

CHRISTOPHER KURTZ *Longhand*

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Christopher Kurtz is a sculptor who works in wood. His work moves between natural winding branches and pointed stick-like forms. Either way, his approach to sculpture is a classical one. It contains a will to order, one that is less about power than balance. While Nietzsche may linger in the shadows, the articulation of proportions is more given to Chuang-Tzu. The content is only a matter of degree. A subtle tilt or bend in the wood will determine the work's expressive potential. Kurtz's sense of ordering is generally more spatial than formal. Whether thinly carved wooden spears shoot out from a central hub into the space around them or a large fallen branch becomes the readymade design for a winding linear form, Kurtz follows the course of his observations and thought. His work may recall three-dimensional asterisks, such as bursting planetary orbs, or it may suggest a ribbon-like estuary that flows until it becomes fixed in time like a meandering glacier. Regardless of his sources, the structure within each piece of work remains clear and incisive. The resolution is less about pre-determination than a process that engenders discovery.

In contrast to sculptors of a previous generation, Kurtz is less involved with a Minimalist aesthetic. He is more aligned with outsiders, ranging from James Surls to Tom Doyle or even the Italian Giuseppe Penone, all of whom work in wood as their primary material. While there is a reductive aspect to Kurtz's work, there is no particular allegiance to architecture. He is less concerned with the rectangle or applications of the hard edge than with the flow or punctuation of his forms and how they occupy space. In general, the focus of the artist is given to shapes derived from observations in wilderness terrains. At best, the work may incite an instant of primal consciousness, a measure difficult to explain or articulate outside of direct experience in a place or space where such an observation may occur. Even so, the precision in his sculptures rarely falters. They appear inexorable, exacting, and intensely specific. The rigor is rarely lost in the viewer's gaze.

Parallel to his work as a sculptor, Kurtz also designs and constructs original pieces of furniture. He works in both mediums on equal terms. Does one influence the other? Possibly, but this is less the point. Kurtz's parallel venture is interesting and important as he carefully considers the differences. In the book *Donald Judd: Architektur* (Munster, 1989), the Minimal artist holds forth with the following prognosis: when making sculpture, he intends the work as sculpture; and when making furniture, he intends it as furniture. In Judd's case, the link between the two is architecture. Sculpture relates to architecture but is non-functional in that it has no utility. On the other hand, furniture relates directly to architecture and is functional. Both mediums are grounded in empiricism, and therefore dictate their purpose, physicality, and materiality through the experiential encounter. While formal attributes are present in each, sculpture and furniture remain distinct from one another.

I find it difficult to generalize in this way about Kurtz's forms. On one level, he and Judd would seem to agree. On another, they appear divergent from each other. In either case, the precision is held in high esteem. Kurtz leaves no stick unrefined, no twig unpended. Between his sculpture and his



Christopher Kurtz, "Litany," 2012. Bent and hand-carved maple, oak, cedar, and milk paint. 64 x 156 x 60". Courtesy of Tomlinson Kong Contemporary.



Christopher Kurtz, "The Gloaming," 2012. Hand-carved bass wood, monofilament, and paint. 84 x 96 x 72". Courtesy of Tomlinson Kong Contemporary.

furniture there exist formal resemblances, but these are superficial. Like Judd, the intentions are different, and the differences are profound. This is most likely true in any good design. The delimitations and decisions made by Kurtz pervade every step of the process—from the sawing and carving to the construction of parts to the whole. In contrast to the sculptor, Louise Nevelson, who began working in the 1930s, Kurtz goes more for the origins of the material—the kind of wood, the smell and appearance of the trees, and the intrinsically organic structure of the twisted or extended linear shapes. Nevelson was quite the opposite. In an interview from the late 1970s, she made it clear that she was less concerned with wood as a material than with the forms she was able to derive from it. These were most often flat planar forms that she would paint black, white or gold, as if to disguise the fact they were wood. Her Constructivist aesthetic was less about removal by carving, and more given to the process of construction.

Kurtz's recent sculpture, currently on view at the Tomlinson Kong Gallery on the Bowery, suggests a kind of poetry, a verse that goes deeply into the origins not only of the nature of the material, but into the nature of thought. One senses a philosophical input, if not an epistemological one, in terms of how the forms move from their origins to what they become as sculpture, and how they influence our relationship to space and time. The poet W.H. Auden may, in fact, be a close reference for Kurtz in that the poet paid serious attention to the moments of observation and inward realization taken from signs of outward appearance. My impression of the sculptor is that he takes a lot of information into his sensorium, which he carefully refines, only to release over an extended period of time. ☞

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