

The Presence of Absence: Exploring the Void in Contemporary Wood Sculpture

By Hal Nelson



A.

A.
Gyöngy Laky
Globalization IV: Collateral
Damage, 2005
ash, commercial wood, paint,
blue concrete bullets
32 x 97 x 4
photo: courtesy of
browngrotta arts

For over fifty years, artists throughout this country, Europe and Asia, have investigated the seemingly infinite formal and expressive potential of contemporary wood sculpture. Through a broad range of approaches to form and process, these sculptors have exploited wood's most fundamental properties, including a natural association with its source – the enduring, but constantly-changing, nature of the tree itself.

While some artists have emphasized the substance of their medium, its weight, bulk and mass, others have investigated its opposite – the pure empty space surrounding form. Turners, in particular, who typically remove mass to create shapes that contain empty space – vessels – are keenly aware of the inter-relationship of solid and void, a relationship that results from the dynamic process of turning wood.

From the elegantly-proportioned lathe-turned vessels of Bob Stocksdale to the witty constructs of John McQueen, artists have used wood to celebrate the void – the negative space within or around their turned, carved or constructed forms – and have considered “the presence of absence” central to their work.

Many contemporary artists who have been particularly influenced by non-Western culture, view empty space as a fundamental element in their formal vocabulary, as essential to their sculpture as its weight and mass. Numerous sculptors, Eastern and Western, alike, have embraced the concept of *Ma* (the recognition and celebration of negative space), a principal central to Asian aesthetics, as fundamental to their work. This is particularly true of wood sculpture, fiber, and basketry which are so deeply indebted to Asian traditions, forms and practice.

The Presence of Absence explores contemporary artists' investigations of negative space through a selection of approximately twenty

three works in wood. Among the artists included in the exhibition are Dorothy Gill Barnes, Derek Bencomo, Christian Burchard, Barbara Cooper, David Ellsworth, Marion Hildebrandt, Robyn Horn, Todd Hoyer, William Hunter, Gyöngy Laky, Stoney Lamar, Mark Lindquist, Kari Lonning, John McQueen, Christophe Nancey, Michael Peterson, Binh Pho, Harry Pollitt, Joseph Shuldiner, Hisako Sekijima, Kay Sekimachi, Takeo Tanabe, Hans Weissflog and Howard Werner.

While many of the sculptors featured in *The Presence of Absence* work within long-standing wood turning traditions, each artist's distinctive exploration of form, combined with an experimental approach to process, has advanced the field in bold new directions.

For over thirty years, David Ellsworth has explored sculptural form using both traditional and distinctly non-traditional wood turning techniques. Typically, Ellsworth starts with a block of wood and reduces it to the desired shape through a conventional turning process. In his early work he used exotic woods such as Brazilian rosewood. However, over the years, he has begun to reclaim discarded and often imperfect wood in a desire to engage and bring new life to abandoned natural material. Once he has defined the overall shape of a sculptural form, he uses a bent-shaft cutting tool to open the mass and create a vessel with a vast interior and an increasingly small opening. Through this process he creates exceptionally thin-walled vessels that are adroit exercises in wood turning virtuosity.

Homage Pot # 24 is a fine example of Ellsworth's inventive approach to the turning process. In this extraordinarily thin-walled vessel, a cavernous space within – an area of absence sensed only through the light weight of the vessel itself – is counterbalanced by the visually rich patterns of the wood, a spalted sugar maple, on the vessel's exterior.



B.



C.



D.



E.

B. C. D. E.
David Ellsworth
Homage Pot #24, 1999
spalted sugar maple
16 x 10.25
photo: courtesy of
del Mano Gallery

In Ellsworth's work, a richly varied surface conceals a fullness of absence within.

William Hunter is another major artist steeped in long-standing wood turning traditions. However, while most of his work begins to take shape on a lathe, Hunter has introduced inventive new sculptural techniques over the past thirty years that have radically transformed the contemporary wood sculpture field. While much of his work continues to refer to vessel-forming traditions, his most recent work is purely sculptural in its configuration.

The two interlocking sculptural elements comprising Hunter's *Infinity's Echo* of 2006 represent for the artist a highly evocative visual metaphor. Describing the rich layers of meaning behind this and other related forms, Hunter has said: "I want to create an interplay of both the piece within itself and between the piece and the viewer. The interactivity is underscored by the many possible relationships of the parts to each other as they are reconfigured by the viewer or as the viewer simply changes viewpoints. The elements of the sculpture can be entangled, they can rest lightly together, they can focus towards or away from each other, reflecting the emotions and scenarios of human relationships as well as the balances in the natural world. As with most of my work, I strive to express this with fluidity through a complexity of voices emerging from a pure form."¹

In the work of four artists included in *The Presence of Absence* – Robyn Horn, Todd Hoyer, Christophe Nancey and Hans Weissflog – positive and negative space are presented in perfect counterbalance, as solid form is opened through cutting, drilling, piercing or wood turning processes, to allow negative space to permeate solid mass.

In Endless Form, Robyn Horn has created an open, ovoid shape which, while carved from one continuous block of wood, appears

to be comprised of separate interlocking sculptural elements. The oval is open in its center allowing light and space to permeate form. The concept of 'endlessness' suggested in its title, comprises both the endlessness of the ever-returning circle and the continuous interrelationship of positive and negative space, so central to the work.

