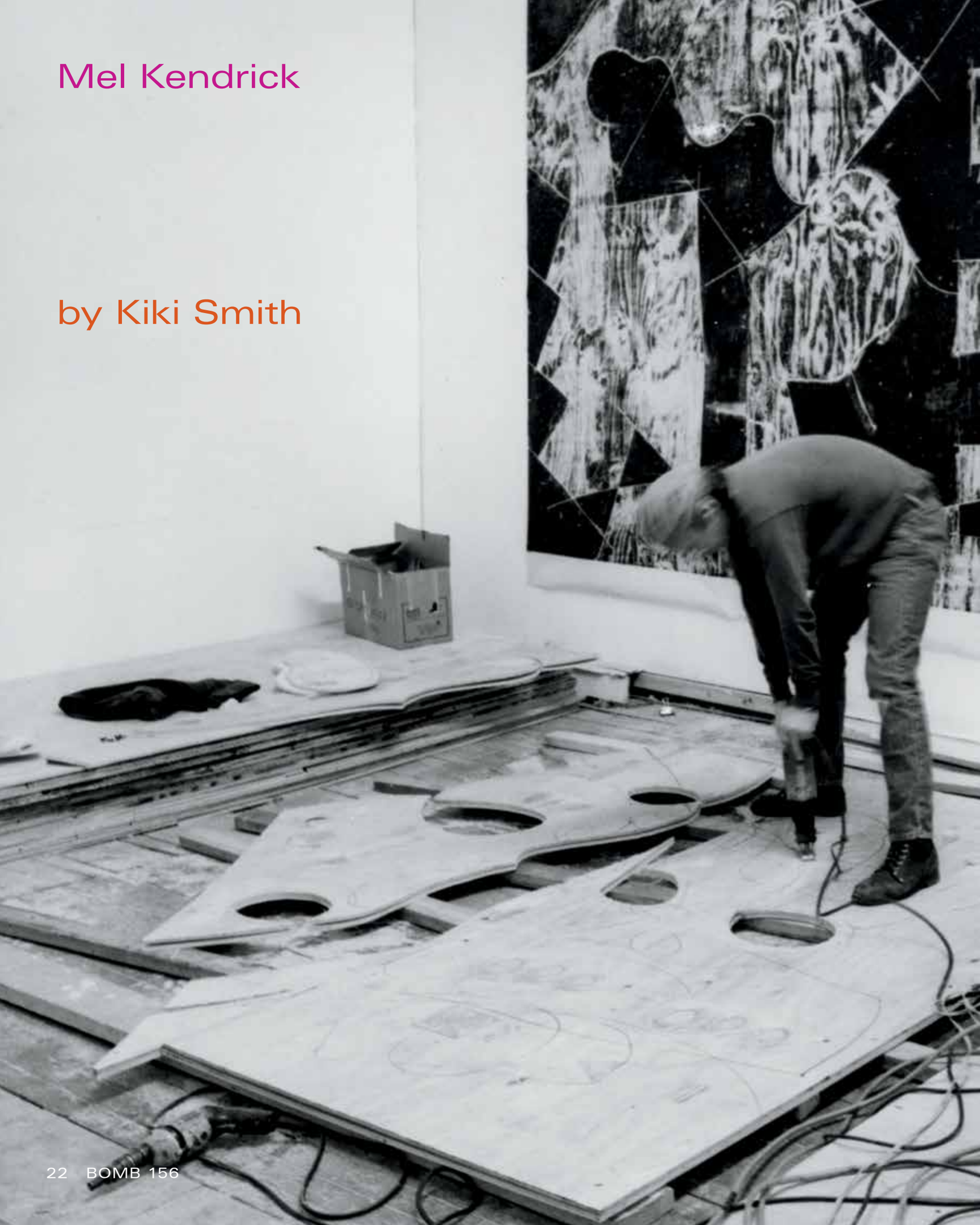
Mel Kendrick

by Kiki Smith



overleaf: Mel Kendrick carving wood in his studio, YEAR to come. Photo by TO COME. Images courtesy of the artist unless otherwise noted.

