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« DEC 22–JAN 23 Issue

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Mel Kendrick: *Seeing Things in Things*

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By Joyce Beckenstein



Mel Kendrick, *Black Dots*, 1989–90. Basswood, glue, and lamp black, 145 x 60 x 120 inches. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Gary Mamay.

Parrish Art Museum

Mel Kendrick: Seeing Things in Things

November 6, 2022–February 19, 2023

Watermill, NY

Less is more, or is it? A young Mel Kendrick would find his own answers to what was, back in the day, an essential element of Minimalism: stripping art down to its basics. No excesses. No narratives. No emotions. No pedestals. Simply put, art was about the object. *Mel Kendrick: Seeing Things in Things* presents a riveting survey of works, from 1983 to 2022, by an artist who absorbed Minimalism's quirky mystique as he unabashedly broke most of its codifying rules.

Tony Smith, Robert Morris, Dorothea Rockburne, and Carl Andre, iconic practitioners of the movement, are among the mentors and friends with whom Kendrick alternately studied, worked, and schmoozed with at Max's Kansas City, a favorite sixties and seventies haunt for the New York City avant-garde. The impact of Minimalism, its rationale, and the alternative paths Kendrick took to chart his own course are clear in the Parrish Art Museum's reception gallery, where a recent wall relief, *Thinking of What* (2022), nods to *Black Dots* (1989–90), a soaring, free-standing wood sculpture.

These two works, made decades apart, underscore Kendrick's practice of starting a sculpture from a single slab or block of wood, often taken directly from a tree, which he deconstructs and then pre-paints. *Black Dots*, a massive tower of roughly stacked wood blocks, revels in exposing whatever it took to bring the work into being: the chainsaw cuts, drawn marks, lines, and exposed hardware. Kendrick throws nothing away. A remnant curve from a carved-out circle turns up elsewhere within the piece, and for the base he positions the bulk of his sculpture on wooden layers: one with black dots repeating those in the torso of the piece; another set as a somewhat awkwardly cantilevered wooden projection to balance this work's apparent gravity-defying wish.

In the wall relief *Thinking of What*, Kendrick again does more with less, this time conflating one's sense of two and three dimensions. Cutting then reassembling the parts of a spare sheet of wood, he creates hollowed-out voids only to reinstate them elsewhere as three-dimensional projections animating a giant jigsaw puzzle. In yet another iteration of Kendrick's process, *L450* (2019), the cut-out shapes defining the negative spaces of a free-standing structure huddle together to form the work's supporting base.



Mel Kendrick, *Thinking of What*, 2022. Ebonized mahogany and gesso, 119 x 140 4 ½ inches. Courtesy the artist and David Nolan Gallery. Photo: Gary Mamay.

Sometimes, instead of slicing up trees for his sculpture, Kendrick pulls them inside out, extracting their cores. Three works, *Plug and Shell* (2000), *7 from 7* (2000), and *X+Y* (2001), reveal these innards cut into small blocks, cobbled together with steel and cement, or attached with wires and cables, each process in the service of exploring the tree's interior and exterior selves. The final results invite interesting psychological comparisons related to the twinned aspects of the human self, the persona one presents to the outside world versus the soul within.

Perhaps as a reflection of his Minimalist consciousness, Kendrick eschews most narratives, preferring to raise questions and ponder their answers through his process. How, he wonders, do the inner and outer selves of his created forms translate into other media, such as photography, woodblock printing, or paper casting? A series of untitled negative photographs based on the twinned sculptures appear as X-rays, some eerily suggesting human organs, such as the heart or the bronchi of lungs.

A large woodblock print, *Trunk Drawing* (1995), derives from *Black Trunk* (1995), a hollowed-out tree horizontally divided into sections then reassembled as a monumental form. Kendrick created the print by wrapping the standing sculpture with multiple sheets of Kozo paper, the open butterfly joints of the sculpture transcribed as closed forms on the completed image. With its multiple sheets connected, this enormous work unfurls like a giant ancient cylinder, the butterfly joints, as graphic forms, suggesting markers for growth as would otherwise be discerned in any given cross section of the original tree. In this way, Kendrick's juxtaposition of woodblock print and imposing sculpture vividly connect visual form with primordial time.

While his photos and woodblocks derive directly from his sculptures, Kendrick created this exhibition's three cast-paper works as original, unrelated pieces. These untitled (2013) works, which he calls "water drawings," were made by pressing original ink-stained rubber molds into a pulp paper paste, blurring the lines between drawing and relief sculpture. Kendrick is a consummate visual linguist, fluent with a variety of materials, including bronze and rubber. As he shifts from one process to another, he explores the language of abstraction for its infinite possibilities: its inversions, distortions, complements, oppositions, and their intriguing slides from the natural to the hand-wrought, the organic to the geometric, the graphic to the sculptural, the Minimal to the complex, the intuitive and the accidental to the reasoned and purposed.

As Kendrick and I toured his exhibition, he pointed out a series of three 1991 untitled sculptures. When I mused that these nearly eight-foot-tall constructions looked like an ensemble of top-heavy dancers poised on surprisingly slim triangular legs, he explained that he wanted the fragments of these figures to fit as if they had been "blown together." Closer inspection revealed how Kendrick clustered these irregularly shaped lampblack and multi-hued wood shapes around a central core, using a hardly visible metal pipe to secure each sculpture to the floor. In this way he enabled his gravity-challenged forms to gracefully hold their balance from every angle of vision.



Installation view: *Mel Kendrick: Seeing Things in Things*, Parrish Art Museum, Watermill, NY, 2022. Courtesy the artist and Parrish Art Museum. Photo: Gary Mamay.

Much of our experience with these works relies on the space in which they are exhibited. The Parrish Art Museum, with its minimal barn-inspired architecture, exposed beams and hardware, and enormous heights, all bathed in natural light filtered through skylights, allow Kendrick's muscular sculpture the unfettered space its otherwise Minimalist logic craves. "The acid test for sculpture would be to remove all the walls, to see a forest and focus on the details," said Kendrick of the way his works are dispersed in one particular exhibition gallery. Here, the enormous *Painted Poplar and Plywood with Bolts* (1988) looms over a virtual forest of smaller wooden sculptures, some painted, others in natural wood. Reminiscent of Cubist sculpture, these delightful figures, easily viewed in the round, invite imaginative associations wherever the zigs, zags, curves, arcs, blocks, holes, and exposed hardware happen to take the mind's eye: a twisting figure here, a crowing rooster there, perhaps. Which brings us to the title of this exhibition: *Seeing Things in Things*.

While Kendrick avoids figurative and narrative interpretations of his work, he does not deny the universe of sources embedded in his consciousness. There are remembrances of his travels and studies, through caves in Afghanistan and cathedrals in Siena, the totems of indigenous cultures, and of course early modernist experiments with Cubism and Constructivism. That each of Kendrick's forms can likewise ignite such memories for his audience speaks to the power of his abstraction as a shared journey, an elusive shimmy through emotive and intellectual spaces that are as mystically fugitive as they are coolly (il)logical.

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