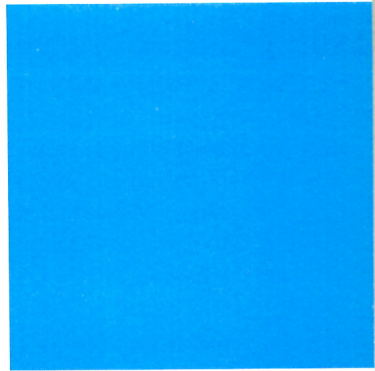


Red Holes 2,
2016.
Mahogany and
Japan Color,
22 x 14 x 4 in.

q/a



Turning Things Inside Out:

A Conversation
with Mel Kendrick

by Jan Garden Castro

Mel Kendrick's forte is making new things. As a student, beginning in 1971, he studied with Tony Smith and Robert Morris at Hunter College in New York and worked for Dorothea Rockburne. He also became friends with Mel Bochner, Sol LeWitt, and Robert Smithson at Max's Kansas City. Kendrick assimilated their discourse as he honed his own work. Over five decades, his sculptures have evolved in unique directions, exploring the properties of wood, rubber, and

most recently, concrete, while laying bare the process of making. The works that result from his endless experimentation double as meditations on the nature (and history) of sculpture, finding new ways to approach formal oppositions such as inside and outside, positive and negative, organic and geometric, and nature and culture. Kendrick's retrospective "Seeing Things in Things," which debuted at the Addison Gallery of American Art last year, travels to the Parrish Art Museum this fall.

Jan Garden Castro: **Could you discuss the interiority of your sculpture?**

Mel Kendrick: Using the interior? Seeing the interior? It started as a joke. I never quite understood all that Henry Moore talk about negative space, but I decided to make my own negative space by removing part of whatever I was working with. It was an amusing idea. The next thing—with *Reverse Stump*, *Black Trunk*, and some others—was working with large, hollow trees that I found. I then began to hollow out my own trees, and I wound up with the interior, which led me to my credo—to use everything. I don't remove something and throw it away.

I'm not chiseling; I'm not leaving a pile of wood chips on the floor. What I take out, through whatever method I'm using, I put back into the piece. The method of reconsidering the interior in relation to the exterior has varied considerably over the years. Lately, it's been more direct, although it's getting obscure again. In my recent show at David Nolan, it was still about removing something, but sometimes putting it in a different piece. I came up with this concept because I'd been dealing with bases from the beginning. I didn't want the standard museum white plinth or box, which removed the object from the real world. I thought I could make a sculpture that came from the base, and the base very quickly became half the sculpture. It set up the relationship, one to one, of the inside seen as a positive and the outside as a negative space. Some pieces are a lot more complex.

My "Red Blocks" show at David Nolan (2007) was about working with solids—making my own starting blocks from wood and painting them to create the surface, which would then, as I worked with the piece, travel around and become part of the information. In other words, by painting the block red, removing the interior, and putting it back together, the red paint, all through the process, would register as what was outside, and the rest as what was inside. Paint, for me, is a material more than a color. Coating laminated blocks of wood with raw linseed oil and lampblack or Japan Colors is a way of preparing the block—the minimal sculpture that I begin with—for the next step, which is cutting into it, bringing parts out, and moving them around.

JGC: **Could you elaborate on how you make your starting blocks?**

MK: Fabricating the blocks, treating them, painting them, and, recently, fragmenting them, is a long pro-



mel kendrick 



LEFT TO RIGHT:
Big Tree,
1988.
Cedar,
101.63 x 30 x 30 in.

Reverse Stump,
1995.
Wood, pipe, mending
plates, and threaded rod,
92 x 67 x 65 in.



cess. I create blocks out of laminated or joined pieces of rough-sawn wood, often mahogany. Then I ebonize the block. I like that it changes the feeling completely and, so far, no pigment is involved. This is a long process. Japan Red or plain white gesso goes on afterwards to make it a clear signifier—it's putting on a skin and creating an exterior.