Dear Readers,

Mel Kendrick's work has always been mysterious and exciting for me to see.

I met Mel Kendrick through my father, the artist Tony Smith, when I was in my mid-to-late teens and Mel, being several years older than me, was already a grownup.

I like Mel's work very much. I think it is engaging in a way that is unique as it is not sculpture trying to represent or copy the world. His work retains the integrity of the wood he uses and at the same time makes radical interventions and visceral transformations.

I was very excited to be able to ask him questions. We talked this spring just before he installed a retrospective of his work, *Seeing Things in Things*, at the Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts.

All my best,
Kiki

opposite: *Raised Stump*, 1995, wood, pipe, mending plates, and threaded rod, 92 ½ × 67 × 65 inches.

Installation view of *Seeing Things in Things*, 2021, at Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover, Massachusetts. Photo by Frank E. Graham.

MEL KENDRICK: I'm doing very East Village things today, like moving the car for the street sweeper, picking up coffee at Ninth Street Espresso.

KIKI SMITH: I was down at my house last week but I'm rarely in the East Village now. I officially moved upstate this year.

MK: What's changed for me with the pandemic is that I'm now staying in the studio so I see the neighborhood in a completely different way, along with my work. It's like a flashback to the way I started in New York, getting up and walking into the studio with a cup of coffee in the morning. Living and working in the same place is much better for artmaking. I work all day and then I go and change it at night.

KS: And you must have good light there.

MK: Excellent light. I'm in the building where Pat Hearn's gallery used to be.

KS: Your show at The Addison Gallery of American Art in Massachusetts, is it a survey of your life's work, or of a particular moment?

MK: I guess they call it a survey because it covers 1982 onward. There are distinct bodies of work. It's great having a comprehensive catalogue published in conjunction with this show because I know many people are familiar with one group of my work but not with others, and they were all happening more or less simultaneously. It's really good to be able to see all that work together.

KS: Will you also show your photographs and prints?

MK: Yes, I'm going to show photographs, woodblocks, and the cast paper pieces. But no bronze. I wanted things that I actually made and bronze is a replica of something else. It's taken a long time to put this exhibition together.

KS: Do you have a curator you're working with?

MK: Allison Kemmerer is the curator of Photography and Contemporary Art

Plug and Shell, 2000, wood, pipe, cable ties, and cement blocks, each element 63 × 21 × 24 inches.

at the Addison, and she's great. All of these museums seem to be going through some sort of mini-crisis, so the director who I started out with, Judith Dolkart, is no longer at the museum, and now Allison is the acting director. She's got a lot on her plate, and I'm amazed that we're getting this done.

KS: I was so happy seeing your photography included. There's a long history of people making both sculpture and photography. The intersection of these two things is very rich. When did you start making photographs of your work?

MK: I got into art completely through photography.

KS: Oh, you studied photography?

MK: Yes, it was the easiest way for me to get into art because there was no innate talent involved in taking pictures. So that's where I started. I thought I was going to go into film. I studied at Trinity College in Hartford and often went down to New York looking at shows. The logical thing to do when I graduated was to move to New York, which I did in 1971. And I started making things. I tried to follow through by working in a film collective but everybody was just talking about where to get money and equipment. It was a communal thing and it was fine, but I eventually realized that I wanted something that I could do by myself. I totally enjoy that and that's kept me going, kept me entertained.

KS: Looking at the catalogue for your show, I was shocked at how much motion there was in your early sculpture. It makes sense that you came from film and photography. I was thinking about cubism—the multidimensional unfolding of a possibility—it's so present in your work, from every angle. It seems like dance, or Russian constructivism, like people's theater. It has so much vitality: even the chopping up of wood and putting it back together. You put it back together in a density of movement rather than others who cut things up and then leave them asunder.

