

Mel Kendrick
Seeing Things in Things

WALL TEXTS

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Introduction

Since the 1970s, Mel Kendrick (PA 1967) has charted a unique and innovative path of experimentation, making objects with a sustained and concentrated intensity. Aesthetically informed by both process-oriented conceptual art and minimalism, his rejection of narrative and illusion in favor of works that are self-contained and self-referential has led to an ever-evolving interrogation of the function and possibilities of sculpture. Bringing together over 100 works that span nearly five decades, this exhibition offers a rare glimpse into the development of one of the boldest and most consistently adventurous artists of his generation.

Pursuing a simultaneously analytical and intuitive approach and guided by the essential properties of his materials, whether wood, bronze, rubber, resin, cast paper, or concrete, Kendrick creates objects that provide clues to the process by which they were made. Visible traces of his trial-and-error method—marks, cuts, paint, oil stains—compel us to tease out the logic and unravel the mystery of each sculpture's making. And while these visual puzzles are not always solved—which is part of their magic—they encourage us to look closely. Contemplating them, we share in the artist's meditations on the relationships between inner and outer, positive and negative, organic and geometric; at the same time, we are made aware of the distinction between nature and culture.

Kendrick has said that the goal is to make something you want to see, that doesn't yet exist. He notes: "Every sculpture is only a point in time. Every object could go further." His singular vision and his restless experimentation ensure that this varied oeuvre will do just that.

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Outdoor Lobby/Meadow

In 2009, Kendrick began to work with cast concrete. *Markers*, monumental outdoor sculptures presented in Madison Square Park in Manhattan, demonstrated a dramatic shift in scale and material although they evolved naturally from his process of deconstruction and reassembly. Black and white concrete was poured in layers into polystyrene molds that were cut with hot wire, an action akin to sawing through wood. Since then, Kendrick has created numerous concrete sculptures by this process, including **these two** works in the meadow and outdoor lobby. Stacking the extracted weighty volumes atop their airy shells offers another twist on his exploration of sculptural relationships: pedestal/work, inside/outside, solid/void.

Gallery 1

The dynamism and complexity of Kendrick's large-scale sculptures of the late 1980s and 1990s emphasize the link between body and sculpture. The viewer must physically engage with these gestural works by moving around them to experience their constantly changing profiles and textures. Kendrick variously stained, gouged, and punctured blocks of wood, took them apart with a power saw, then reassembled the sections via an intuitive trial and error process. His innovative use of bases, bolts, and pipes further enlivens the work. Wholly new in their rearrangement but retaining echoes of their initial incarnation—as well as clues to their becoming—these highly animated sculptures magically unveil the creative process. Each sculpture's content derives from the activity of both making and seeing.

Kendrick has always been interested in bringing the concept of drawing into sculpture. While he does not make conventional drawings as studies for his sculptures, he has long used printmaking to rethink sculpture. To make the prints that he refers to as woodblock drawings, he cuts through stacked plywood sheets, often with varying grains, wielding his saw like a pencil, to make shapes, dropouts, patterns, and lines. He then separates and assembles the cut parts into a single layer or matrix screwing them down to a secondary support or "printing table" from which he makes an impression onto paper. Monumental in scale, and often created by assembling multiple sheets of paper, Kendrick's prints have a physicality and sense of space almost as palpable as his three-dimensional works.

Gallery 2

In 1983, Kendrick began to make a series of freestanding sculptures from single blocks of wood. He describes this new approach as going from planning things and then constructing them to understanding through making, responding to each piece as it evolves. Recognizing the power of the bits and pieces that made up the increasingly complex large-scale floor and wall works like **Painted Poplar and Plywood with Bolts**, Kendrick turned to creating wood sculptures that, in their intimate scale and self-containment, seem diametrically opposed to the works that inspired them. Yet, these small works cross media boundaries too: the artist's direct, gestural cuts into the wood blocks create serrated contours, rippled edges, sweeping arabesques, and pocked surfaces that can be interpreted as drawings in wood. While the outer surfaces of the original wood blocks bear evidence of how each sculpture was made, graphite marks and paint also blur the distinctions between sculpture and drawing. The strong colors and striking grains of distinctive woods add to the sculptures' painterly quality.