Next, I fragment the block with a band saw or other tools with an eye toward how I am going to open up the sections. I remove most of the center. It's a play between the geometric and the hand-drawn. I draw on the wood before I cut it, and some of the drawing stays. The band saw is kind of a straight line through the material, but what I draw on one side isn't exactly what happens on the other side. And I still don't know what the piece is going to look like. I now try to keep

THIS PAGE:
7 from 7,
2000.
Wood and cement
blocks,
each element: 32 x 21
x 18 in.

OPPOSITE:
Trunk Drawing,
1995.
Woodblock print on
Kozo paper, mounted on
muslin,
117 x 152 in.

records of the iterations on my iPhone. In general, I see relationships of the holes to the rectangles, and they change until I see something that becomes essential to the piece. As hard as I try, 95 percent of what I do as an artist is invisible to the viewer.

JGC: How do you source your wood?

MK: A lot is happenstance. I've found cedar on the back of a truck. Black walnut, which grows in Westchester, is the most expensive wood now—big pieces take 30 years to cure. That brought me back to mahogany, which is the largest kiln-dried wood I can get. I have picked up pieces of ebony over the years; any ebony I have now was probably cut a hundred years ago. Artists hold on to it.

JGC: How do you decide where to cut?

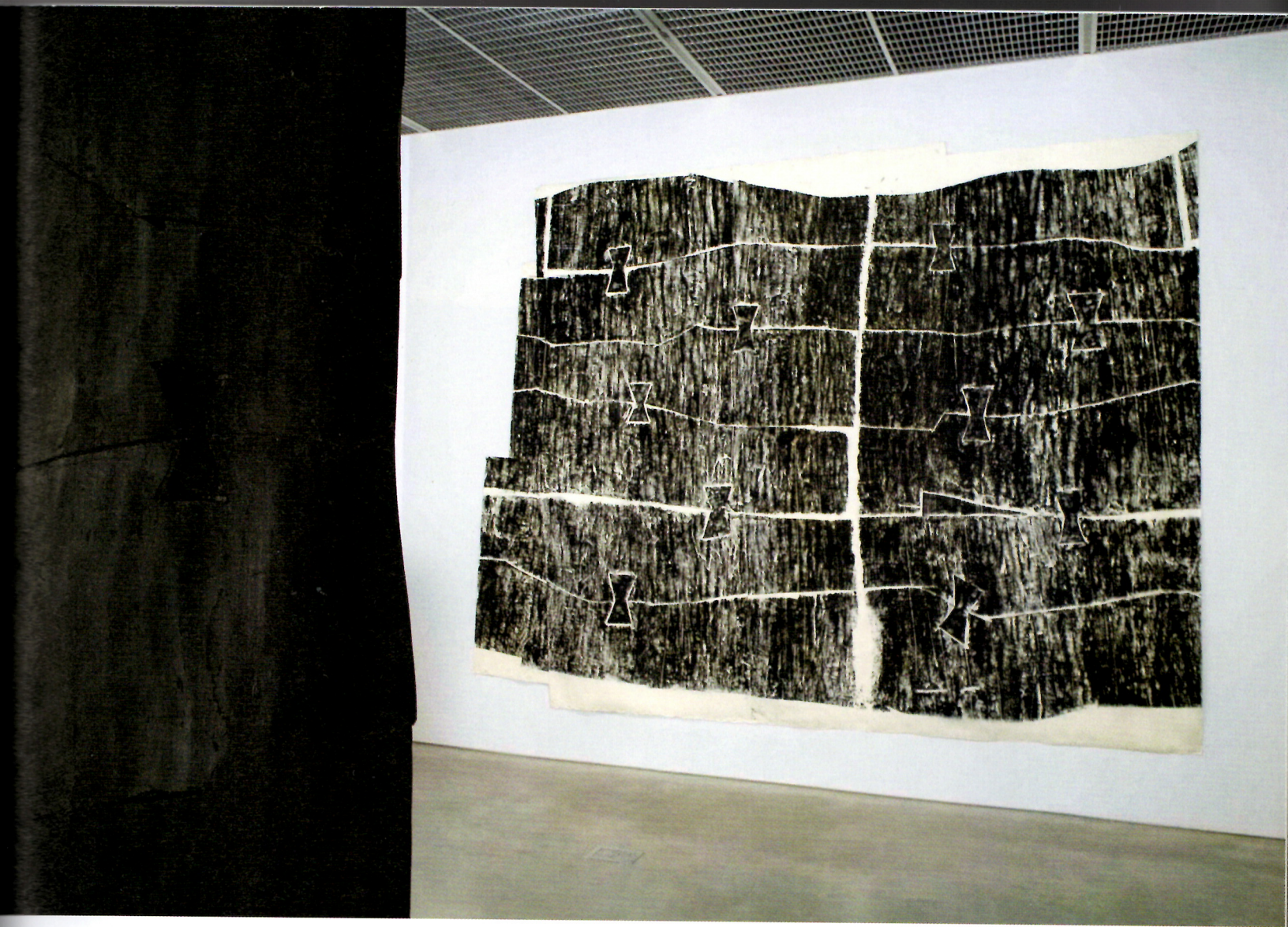
MK: My cuts are always in response to the first shape that I put together. I try to derail that and get away from the central feeling of the square.

