

Art in America

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REVIEW OF EXHIBITIONS

Mel Kendrick at David Nolan

An unassuming show in a small gallery, Mel Kendrick's "Red Blocks" was stealthily potent. In the main room, five sculptures stood in a row on the floor, their rectangular bottoms squared with the wall. Two more faced an adjacent wall, forming a dogleg. All were made following the kind of dismantling-and-recomposing procedure Kendrick has followed in one variation or

another for 20 years. In these sculptures, from 2007, a block of wood is cut into eccentric pieces; some of the pieces are removed piecemeal, reassembled more or less faithfully, and stacked on top of the original. Since the sides of the blocks are painted red before the sawing begins, it is relatively simple to visualize how the pieces could all be fit back together.

Still, the new works defy intuitive spatial sense in a way that is, like any good puzzle, deeply engrossing. Each is roughly 32 inches high overall and a foot on a side. The wood, where unpainted, is a rich reddish brown and densely grained; though not named on the checklist, it is mahogany (for a time, Kendrick was engaged with rare, exotic woods and their striking differences in texture, grain and color, though not here). The red applied to its outer surfaces, a water-based medium called Japan color, invokes New England barns and Constructivist graphics and, with help from its name, Japanese woodblock prints and painted furniture.

As their title suggests, the "Red Blocks" have something innocent about them. They could serve as building toys for giant toddlers; their faces have an inscrutable simplicity that suggests how letterforms might

look to a preliterate child. A photo on the show's press release shows the sculptures not lined up but arranged in a rough circle, like folk dancers, or witches in a coven; even ranked in single file, they have a powerful sense of animation. Component parts bear resemblances to megaphones (the several truncated cones) and cement mixers (two such cones, bottom to bottom). In at least one case, the cutout form is a goofily charming red heart. As gestalts, the blocks suggest animals out of their cages, instruments—musical, mechanical—out of their cases, jack-in-the-boxes sprung from safety.

Such associations are elicited at larger scale, too. By itself in the center of a second room stood *Untitled (Green Block)*, constructed in similar fashion. Tall as a substantial person, it is totemic in presence. But its lighter, softer wood, casually painted a milky green, is cut into sweeping, leafy shapes that are almost Matissean in their sunny grace.

Pleasurable—and perhaps inevitable—though they are, such literal readings are all a secondary matter. Kendrick is concerned, in a general way, with play, including the play of flexible concepts as well as of tractable materials. But mainly, he seems interested in the most basic ways that formal characteristics like figure and ground, interior and exterior, coherence and disorder are associated with experiential states—in other words with anthropomorphisms so fundamental that the term abstract can be applied without qualification.

—Nancy Princenthal

Mel Kendrick: *Untitled*, 2007, wood and Japan color, 31½ by 12 by 13 inches; at David Nolan.