In tandem with his investigation into the connections between the processes of drawing and sculpture, Kendrick explored the relationship between sculpture and base—one rejected by most of his peers in the wake of minimalism and considered as anachronistic as direct hand-carving. Describing his revival of the base, Kendrick has said, "I turned a clear corner there. And it was sort of revolutionary for me, more

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of a challenge because there was this idea considering who I'd studied with of what art should be, of what sculpture should be, that was definitely involved more with the space you were in rather than the individual object." For Kendrick, the base transcends the traditional role of support or pedestal: it engages the floor on which the viewer stands, becoming an integral part of the work, lending it verticality and raising it to what he describes as "brain level" for a one-on-one, human-scaled correspondence with the viewer.

Gallery 3

After his *Core Sample* sculptures, made by pulling a tree inside out, Kendrick complicated his investigations of interiors and exteriors by adding color. Recalling the process used for his *Black Oil* sculptures, chunky, rough-hewn mahogany sculptures were painted in either green or crimson tones before being sawn and then reassembled like building blocks. Deceptively simple in their low-tech handling and often arranged in clusters, these gnomelike structures encourage visual puzzling and offer what one critic has described as an "elegant exercise" in interior/exterior and positive/negative space.

Kendrick was introduced to photography as a student at Phillips Academy in the mid-1960s by extraordinary teachers steeped in Bauhaus traditions and committed to an experimental and problem-solving approach to art. Initially shooting his sculptures to document them, he found that the camera's analytical eye afforded him a dispassionate view of them, in his words, like "looking at someone else's work."

Working on the *Core Samples* and exploring the dialectic of positive and negative, inspired Kendrick to take photography to an entirely new level. Curious to see what happened when his small table-top sculptures were translated from three dimensions to two, he began to photograph them using Polaroid positive/negative film. He found the broad tonal range and cinematic contrasts of the negative prints far more dynamic than the lighter and less contrasted positive versions. More importantly, things became more complicated—and more illuminating—when seen in reverse. Revealing previously invisible details, the negatives allowed him to focus on the sculpture's internal logic rather than on its external attributes. Ironically, by blowing up these tiny sculptures and placing them against indeterminate backgrounds, Kendrick is able to render them scale-less: line, form, and structure take center stage. Taking advantage of photography's ability to both arrest and expand time, his photographs encourage prolonged contemplation and in doing so make visible that which is not immediately perceptible in the round.

Spine

Kendrick began producing unique cast-paper works in 2007, discovering a more perfect vehicle than two-dimensional prints to explore the bridge between the pictorial and sculptural. The "water drawings" are formed by pressing a slurry of fibrous pulp into a rubber mold taken from a raw wood positive. Areas of the mold are defined by black pigment. Using a hydraulic press, the water is expelled while the pigment seeps into and binds with the handmade paper to create a three-dimensional object with shadow, depth, texture, and surface.

Most recently, Kendrick has been creating slabs of wood that he paints and ebonizes before cutting into them and removing sections as seen here in *White Line*. colorfully painted loopy constructions are hung on the wall or placed upon bases composed of rearrangements of the extracted plugs of wood and sometimes colorfully painted. Additional sculptures are constructed by a playful piling up of these cored plugs.

Double-Wide 1

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After graduating from Trinity College, Hartford, in 1971, Kendrick moved to New York City and studied at Hunter College with legendary figures like Tony Smith and Robert Morris. Working briefly for Dorothea Rockburne, he came into contact with conceptual artists such as Mel Bochner, Sol LeWitt, and Lawrence Weiner. At a time when dominant modes of minimal and conceptual art seemed to court “the end of sculpture,” exploring abstraction via hand-wrought and singular three-dimensional objects was both unorthodox and gutsy. Yet Kendrick has described minimalism as “ground zero,” crediting it with clearing the slate for artmaking. For him, the movement’s eschewing of illusion in favor of pared-down self-referential works opened the door for a renewed interrogation of the function and meaning of sculpture. Following artist Frank Stella’s dictum “what you see is what you see,” Kendrick embarked on what became a lifelong interest in sculpture as discrete entities, placing emphasis on physicality and materiality.