JGC: In 1983, you began making freestanding sculptures from single blocks of wood. When did you decide to use every piece in the block?

MK: I set the retrospective up at the Addison Gallery so that *Nemo* (1983), a black and white, room-filling, spidery piece, was the last of a group of works consciously inspired by Futurism. The interesting thing is that there is a cube in the center of *Nemo*, and everything radiates from that cube—almost like taking the Sol LeWitt cube and swinging parts off of it—so there is a semblance of organization. As I kept cutting up these pieces of wood, I went further and made *Untitled* (1983), which is really an outtake from *Nemo*. I put that in the retrospective because it was a transitional piece. After that, I started making smaller pieces.

I had in my mind that scale is not content—you can look at something fairly small and project yourself into it. You don't have to be overwhelmed by a sculpture. I found that very freeing. That's when I started working small, and 20 years later, very small. Because I was working with saws, if I cut out a shape, I would have the other part in my hand. It just made sense to use all of the pieces. I always wonder: Are these my rules? My method? My system? Everybody has their own system; this is one I never talked about, but it was there.

JGC: What was behind your revival of the base after it had been demonized by earlier generations?



MK: Young artists always want to do something they are not seeing. Putting something on a base immediately drew references to Modernism, so I was taking a big chance. Everything I had done until then was on the floor and related more to architecture, so the decision to put things on a base was a problem that had to be solved, because I wanted these pieces high up. My idea was to make a base that was physical—you understood how it worked, how it went to the ground that you were standing on yourself, and how it's there to lift these pieces up to a certain position where you can project into them.

One year, Joel Shapiro, Nancy Graves, and I represented the U.S. in the Budapest Small Sculpture Triennial, and there, they were still working their way

out of 1930s, '40s sculpture; all the works in the show were installations on the ground, except mine. I don't think they could see it. They also left the brown paper tags and string on my sculpture thinking that, everything being conceptual, those things were part of the sculpture, but they weren't.

JGC: Your work in the mid-'90s involved deconstructing tree parts and making rubber alternatives for the originals. Could you discuss *Square Cut Osage* (1996) in terms of the final shape and the effect of using cable ties to join the pieces?

MK: *Square Cut Osage*, probably the last of the rubber pieces, came about because I'd been casting many things in bronze. *Square Cut Osage* was also

THIS PAGE:

2 Holes,

2017.

Gesso on ebonized
mahogany,
30 x 31 x 2.5 in.

OPPOSITE, FROM

TOP:

Black Trunk,

1995.

Wood and ink,
116 x 59 x 52 in.

