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November 2nd, 2017

MEL KENDRICK: *Woodblock Drawings*

by Jonathan Goodman

DAVID NOLAN | SEPTEMBER 7 – NOVEMBER 4, 2017

Based in New York since 1971, Mel Kendrick is best known as a sculptor, though he has consistently worked on drawings. This practice goes back a long time—the six woodblock works on exhibit date from 1992 to 1993. As Mark Pascale, a curator at the Art Institute of Chicago, explains in an accompanying catalogue essay, the imagery in these compositions result from being printed from “horizontally aligned sheets of plywood.” The application of ink is heavy, and the imagery looks thoroughly abstract. But, even so, Kendrick’s drawings display a lightness of being we might not expect from a body of work so dark in color. The group of drawings—Kendrick call these efforts “drawings” despite their having been printed—possesses a subtlety and a fineness that seems to lean slightly toward Asia. But it is impossible to culturally pin down their effect. Whatever cultures the artist may draw from, it remains clear that in both his sculptures and his two-dimensional works, he is an independent.



Mel Kendrick, *Sculpture No. 4*, 1991. Poplar, steel, lampblack, and linseed oil, 108 × 57 × 53 inches.

One of the most immediately striking qualities of *10 Loops 3* (1992) is its highly visible woodgrain, seen as thin white lines against a black background in the two trunk-like verticals that dominate the composition. The title refers to the ten loops that occur both inside and outside these massive-seeming tree trunks. Those loops inside the trunks are black, while those outside them are whitish. In the black expanse that forms the background, one sees myriad flecks of white, which give the impression of sweepings floating in cosmic space. Although the composition is abstract, given that Kendrick usually works with wood when he sculpts, we can take a leap and suggest that natural imagery is being implied by the two

tree-like images. The curvilinear white outlines defining the loops give definition to what otherwise might be an inchoate presentation of form. But this close description doesn't do justice to the elegance, and also the mystery, of what we see. We might well expect such critically reticent work from Kendrick, whose art has often seemed self-referential and thematically contained.

Blades
(1993)
continues



Mel Kendrick, *10 Loops Split*, 1993. Woodblock on Kozo paper, mounted on canvas, 108 × 95 inches.



Mel Kendrick, *10 Loops 3*, 1992. Woodblock on Kozo paper, mounted on canvas, 107 1/2 × 93 3/4 inches.

Kendrick's patterns of forms outlined by white bands against a dark backing, littered with raw white scrapes and blotches. Here the loops exist as triangles, nearly squared forms, and tall, thin rectangles, all of them seemingly hovering above a black abyss, which is activated by small strokes of white. Because Kendrick consistently uses black as his background, it is easy enough to see the setting as a night sky. At the same time, the imagery does remain thoroughly nonobjective, so that a figurative reading is inevitably speculative: we are imposing a cohesiveness on what is more or less free form. But it doesn't matter whether we read the composition as abstract or figurative; one of Kendrick's strengths lies in his ability to make work that leans in both directions. In *Ten Loops Split* (1993), we see a lot of woodgrain used as a background, while the ten loops for three horizontal range across the length of the drawing. The white blade-like forms cut across the grain and loops, asserting themselves as if they were determined to overwhelm the forms beneath them. Kendrick's gift derives from his thorough knowledge of modernism, but there is also something else, something outside modernity, in this work. Woodblock printing is an ancient practice, and some of its archaic gravitas survives in these drawings.

No show by Kendrick should be absent of sculpture—he is currently one of the best American sculptors working. The gallery put up only one piece, and it was monumental and appealing to the

point of being splendid. *Sculpture No. 4* (1991), a nine-foot work, is constructed from poplar and steel and is tinted with lampblack and linseed oil. A composition of unusual intricacy, the work is supported by five wooden staves ending in points. Cuts are made into wooden spars that are closely packed; some of them are colored. Fitted together like a three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle, with certain groups of wood darkened by lampblack, the sculpture manifests density and an imperial poise. Because the wooden components jut outward in all directions, *Sculpture No. 4* requires its viewers to circle the piece entirely. Its elements shift and break away from any easy overall gestalt. In the American art world, a premium has been put on the conceptual intent behind a work's creation, but an overwrought intellectualism is not part of Kendrick's outlook. Instead, he saves his considerable intelligence for making drawings and sculptures that are intricate on the face of things, but also cohesive in their motivation and overall design.



Mel Kendrick, *Blades*, 1993. Woodblock on Kozo paper, mounted on canvas, 67 × 47 inches.

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