inches tall and tinted Japanese red, is divided into two halves (upper and lower). One part (either top or bottom) has seemingly been carved out of and removed from the other. The artworks’ cutout, negative sections have apparently, magically rematerialized as positive forms. They suggest sculptures on plinths, heads-and-busts or seated figures, but also nuts outside of their shells, or organs detached from their hosts. There’s spare, Constructivist logic and familial integrity at the heart of this sculptural idea—as well as sweet satisfaction in the recognition of the interrelatedness and transposition of top and bottom, inside and outside.

In other standout pieces, such as the crude “Black Walnut With Legs” (1986)—in which Mr. Kendrick pays homage to Constantin Brancusi’s first sculpture in wood, “Prodigal Son” (c. 1914-15), a blocky, nearly abstract figurative carving in the Philadelphia Museum of Art—primitive totem and figure are subsumed into pure, powerful abstract form. The sculpture’s “head,” “body” and “torso” interchange: “legs” become “neck”; “face” becomes “spine.” And in the blackened, equally totemic “Split Ebony” (1987), less than a foot tall, Mr. Kendrick beautifully contrasts and melds rippling curves and smooth polish with the

sharp, chipped and roughhewn. And in “Tiny Red and Blue” (1983), forms painted those colors and resembling stairs, waterfalls and plumage expand and contract with accordion-like ease.

Too often, however, process dominates—as if Mr. Kendrick is concerned more with how these things are made than with the finished products. “Big Tree” (1988), a chopped up, carved and reconfigured massive tree trunk, never transcends its humble origins. The 12-foot-tall by 5-foot-wide by 10-foot-long “Black Dots” (1989)—combining stacked blocks and octopus-like tendrils—is not a cohesive sculpture but a whiplashing stockpile of discordant articulations. And a lot of the wood works, comprising a body supported by legs or flying buttresses (such as pipe), imply gangly figures, potbelly stoves, space aliens, robotic models, giant hives and egg sacks—despite Mr. Kendrick’s disavowal of their blatantly anthropomorphic qualities. These “beings” can seem less like abstractions and more like obsessions with carved, surface razzmatazz and figurative contrapposto. Not much is gained when these artworks, like “Big Daddy Fun/Second Version” (1995), are then cast in rubber, propped up further with 2-by-4 blocks and displayed in pairs.

“Seeing Things in Things” establishes that Mr. Kendrick entertains a multitude of fertile, sculptural ideas. The artist who handed me that piece of tree branch was inspired by Mr. Kendrick’s “7 From 7” (2000)—an intriguing pairing of two much larger, hand-shaped wooden sculptures: one, fabricated; one, though altered, found. If not for this exhibition, she admittedly would not have seen the hand in the branch—the thing in the thing. Unfortunately, this show offers a few ideas too many and is so congested you can hardly navigate the galleries. It would benefit greatly from some judicious whittling.

—Mr. Esplund, the author of “The Art of Looking: How to Read Modern and Contemporary Art” (Basic Books), writes about art for the Journal.