Like Horn's sculpture, Todd Hoyer's *X Series* of 1995 has open space at its heart. However, unlike Horn's which appears to juxtapose solid and void in co-equal balance, Hoyer's 'X' reads as a stamp, almost as a piercing or burning through of solid form. The wood – a lateral cut from the trunk of a palm tree – appears raw and powerful as the X pierces it, seering through, leaving blackened char remains on the form's interior.

Christophe Nancey's *Empreinte* also has an opening at its center. This relatively thin vertical plane of ash has grooves that radiate out from a central circular opening like lines of force, energy emanating from a void. Cosmic metaphors were very much on Nancey's mind as he created this stunning sculpture. In describing a combination of metal and wood that characterizes much of his earlier work, he stated: "This technique suggests to me a relationship between the universe and woodturning. As in woodturning, everything in the universe is not straight, even if it appears so. The heavenly bodies are linked by gravity... While thinking about the infinity of the universe, I have created a story...but this is not the end of the story..."²

Hans Weissflog created an extraordinary transparency in his work, *Big Star Bowl*, by cutting into black walnut using his virtuoso wood turning skills. Turning a single piece on multiple axes, he creates overlapping, arching grids cut through the wood. While appearing solid, Weissflog's work, when viewed closely, is comprised, in almost equal parts, of solid and void.

While several artists in *The Presence of Absence* juxtapose positive and negative space by opening solid masses to allow empty space to permeate form, others construct open forms through composite materials, using an additive rather than a reductive process.

Christian Burchard's *Torsos* – seen individually and as a whole – subtly juxtapose positive and negative space. In each element, a thin sheet of bleached madrone burl that has shaped itself in the drying process, alludes to forms the artist likens to human torsos. While suggesting solid mass, these forms are actually thin veils, skin below which there exists a void. The negative space between each figure in this expansive installation, is as central to the artist's concept as are the individual torsos.

In *Calycanthus*, fiber artist Marion Hildebrandt creates an open, basket-like form using California native spice brush branches and waxed linen twine. While her shapes suggest the possibility of containment – the containment a vessel or a basket would offer – the predominance of negative space renders containment impossible. In its open form, *Calycanthus* represents the idea, the essence, the spirit of a vessel, rather than its substance.

In *Be Away To Be* of 2003, the Japanese-born artist Hisako Sekijima creates what appears to be a mass, comprised of tiny elements of natural materials. Similarly, sculptor Dorothy Gill Barnes constructs "baskets," from natural materials that, because they lack a definable, functional interior, exist more as sculptural form than as an object for use.

Like Christian Burchard, Michael Peterson works with unseasoned, green wood, and allows it to shape itself in the drying process. For this reason, the element of chance – an abandonment of will to random forces, allowing nature to define its own course – apparent in his stunning abstract sculpture, *Earth and Stone IV*, is consistent with Peterson's Asian-influenced aesthetic.

Kay Sekimachi's *Leaf Vessel* is among the simplest and most poetic works featured in *The Presence of Absence*. Comprised of five Boda leaves, *Leaf Vessel* is like a Haiku poem, spare, yet resonating with life's fullest meaning. There is something wistful, elegiac about this vessel shaped from leaves, separated from their source. However spare, its simplicity and beauty, ultimately, reassure.

For Gyöngy Laky, an extraordinarily inventive sculptor from northern California, the concept of absence exists at multiple levels and is related to a multi-layered sense of loss, separation and even death. Her work, much of which is comprised of reclaimed natural refuse (branches, twigs, wood discarded from orchards after the winter pruning), reinstates discarded materials and finds new meaning, new beauty, in loss.

In *Globalization IV: Collateral Damage* of 2005, Laky explores compelling social and political issues related to the absence of life due to the presence of war. About this concept, she has said, "The work has to do with my opposition to the Iraq war; in a strange way it addresses absence referencing the unnecessary loss of life...both of Americans and of Iraqis. When innocent individuals are killed they leave an un-fillable and painful void within their families and communities."³

Just as in the pioneering work of the 20th century composer John Cage in which ambient sound – the honking of horns, people talking and dogs barking outside the orchestra hall – was viewed as a core element of the musical composition, negative space or the "presence of absence" is integral to much contemporary wood sculpture.

Over the past twenty years, artists have explored the richly evocative set of relationships – both formal and conceptual – between solid and void, positive and negative – the constantly evolving but eternally interrelated principles of presence and absence.

Hal Nelson is director of the Long Beach Museum of Art in California. Most recently he has co-authored with his partner, Bernard N. Jazzar, a book on 20th-century enamels accompanying the exhibition *Painting with Fire: Masters of Enameling in America, 1930 – 1980* which opens in Long Beach in January 2007.

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¹ William Hunter, ex. cat. (Los Angeles: del Mano Gallery, 2001): n.p.

² Christophe Nancey as quoted in *Connections: International Turning Exchange 1995 – 2005*, ex. cat. (Philadelphia: Wood Turning Center, 2005): 112.

³ Gyöngy Laky to Hal Nelson, April 17, 2006.



F.

F.
William Hunter
Infinity's Echo, 2006
cocobolo, Corian,
digital prints, Perspex
10 x 21 x 16
photo: courtesy of
del Mano Gallery



G.

G.
Michael Peterson,
Earth and Stone IV, 2006
madrone burl, blackwood
30 x 18 x 16
photo: courtesy of
del Mano Gallery



H.

H.
Marion Hildebrandt
Calycanthus, 2005
California native spice branches,
waxed linen twine
30.25 x 18
photo: courtesy of
del Mano Gallery



I.

I.
Kay Sekimachi,
Leaf Vessel, 2005
boda leaves
6 x 5 x .5
photo: courtesy of
del Mano Gallery