

AT LARGE | NOVEMBER 28, 2022 |
BARBARA A. MACADAM

Mel Kendrick on Seeing Things in Things



BARBARA MACADAM

Portrait of Mel Kendrick with his artwork

The title of sculptor Mel Kendrick's exhibition "Seeing Things in Things" at the Parrish Museum in East Hampton (<https://www.artandobject.com/news/3-must-see-gallery-pop-ups-hamptons>), New York is particularly apt. At 73 years old, Kendrick is famous for taking things apart, reassembling the fragments, and then reapplying them to create composite sculptures, letting his materials be his guide. He is what he does.

Most recently, Kendrick's exhibition at the Parrish follows its debut at the Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts. The choice of these two venues has allowed Kendrick to explore context as an element and inspiration in his creations, much as his materials are.

Kendrick had to accommodate himself to the Addison Gallery's light-infused spaces (<https://www.artandobject.com/news/wrightwood-659-tadao-andos-brilliant-architectural-designs>), patterned ceiling, and warm wood floors and then shift to the Parrish's spare, clean lines, concrete floors, and galleries that are set off a central corridor.



COURTESY THE PARRISH MUSEUM, PHOTO CREDIT: GARY MAMAY

Mel Kendrick (American, born 1949) Installation view of 'Seeing Things in Things' at the Parrish Museum of Art.

When he arrived at the Parrish, he discovered that he could install his large concrete (<https://www.artandobject.com/news/stepping-concrete-utopia-moma>) works outside the entrance to the Herzog and De Meuron-designed museum. "It became a separate show and then," he realized, "the space itself was part of the show,"—an outdoor gallery and a grand entrance.

"The space at the Parrish brought this new focus," Kendrick said. "The irony is that, when I started moving things around, the pieces seemed more monumental." Then, he added, "I considered each room (<https://www.artandobject.com/news/ancient-roman-baths-archeological-explanation>) a show." There were nine rooms. "The first big room was very exciting with sculptures all around. Unlike in a painting exhibition," he said, "I could see the space behind the works. I got to see the power of the architecture, I used the museum, and it became part of the work." The light, the time of day, and the season expanded the potential of the work.

The artist also installed a large sculpture in the main entrance, adding a counterpoint to the flat Long Island landscape (<https://www.artandobject.com/news/ashley-bickerton-creates-colorful-seascapes-debris-washed-ashore>) that stretches outside the windowed wall. In effect, Kendrick supplemented the landscape with his own version of nature (<https://www.artandobject.com/news/daan-roosegaardes-art-helping-keep-earth-beautiful-and-clean>).

Coherent with lots of contradictions: conversational and yet reflective, Kendrick's work is not easy to pin down. It can be viewed as comparable to self-analysis, whereby the artist explores internal forms and reassesses them as he creates new ones, gathering up the old matter and not knowing what will emerge. He tugs out the guts of tree



COURTESY THE PARRISH MUSEUM, PHOTO CREDIT: GARY MAMAY

Mel Kendrick (American, born 1949) Installation view of 'Seeing Things in Things' at the Parrish Museum of Art.

(<https://www.artandobject.com/news/gardens-pompeii-natural-disasters-antiquity>) trunks, cuts them up, and then applies them to his sculptures' exteriors. He cuts holes that become negative space in one context and positive in another.

Kendrick is complicated. His works could be that of several different artists, working in various traditions. Why choose this particular approach? In fact, Kendrick's complex creations ask such questions of themselves.

Specifically, how do his puzzle-like pieces relate to his more self-contained tabletop wood sculptures? We see how some of his compositions allude to Futurism, embracing the dynamism of Giacomo Balla. There are hints of Brancusi in the roughness and jagged spine of his wood (<https://www.artandobject.com/news/marcin-rusak-brings-natural-world-indoors>) constructions. And a sprinkling of David Smith in the way Kendrick draws in wood and metal. Kendrick's work is also reminiscent of pre-Colombian artisans in the small forms poised on tables as gestures or attitudes.

A member of the tight-knit cohort of artists breaking out in the 1970s and 80s – Eric Fischl, Carroll Dunham, (<https://www.artandobject.com/news/laurie-simmons-big-career-photographing-little-things>) Julian Schnabel, and David Salle – Kendrick makes work that is often inscrutable. He bridges genres, having broken away from uncompromising Minimalism and Conceptualism. He doesn't like viewers to seek out figurative associations in his sculptures, but allows as how they might do so. It would be difficult not to compare sticks at the bottom of his sculptures with legs in place of bases and to see a twisting and dancerlike black form as evoking Jim Dine's *Venus de Milo* currently on Sixth Ave.



COURTESY THE PARRISH MUSEUM, PHOTO CREDIT: GARY MAMAY

Mel Kendrick (American, born 1949) Installation view of 'Seeing Things in Things' at the Parrish Museum of Art.

Kendrick explains in an interview with Carroll Dunham in the exhibition catalogue how he understands his work "better afterward than while doing it": "I can look back and say, 'Oh you know, prosthetic legs held those sculptures up, or the use of the chainsaw had a lot to do with getting away from geometry, getting away from precision.' And that's always served me in my work."

What most distinguishes him is his devotion to materials, tools, and process more than to subjects. Kendrick wields a chainsaw as freely as he might a pencil or paintbrush, and he picks up random pieces of wood and metal, trimming them to size, but not shaping them. They are what they are and make of themselves.

Nemo is an 18-foot-long black and white sculpture from 1983. Composed of wood, plaster, and ink, the work projects a long, ridged tail or limb, like a dinosaur's (<https://www.artandobject.com/news/de-kooning-celmins-and-t-rex-come-auction-christies>). It might suggest locomotion, and, a straight shorter piece, implying tension between the tail in motion and the leg as arresting the action.

There is playfulness in the works and an ease in the flow of relations among their parts, as in the human-scale vertical sculptures (<https://www.artandobject.com/news/sculptural-odyssey-world-jack-whitten>) with prosthetic legs, posing as if in the forest of a Victorian fairy tale. Some works also reveal a quality of defiance. The artist's huge black and white cast-concrete sculptures (<https://www.artandobject.com/news/phillips-offers-monumental-voulkos-sculpture>), titled "Markers," which appeared in Madison Square, resembled at once a grown-up playground, the marble churches of Italy, and black and white prison garb.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Read more stories from Barbara A. MacAdam

(/AUTHORS/BARBARA-A-MACADAM)

Barbara A. MacAdam is a New York-based freelance editor and writer, who worked at *ARTnews* for many years as well as for *Art and Auction*, *New York Magazine*, *Review Magazine*, and *Latin American Literature and Arts*. She currently reviews regularly for *The Brooklyn Rail*.