Inspired by drawings by Italian Futurist painter Giacomo Balla, these early linear structures of curved and laminated wood are the result of Kendrick’s desire to “break down the grid” and, in so doing, start sculpting instead of contending with minimalism. While the splayed legs and concave center of *Nemo* evoke a grid that has been stomped, the twisting curves of *Behind the Cross* suggest one that has been crumpled then stretched. Hung on the wall or sprawled spider-like across the floor, the works also reflect the post-minimalist impulse to engage the surrounding space as well as blur the traditional boundaries of painting and sculpture. Contrasting passages of plaster-filled grooves and holes with areas of richly stained wood lend a graphic quality to these black and white objects.

Double-Wide 2

In the mid-1990s, Kendrick moved from a basement studio to a larger one with a freight elevator big enough to accommodate logs and hollow trunks he had found in a tree dump in New Jersey. Intrigued by the “conversations” sparked among works within his studio, he began creating sculptures— assemblages of these tree parts, some little altered from their natural state—that he cast in translucent rubber. Placing the wood and rubber works side by side, the artist proposed the two versions—unified and defined by their formal similarities and material differences—as forming a single object in each case. By transforming his works through this casting process, Kendrick questions notions of authenticity, reproduction, the value of the original versus its copy, as well as the organic and the synthetic. As one critic wrote of these works, “In each case, the identity of the original is obvious,” but because the materials and fabrication processes differ “its ‘twin’ isn’t really a copy . . . It’s an alternative original.”

Double-Wide 3

In the early 2000s, Kendrick embarked on a group of *Core Sample* sculptures made by pulling a tree inside out. Building on his earlier interest in the concept of duality and twinning, he cut portions of tree trunks, excavated the inner form in carefully selected segments, and then, preserving the natural color of the wood, displayed the extracted and reassembled core alongside its reassembled outer casing. Echoing the geometric sections of cut wood, bases assembled from cinderblocks create a tension between natural and manmade. As he has described, “I am taking something that is recognizable, something that exists, in this case part of a tree, and I am analyzing it. . . . You can look at it, you can photograph it, you can turn it upside down, you can grind it to bits, you can burn it, or you can make it again.”

Captivating visual puzzles, these sculptures play with negative and positive space, abstraction, and representation, even male and female, to reveal the familiar in a new way. Standing side by side, hollowed exteriors and liberated interiors are clearly related but not the same. More like fraternal than identical twins, they share a primal essence, but project different personalities formed by texture, volume, and physicality. With these objects, Kendrick pierces the skin of the “known” to reveal parallel worlds of mystery and wonder.

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Double-Wide 4

Created before his *Core Sample* sculptures, the massive and towering *Black Trunk* is the first work in which Kendrick retained much of a tree's original form. Made from the remains of a tree—hollowed-out sections of its trunk—the sculpture does not represent a tree but maintains a clear link to its original form and offers clues to its making. Although hand-wrought, the geometric dovetail cuts that pierce the stacked sections of textured trunk seem machined by comparison with the organic form that contains them.

Although Kendrick has always avoided representation, the potent and often anthropomorphic symbolism of trees makes it hard not to project human qualities onto this work. As critic and curator Klaus Kertess once wrote about this sculpture, "Kendrick . . . literally and figuratively animates his process, turning it into a near totemic presence as inviting of speculation as is the process of its forming. The process invites anthropomorphism."

Anticipating the spawning of second works by Kendrick's cored tree parts, *Black Trunk* engendered a woodblock drawing. Like an Egyptian cylinder seal, the surface of the inked sculpture was used to roll an impression onto multiple sheets of paper that were then mounted together on muslin to create *Trunk Drawing*.