Installation view of
"Markers," Madison
Square Park, New York,
2009-10.



cast in bronze; it was beautiful to put them side by side. I took the used molds back to my studio, and using a hard architectural gasket rubber, I could re-create the piece in rubber in my own studio, which I liked, because bronze is putting the work in someone else's hands. So, I could make a "replica" in amber rubber, which was translucent and another shift from anything I did in bronze. Bronze replicates the surface; the rubber creates a visible interior. I went back to "camp craft" and laced the parts together using cable ties. I liked the idea that the fitting matched the material. *Square Cut Osage* is one of those pieces, like *Raised Stump*, where I was experimenting with an interesting piece of wood—I wanted to do very little to it and make the simplest monument or marker. It has what I call the "pumpkin cut," which is basically a plunge cut with a chain saw. The thing about making something solid in rubber is that, by its nature, rubber sags and doesn't want to stand; so, every time I make something in rubber, it requires an adjustment of the supports—wedges and things to match the original.

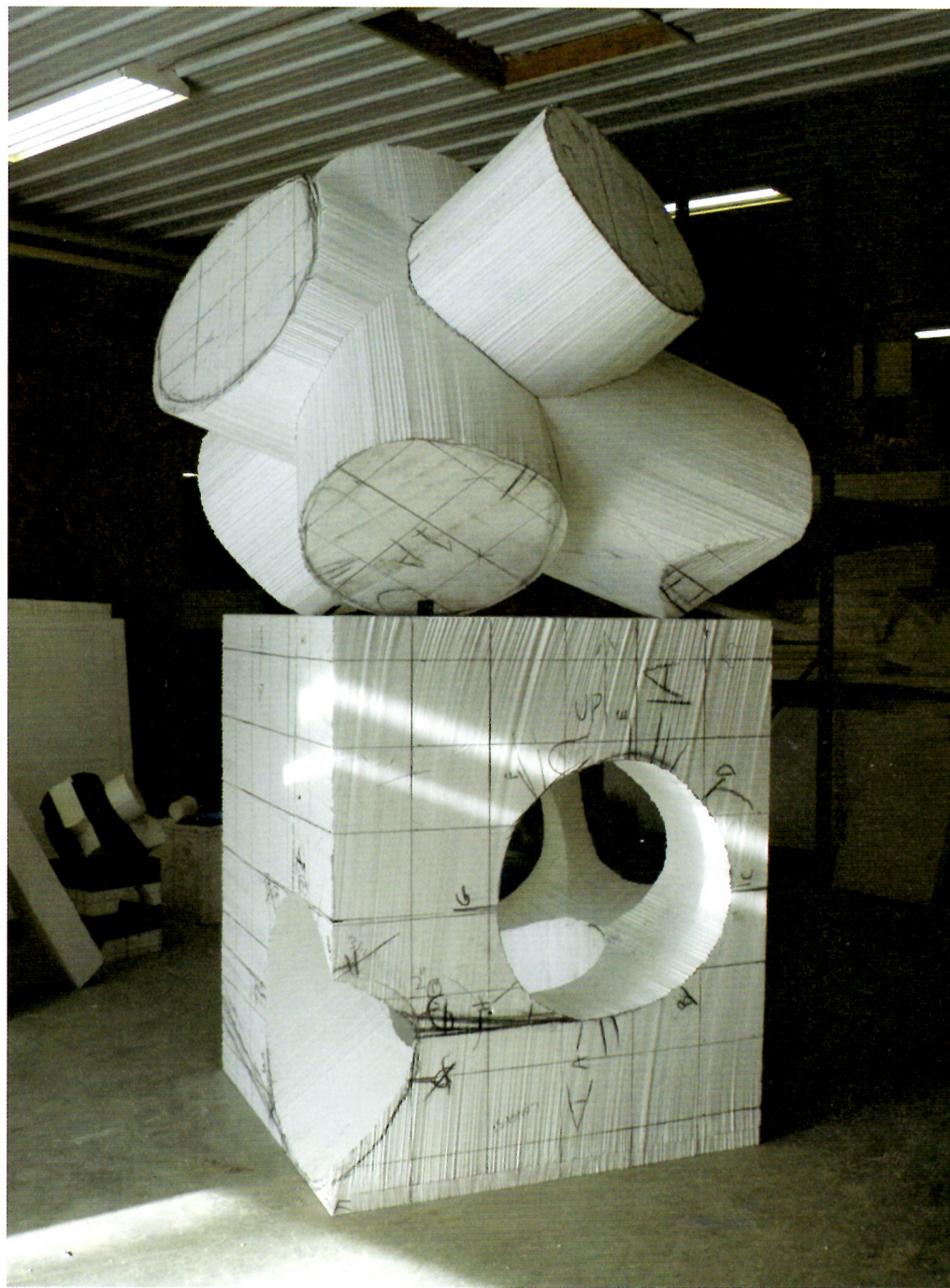
JGC: *Black Trunk (1995)* is a tall, dramatically hollowed-out stump with butterfly cuts in the wood. Klaus Kertess called it a "totemic presence." What inspired this and the subsequent print you made using the inked sculpture?