MK: I put everything back.

KS: I have my own weird references; when I was younger, I used to think about *Frankenstein* a lot and the twentieth century as this rupture of people's sense of location and self. The fragments have been reassembled but the scar always remains. You fragmented the source but your sculptures are autonomous. I always think that for myself—well, first for my father [Tony Smith]—it's essentially monotheism. It is a singular thing, one that you can't quantify by moving around it. You can't understand the piece as if it's an icon or something like that, but it's still singular. I always think my work is like that because I can't deal with more than one thing at a time, but I thought yours is like that, too. It holds itself together.

MK: Back to your *Frankenstein* thing, there's putting things back together in different ways, sometimes they're almost stitched together. I'm not quite sure where the drive came from. My first inside-out sculptures were those tree shapes. I just took out the inside and then put the tree back together in two separate parts. The cut-out interior was more geometric, while the exterior was stitched back together in its original form. I was also aware of the art of repair. You only repair things that have value, so to repair something you make gives emotional strength to it. But the language of the sculpture does change completely as you walk around it. The funny thing about sculpture is that I can make it look like anything in an idealized photograph. (*laughter*) You know, if I really went to town, you would never recognize the actual sculpture. You can do a lot.

KS: Mending was a very important thing in the twentieth century and continues to be in the twenty-first century—trying to figure out how to put something back together that has a semblance of a whole but you still see all the parts. But with your works, the parts are so vital, and also playful.

MK: It's all discovery. I think you and I share this. I mean, I cut into something and I don't know where it's going to go. I don't do drawings. I have an idea of what I want to see, or what I don't want to see, and then I figure out how to get there. And that involves a lot of mistakes, mending, gluing, but I leave all that process visible. I mean, I don't try to do that, but it's just all there.

KS: It is there. How did you make the pair of works titled *Plug* and *Shell*?

MK: I usually first take part of the tree, sometimes an interesting outer part, sometimes the inner section. Trees are like humans in a way—

KS: Yeah, they're very figurative.

MK: With *Plug* and *Shell*, I took part of a birch tree trunk. The process felt almost scientific—I had to cut the wood into small enough pieces so that I could take the inside out. There's no other way to do it. I broke the tree down into discs to remove the inside. And then I basically glued or stitched the husk, the outside, together again. That part is the *Shell*. Reconstructing the inside for the second sculpture, *Plug*, was interesting because you have the grain of the wood, so even though the pieces may be stacked or spread out all over the place, you can always follow the grain to put them back exactly where they belong. So I built a parallel structure with the inside only, which I thought was cool. Putting *Plug* and *Shell* side by side was a way of asking, How do I put these two into one object without it becoming a dichotomy or a dialectic proposition? Some interesting conversations happened between the two parts. You put the bark of a tree back together and you recognize it as a tree. But when you put the insides back together, what is that?

KS: So, the outer part is the bark and then there's a first layer. And then there's the inner part which is softer.

MK: I took off a layer behind the bark, the layer that held the bark together, pulled out the core, or the guts, out of the wood and then reconstructed it. I made several of these works. It was always a surprise.

KS: They are incredibly exciting because we can see all the phases, like when you're working in different directions. Your early pieces remind me of Giacometti, something about the

murder of oaks, cutting the throat. Like a praying mantis.

MK: His *Woman with Her Throat Cut* was actually a tremendous influence, even on my sprawling works. It's loose and it just sits on the floor. I really identify with Giacometti's work from his Surrealist phase, not so much the figures.

KS: There are very few sculptures that move in opposition within themselves, and have space in them. When I saw your's I thought, "Oh they have that movement that sculptures rarely have." Sculptures are often more static.

