

Carpentry at the Service of Art: Christopher Kurtz at Tomlinson Kong

by Karen Gover

Christopher Kurtz *Longhand* at Tomlinson Kong Contemporary

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"Longhand" proves an apt title for Christopher Kurtz's four-piece show at Tomlinson Kong Contemporary. On a formal level, Kurtz's sculptures suggest the lines and shapes of handwriting. Two of the pieces, *Litany* and *Act Together*, resemble the baroque swirls of cursive script made three-dimensional. The slender quills of the other two pieces, *Palace* and *The Gloaming*, suggest a different graphic sensibility: neat and formal, yet still bearing the trace of the hand, these forms etch soft black lines in space to create volume and void.



And yet, '*Longhand*' suggests not only formal associations of handwriting but the manual, painstaking process by which these sculptures were made. Kurtz, who is also a furniture designer, is a master carpenter. Each of the hand-carved pieces exemplifies some particular aspect of his technical prowess: his ability to make wood curl and loop back around itself in improbable ways; to carve bass-wood into long, needle-thin spikes; to create invisible seams that join two pieces as if they had always been one. The sculptures in *Longhand* do not apologize for the evident labor and skill that they require, but nor do they belabor the point. Carpentry is in service to Kurtz's art, but this is not art about carpentry.

The centerpiece of the show, not only by virtue of its scale but because of its lyrical drama, is the life-sized *Litany*. Its form suggests a piece of calligraphy that has taken on a life of its own. It is almost as if the words had rolled off a manuscript page and swollen into a life-sized reclining figure. By painting the surfaces with contrasting colors of soft black and white, Kurtz further underscores the association with written text, while at the same time enabling the viewer to see clearly the edges as they curve around themselves Möbius-strip manner. Amidst the play of curlicues, there are two moments where the lines join at right angles, serving as quiet counterpoints to the vine-like tangle of arcs and loops.

Litany embodies a dynamic play between the natural and the unnatural. On the one hand, the artist's dramatic manipulation of the wood appears highly crafted; the shape is highly unnatural even as it mimics the organic lines of vines and tendrils. At the same time, however, Kurtz has allowed some of the natural splits and cracks in the wood to remain visible. The uneven width of the cracks, as they swell and resolve into hairline fissures, is echoed by the lines of the larger form itself, which widens and then tapers into ends whose caliper shapes nearly touch.

In literal counterpoint to *Litany*'s soft prolixity of line, *The Gloaming*, which is suspended from the ceiling, plays upon the tension between nature and artifice in a very different way. At first glance it resembles a monstrous sea urchin whose long jutting spikes radiate from a central vertical

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spine. A study of extremes, *The Gloaming* simultaneously suggests fragility and danger: the thorn-like protrusions are positively lethal looking and yet the hand-carved bass wood sculpture has a delicate, weightless presence. The matte black paint absorbs light to glow softly.

The other two pieces in the show are smaller but by no means mere afterthoughts. *Palace*, a variation on some of the ideas in *The Gloaming* is a small table piece whose elements are the size and shape of pick-up sticks. The rigidity of its rectilinear volume is offset by the organic feeling of thorn-like joints that swell at the intersections before tapering into spikes.

Act Together is the only sculpture of the four that makes explicit reference to its material origins: its base is a gnarled cedar root from which two carved branches arc up and outward before looping back on themselves. The rough cedar root blends imperceptibly into the artfully curved, carved tendrils whose manipulated shapes nevertheless echo natural twists in the root. The simplest piece in the show, *Act Together* has an understated elegance compromised, unfortunately, in that its shape inexorably calls to mind a heart symbol.

In today's artistic climate, virtuosic displays of technical skill can sometimes be viewed with suspicion if not derision. Hence it is a great pleasure to encounter the work of a sculptor like Kurtz, who refuses to pander to the artificial distinction between the ideas for his art and their material embodiment. Viewed in this light, his hand-made wooden sculptures seem almost edgy, daring. Thank goodness he took the time and the risk.