MK: These pieces developed very differently than the preceding works, which required complex cuts and fittings. I found the hollow tree—a remarkable piece of wood—cut it into sections, and brought it to my studio. It was a massive presence. I liked it, but it was just a tree on the floor. I got the idea of inking it and holding the paper against it, going around the tree to make a woodblock print mapping the surface. The woodblock print mapping the surface. The woodblock was made with dovetails in the piece. Since gravity was holding the layers together, I took out the dovetails. Its block base, to me, was the finishing act to make it an object. Putting feet on made the piece come together.

JGC: In the early 2000s, you went even further and started pulling trees inside out and making photographic negatives of the hollowed-out exteriors and liberated interiors. What led you to this examination of the insides and outsides of things?

MK: I think it was a response to working with the hollow trees. I liked that feeling, so I decided I





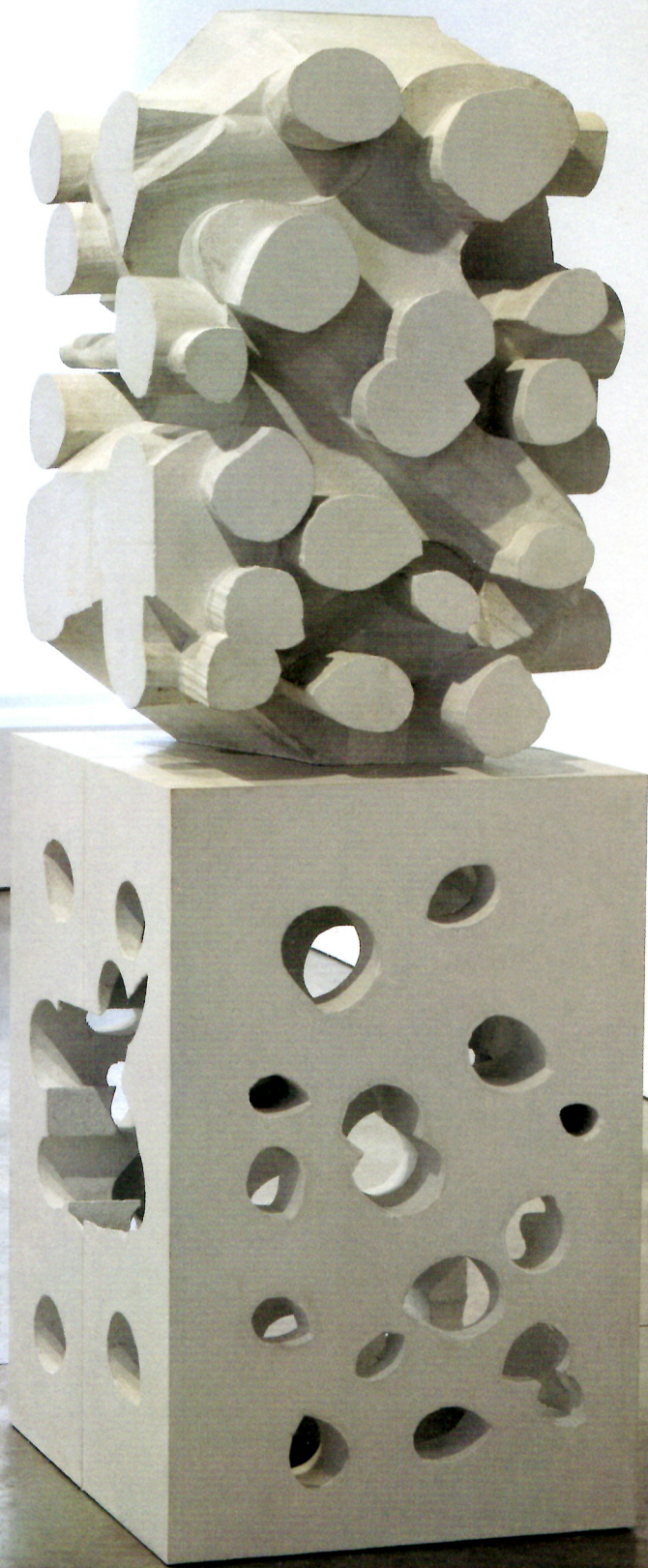
THIS PAGE:
EPS foam prototype
for an unrealized
cast concrete sculpture
in Kendrick's studio,
New York, 2015.