MK: Well, that's one big thing about sculpture: it's an object and it has to stand somehow. Which is why my later work had all those props and weights, making this cluster of objects. I'm thinking of my black oil pieces from the early nineties. I was putting these things together, sort of working in the air, but I really didn't want something hanging from the ceiling. It has to stand. Basically the props were not meant to be seen—but they are necessary so they are part of the sculpture. Thinking about your work, I never thought I was doing anything figurative but on the other hand—

KS: Oh, so delusional! (*laughter*)

MK: We don't have a clue what we're doing. But then, on later analysis, I see in my own work all these figures with prosthetic things jutting out.

KS: But when I see that, I relate so much to this notion of props or crutches or of sculpture defying gravity. That is the problem with sculpture, or the figure: you're always in relationship to gravity. Your sculptures make me think of William Kentridge's work—figures dancing, collages and cutting and animating. Also reanimating the dead, reanimating something that has fallen to the ground, like the wood.

MK: For the bigger sculptures, the open stuff, I used reclaimed wood from a wood dump. They were trees cut down to be chipped, so the material was free. I found these already hollowed tree trunks and they became the basis for that body of work. They were just lying on the ground, like trash, really. Reanimating them—I hadn't really thought about it in that way.

KS: In the '70s or '80s, people I knew who had children would have those Transformers dolls where something would turn from one thing into another. Your work reminds me of that—this recombining to something that has its own life, and the theatricality of that. Or maybe Baroque sculpture in churches, figures ascending and defying reality. I think about things like that a lot. Something needing help to sustain itself.

MK: Yeah, exactly. More than you, I gave myself a set of rules. I don't want to hang something from the ceiling, I want it to stand in a room with furniture and people; it's got to exist on its own.

KS: What other rules do you have?

MK: Well, reclaiming or reanimating means that pretty much everything you're looking at, except the earlier pieces, came from not one piece of wood, but one block or one thing that was taken apart and then everything was put back in. In other words, I don't go around the studio and see a nice chunk of wood, and put it anywhere that looks good. Everything in a sculpture comes from one thing. I find that very satisfying. Even if you don't know it, you feel it.

KS: The wholeness.

MK: I struggle with this idea of what the hell is abstraction. I have to relate to something. I think this wholeness sustains that inner relationship. People can feel that way more than they see. That is the strictest rule for me. You mentioned Kentridge. I'm not a collagist. A collagist grabs things from everywhere. I built my own box here. I work with trees because they have their own organic, associative qualities to the body, but then I go back to working with cubes or rectangles. The first stage of the way I'm working now is that I create a block. I basically create a minimalist sculpture. It could be covered with black oil, pigment, or one of those canned paints I use. So there's a block; that's my material, and it doesn't change. I cut into it, and I discover things. I find things in it. That started when I moved to Duane Street, into the loft that had been an electrical supply warehouse. It was full of wooden shelves and the pine gets really browned. There was just so much of it. I started cutting the shelves at angles and the cuts were so beautiful against the old wood. It was like discovering some other life inside of them. The only problem is that in time the new wood turns old, too. It's very much of the moment. Well, that was then.

KS: I was thinking about being in a darkroom and putting your gloved hands into the box to take the film out. It's like a creative autopsy where you're going into these forms and discovering them.

MK: I haven't thought of that in years but you immediately brought back that image of the darkroom and reaching into that box. What are you looking at when you're not looking at anything? You stand there, not in a trance, but you know exactly what you're doing with your hands. Your perception is through your hands. It's sort of strange.

KS: Like going into the woods, like hunting. I saw one picture of you with a chainsaw. I thought, "I don't think you're supposed to be doing that." (*laughter*). My husband, when I met him, he came with eight chainsaws.