OPPOSITE, (LEFT
TO RIGHT):
White Block/Spiral,
2015.

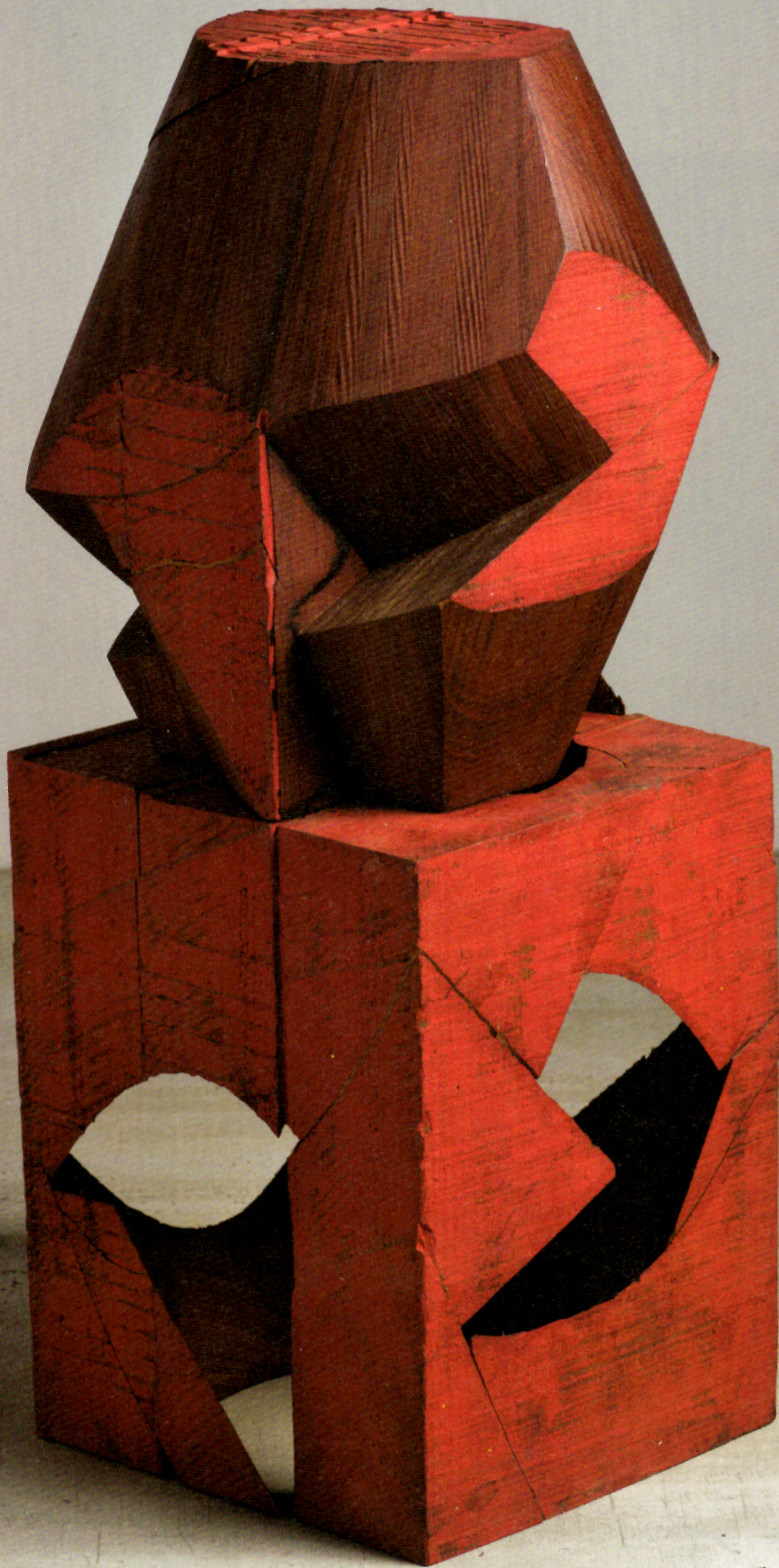
Precast concrete,
64 x 25 x 37 in.