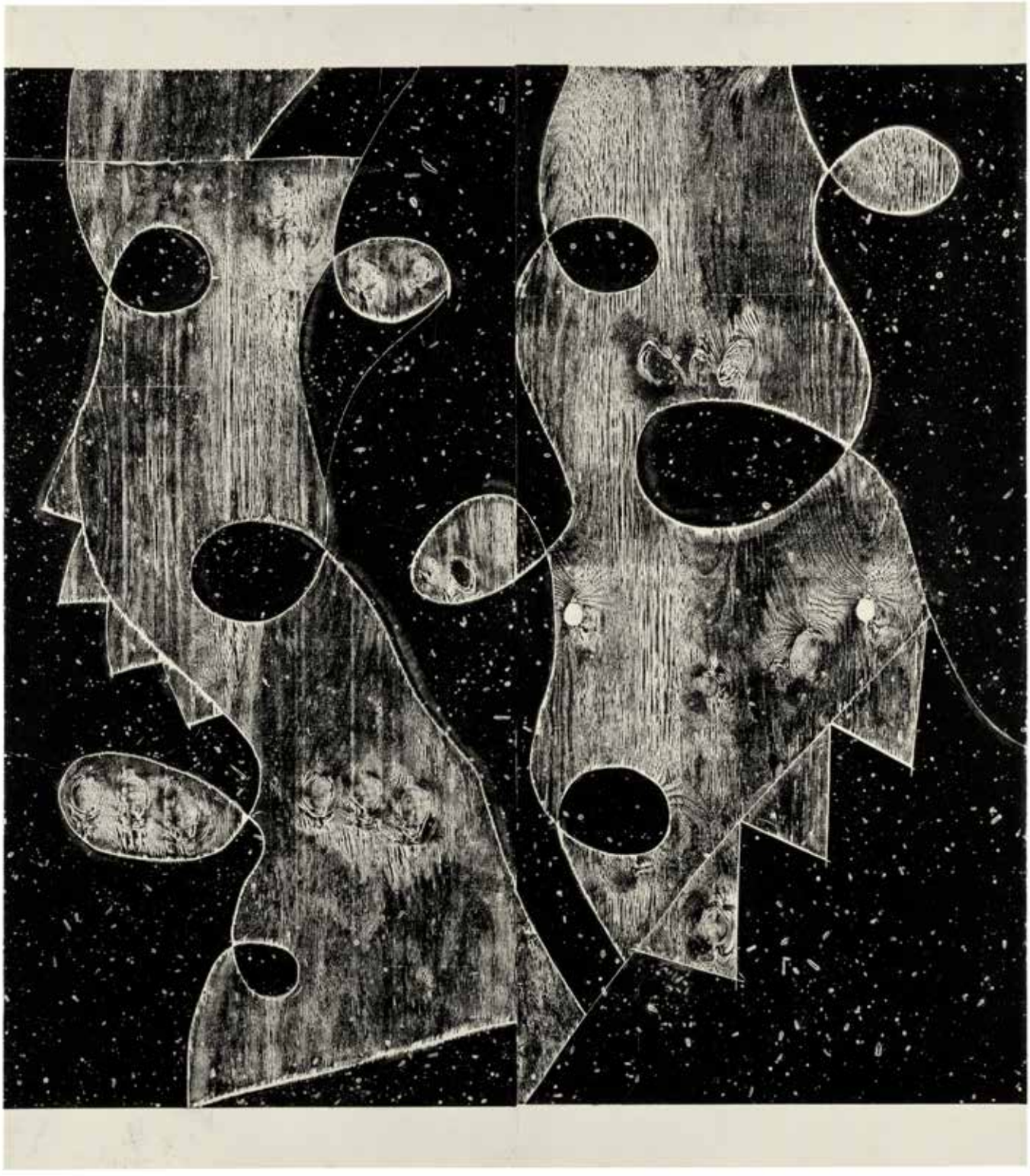
MK: I've got five over there.

KS: And every morning, sharpening the chains.

MK: Every tool I use scares me. And it's got to stay that way.

KS: Good, good.

MK: The thing is—and I've said this a number of times—I use wood: if you cut it, you can't reverse it, you can't melt it back together, you don't chase it, you don't make everything disappear. Okay, you've done it, now what are you going to do? Take a bunch of glue and stick 'em back together, or not? My carpentry is not that great.



10 Loops 3, 1992, woodblock print on kozo paper, mounted on linen, 108 × 94 inches. Courtesy of David Nolan Gallery, New York.

Installation view of *Seeing Things in Things*, 2021, at Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover, Massachusetts. Photo by Frank E. Graham.

Yes, I know how to make things—many sculptors know how to make things, we all did construction work—

KS: Me too. Although, I did more demolition.

MK: Demolition is your specialty. But in my actual work, I ignore some of the basic things about wood: I go across the grains so there's no strength to it. It's an anti-carpentry because I'm not creating a structurally sound thing.

KS: What were you saying earlier about the bronze? It's different because the mending and everything that holds it together becomes invisible. And maybe that's not as satisfying.

MK: I have a lot of bronze pieces out there, but bronze is all surface, it's a quarter inch thick. And it really depends on the surface it's coming from, which in my case was usually wood, but it could be plaster. I mean, what I love about foundries is having something going on when you're doing something else.

KS: It's like money in the bank, passive income. It's like having renters, somebody is working on your behalf. It's benevolent.

MK: It's benevolent, incredibly freeing, it makes you feel good about yourself. The hardest thing is total isolation, which we both have too. Nobody's looking, you know.

KS: I find it psychologically very helpful to not be alone in it. I ask everybody, "What should I do?"

MK: I'm pretty organized myself, I'm different from you in that way.

KS: I could go like the wind. Now, what about this *Double Lock* piece? The precast concrete?

MK: That's what I've been working with lately. It's another transformation. The first concrete pieces were the striped concrete sculptures that were in Madison Square Park in 2009. So I started big; it was easy. But I made them the same way as the wood pieces. I started with a block of foam, cutting into it with a hotwire, removing the insides, and reconstructing it. But I flipped it once more because then, the way I was working with the fabricator, that sculpture would become the mold for the next sculpture. In other words, it reversed again. If there's a block with holes in it and you pour concrete into it, it will come out as tubes. And if I use the tubes as the mold, it creates a block with holes. I liked that.

KS: It's very beautiful when it's the base, but it's turned.

MK: In *Double Lock*, the relationship to the base is not immediate. You sense the shapes, but you know it's done something, taken a turn. I can't do many big concrete pieces, but they allow me to work on a scale I could never consider with wood.

KS: Someone sent me a video the other day of people pouring concrete into anthills in Brazil and then they start digging them out. These anthills are the size of a room, they're enormous. They have all these strange structures that you would never know about. When I saw this video, I thought about this kind of revealing you speak about. With your work, you're revealing something hidden, but it's your brain that told you to make those shapes. I don't know what the shapes come from or why they're positioned in a particular way. You may or may not know.

MK: I don't really go into how I do things, which is what people ask me.

Double Lock, 2015, precast concrete, 80 × 45 × 30 inches.

Everything's a mystery, a kind of a puzzle, but I'm a very practical person.

KS: When is your birthday?

MK: July 28th. Leo.

KS: I'm very practical, too, but I'm Capricorn with Virgo rising, so maybe you're getting too Virgo. I'm incredibly pragmatic.

MK: Pragmatic is the word, not practical.

KS: It's interesting how people get fixated, or how certain ways of working resonate and provide just endless possibilities for discovery.

MK: That's the fascinating thing to me: What am I doing? How did I get here? What's my name? I make things that I never thought I would make. I keep forking off in different directions. Now, living in my studio, I do a lot more work alone. I can change my mind all I want. If somebody is working for me, they do what I taught them to do. I'd come in and sometimes change things.

KS: And then, what about color?

MK: The color is all about maintaining the inside and the outside of the object. I just take colors from the can, I don't mix colors. The color is only in relation to the cuts I make. Say the whole thing is painted green, and that green replaces the bark or whatever else is on the outside. So, as I start working on it, that green travels around and turns up again. It's more of a coding thing than a coating as in painting.