**Clear Ideas (After
Magritte)**,
2015.

Cast concrete,
75 x 24 x 27 in.



**“ What does someone see
in a so-called abstract object
with no outside references? ”**



THIS PAGE:
Untitled,
2007.
Wood and Japan Color,
31.75 x 12.88 x 12.13 in.

OPPOSITE:
Untitled,
2021.
Mahogany and gesso,
80 x 101.5 x 4 in.

would make a tree hollow myself. I had to break it down into small parts to do that, and, once again, I found myself with the two parts. Sometimes I had been reconfiguring the insides with small blocks. It became clear that the most interesting thing to do would be to re-create the tree as it grew. So, I matched up each piece by the grain and put it back together. With *7 from 7* (2000), which is in the retrospective, I was amazed that the inner part of the tree—what I had removed—had such complexity. It's really about perception; the inside is totally manmade, so it's got geometry to it.

JGC: *Could you discuss your fascination with holes and time?*

MK: In certain sculptures, it's very clear that time is an object—a point on a continuum when I stop working. I started the holes to put my mark on it. I had to destroy it in a way. The holes break it down; it's a relationship that's gone through my work. In my later work, when I remove the centers and stack them on their own, they become a different thing, almost cartoonish balancing acts, very different from the process that brought me there. I've also incorporated the holes as a base for another sculpture, which gives them a different function.

JGC: *Raised Stump (1991/2018) opened the Addison iteration of "Seeing Things in Things." What was the history of its genesis?*

MK: *Raised Stump* was not originally green. I was thinking about the most basic monument or marker—stacking one thing on top of the other on top of the other. I incorporated the interior of a black walnut stump that I'd had in my studio for years. Ten years ago, I had painted it green thinking that I was going to cut it apart again, but I didn't. I decided to put it together—now green, now missing some wood on the stump—and it spoke to me. The three moving parts cut with a chain saw may be thumbing my nose at the craft. It's not an aggressive color—the color of an English breadbox. It's looking both ways, forward and back, in the show.

JGC: *What do you want viewers to take away from this huge retrospective?*

MK: The title, "Seeing Things in Things," is me wrestling with abstraction. What does someone see in a so-called abstract object with no outside references? It's very clear to me when something communicates to me.



The conversation in the studio is almost a conversation between objects. So, I am not quite sure what someone else will see.

JGC: *Are there any lessons you have learned from your teachers or that you offer to others when you are teaching?*

MK: Tony Smith and Bob Morris never did real crits. After a student set things up, Tony would philosophize without offering criticism or even addressing the object. I was happy with that. In my experience, great teachers keep throwing it back on you. In my own teaching, the last thing I want is for people to make work like me. It's a process—artists need to find out for themselves what they need to do. ■■■

Mel Kendrick's retrospective "Seeing Things in Things" will open at the Parrish Art Museum in fall 2022.