KS: That's really interesting.

MK: I have these cans of paint that are all moldy and crusted but I can still get paint out of them. I think of paint as another material. It helps identify the surface.

KS: What about the cast pieces—like the *Twin Logs*?

MK: *Twin Logs* came a little bit earlier, before I did the coring pieces. I was still casting stuff in bronze and I thought about something more liquid.

Twin Logs, 1994, cedar, cast rubber, and pipe, each element 26 × 13 × 13 inches.

While I worked at the foundry, I saw this architectural rubber there. It was hard, and amber-like. You could cast it just like you cast a bronze, but in this case, you're looking through it. It was a whole thing onto itself that could become solid.

KS: Yeah, I get it.

MK: The surface was there, but you could look through it, and that's a metaphor for everything else that followed. I set them up side by side, and then I get to the practical part. The original piece, boom, I build it, it stands. The rubber piece, not so well. So, then I started adding wedges and pipes and stuff that got me to another aspect of the work. These rubber and wood pieces, I wanted them to stand in exactly the same way. The wedges and support systems used in the studio remained as parts of the final work.

KS: I saw that the wooden piece in *Twin Logs* had those furniture feet on it. I was looking at those feet thinking, "Hmm... that's very eccentric."

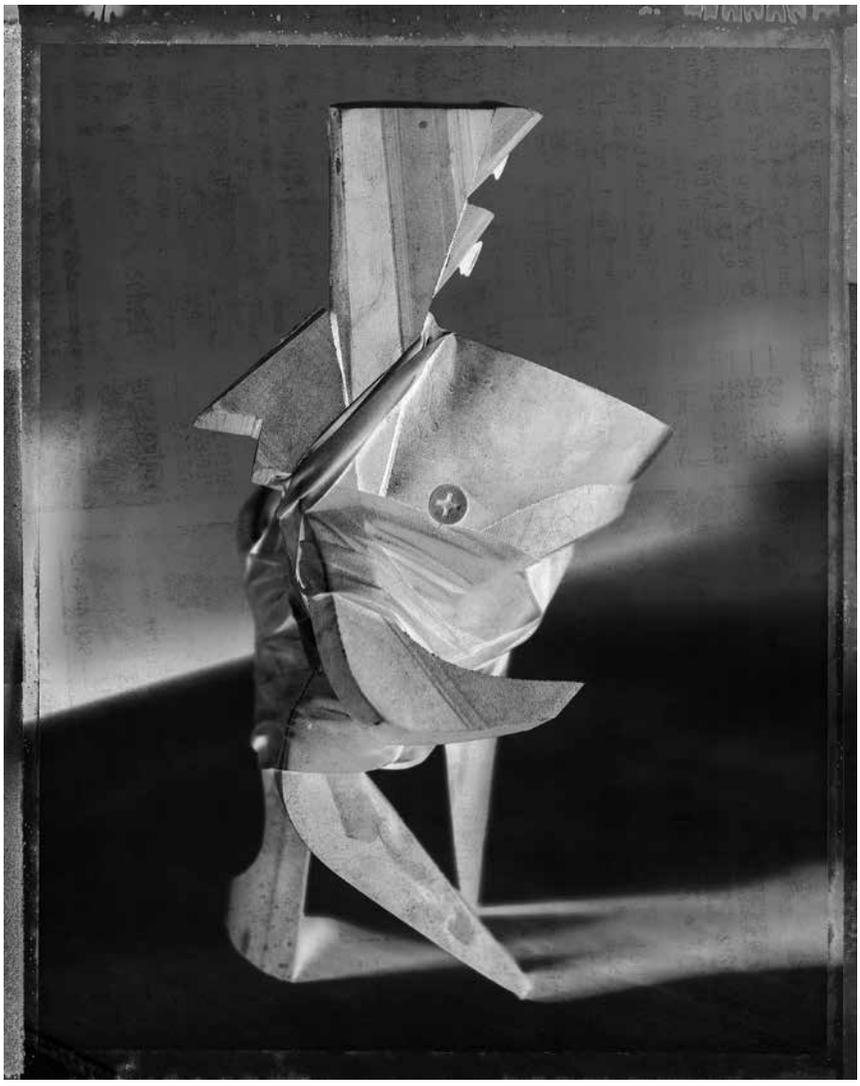
MK: I thought they were funny.

KS: It was funny that the other one didn't have feet. Because it's such a problem, all this sculpture stuff. I'm in some show and they want to drill holes into my sculpture so somebody can't walk off with it and I'm like, No, you can't do that.
So, how many photographs do you have in the show?

MK: I'm just going to have one room with photographs. I'm showing six of the *Negative Objects*. I can no longer get the Polaroid film I used. It was a black and white film that gave you an instant picture, but also an instant negative. The positive images were very flat and gray, but the negatives were beautiful. I scanned the negatives as positives. It was much more revealing, particularly with what you're saying about seeing inside something. Again, positive becomes negative, negative becomes positive.

KS: And the light emanates out of them.

MK: I photographed a number of small sculptures this way. It's a question of what succeeds and what doesn't. It couldn't just be a picture, I had to learn something from it when I looked at the negative. There are probably only a dozen in total. I was big on the four-by-five camera, four-by-five inches,



Untitled (Negative Object), 2002, archival pigment print, 66 x 50 inches.

four-by-five foot prints, everything goes by that. The woodblocks, the big ones, are all based on four-by-eight sheets of plywood.

KS: And they were individually cut pieces of plywood?

MK: Yes, the only thing that makes them like traditional woodblock prints is that they are inked wood printed on Japanese paper. The way I make them is more similar to how I make sculpture. I layer different types of plywood and cut through them all at once. Shifting these layers to get the final image made things happen. They're very rough, there's sawdust everywhere, there's sawdust in the ink.

KS: Did you make them at home?

MK: Well, in my studio. I did a few at Graphics Studio in Florida. It's interesting to see other people print them. They're so careful and everything is like a step in a line. You mentioned earlier, when you talked about film, that you do one thing and it ends becoming another thing. Those woodblocks, ultimately, felt like frames of a film to me. You do one thing, you change it. But the thing about woodblock prints, unlike a sculpture, it's more like photography, watching something develop. You do the physical work behind it, but you're not exactly sure how it's going to come out.

KS: I wanted to ask you something else about evidence. Painting the wood as showing evidence of where it was located in the original—it's pragmatic, but it leaves a trace of the process.

MK: Which is like drawing. I got into the black and white layers or stripes in concrete when I no longer had the wood grain and the paint; the stripes replaced the wood grain. In the cathedral in Sienna, there are black and white marble stripes that pass through everything and that's what I like.

KS: I like your white line piece doing that.

MK: All the things that I do—the sculptures, the photography, the work on paper—there's not one thing that's necessarily about the other, they're all different but they're all parallel.

KS: It gives them an opportunity to have a new life. One's experience is gleaned from things that aren't always evident. Photography is this way of revealing the evidence or revealing your experience of it.

MK: Revealing how you're thinking about it.

KS: And feeling about it. To me, photography is more personal in a way than the thing in the end.

MK: Well, I don't do it anymore because photography is all digital now. I used to love setting up my four-by-five camera. I loved looking at things that way. It is very personal. Even now, I can't help myself—I'm printing out pictures of a sculpture that's in the other room. I don't want to look at it on a computer, so I'm printing all these hard copies. But they don't go anywhere.

KS: But it doesn't hurt to have them.

MK: No, sometimes it's just an idealized way of looking at a piece and sometimes it's a focused way of looking at it.

KS: I think it reveals things in a different way. When something is remade in another medium it gets to generate another life, it's not a direct correlation.

MK: It's one thing and then another thing, and another thing. But there's something going through them all, which is you, the artist.