

Even as a child Martin Puryear enjoyed making things from wood. Although he didn't view these constructions--guitars, canoes, furniture--as art, he later realized that "building was a legitimate way for me to make sculpture, that it wasn't necessary to work in traditional sculptural methods of carving or casting." After graduating from Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. in 1963 with a degree in painting, Puryear joined the Peace Corps and spent two years in West Africa where he learned from the local artist not only techniques of woodcraft, but also respect for the hand-hewn, humble object. His subsequent sojourn in Stockholm, studying etching, sculpture and furniture design at the Swedish Royal Academy, reinforced his commitment and sensitivity to materials and convinced him that sculpture, not painting, was his natural medium.

Puryear returned to the United States to study sculpture at Yale University (he received an M.F.A. in 1971) and was exposed to the New York art world and the prevailing sculptural style--Minimalism. Puryear can be grouped with those sculptors, such as Jackie Winsor, Eva Hesse and Joel Shapiro, who learned from Minimalism but who rejected its high formalism and its concomitant strict geometry and impersonality. Indeed, not only did Minimal sculpture look machine-made, but much of it (Don Judd's aluminum stack pieces, Sol LeWitt's open cubes) was fabricated in factories according to the artist's specifications. The younger Post-Minimalists, as they are sometimes called,

drew on aspects of the Minimal vocabulary, in Puryear's case the simple, abstract forms, but reinvested sculpture with feeling, the personal touch of the artist, and even referential elements. Rather than attempting to purify the medium by returning to fundamental, geometric form like the Minimalists, Puryear seeks meaning through archetypal shapes (which tend to be organic) and traditional techniques of hand construction.

Puryear's sculptures take many forms, from delicately curved, linear wall sculptures that recall Richard Tuttle's wire drawings (Nexus, Boy's Toys #1, #4, #6), to large, volumetric floor objects, such as Cask Cascade, that have formal affinities with works by Isamu Noguchi and Gene Highstein (MATRIX 26.) Puryear's series of longnecked, standing Boy's Toys suggest everything from toilet plungers, to weapons, simple pounding tools and phalluses. What unifies these disparate works is the clarity and simplicity of their smooth, abstract shapes, the consistent use of wood as the primary material (sometimes in combination with gourds or common manmade materials such as steel wire and copper pipe) and the high degree of craftsmanship. Puryear's acute sensitivity to the qualities and possibilities of the materials is always evident. He often allows the natural inclination of the material to dictate the object's final shape, especially in the bent wood pieces such as Boy's Toys #1 and #4. Although Puryear's sculptures suggest many things, they are more mysterious than specific.

Puryear leaves interpretation to the imagination and experience of the viewer.

In his current work, Puryear emphasizes the natural properties of the materials, often leaving their surfaces unpainted and unwaxed (earlier pieces had a more polished look) and also reveals the ways in which the parts are joined. By these methods, he has imbued the pieces with more energy, without the loss of craft.

Puryear has created many permanent outdoor works, such as Box and Pole at Artpark, Lewiston, New York, and Sentinel, a fieldstone piece installed at Gettysburg College in Pennsylvania. Recently, he has worked with landscape architects to develop public spaces, such as Duncan Plaza in New Orleans and the NOAA Western Regional Center in Seattle, Washington. He was the recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Individual Artist's Fellowship in 1977, a John S. Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Grant in 1982 and a Louis Comfort Tiffany Grant, 1982, among others.

Puryears lives in Chicago and teaches at the University of Illinois. He was born in Washington, D.C., in 1941. A ten-year survey exhibition of his sculpture was organized by the University Gallery, University of Massachusetts, Amherst. It traveled to several other museums in the United States, including the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, California.

Constance Lewallen

Works in MATRIX (all works lent by the Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles, unless otherwise noted):

- 1. Boy's Toys #1, 1984, yellow cedar, gourd and wire, 13-1/2 x 72-7/8 x 4-1/2". Lent by Columbia Savings,
- 2. Boy's Toys #2, 1984, sitka spruce, yellow cedar and pearwood, 66-5/8 x 13-1/4 x 6-5/8". Lent by Alan and Wendy Hart, Santa Monica, CA.
- 3. Boy's Toys #4, 1984, gourd and copper, 52-1/2 x 22-1/4 x 6".
- 4. Boy's Toys #6, 1984, gourd, copper and pearwood,  $53-3/4 \times 4-1/2 \times 4$ ".
- 5. Boy's Toys #7, 1984, yellow cedar, 43-7/8 x 5-1/4 x 5-1/4".
- 6. Boy's Toys #8, 1984, steel pipe and red cedar, 22-1/2 x 5-1/4 x 7-3/4".
- 7. Boy's Toys #9, 1984, red cedar and aluminum paint, 48-3/4" x 9-3/8 x 14".
- 8. Boy's Toys #10, 1984, painted basswood and pine, 51-1/4 x 9-1/4" diam.
- 9. Boy's Toys #12, 1984, yellow cedar, basswood and western red cedar, 32 x 6-1/4 x 6-1/2".
- 10. Cask Cascade, 1985, painted wood, 61-3/4 x 59-1/2 x 30-1/4". Lent by Columbia Savings, Los Angeles.
- 11. Lurk, 1984, painted pine, 21-3/4 x 61-1/4 x 7-1/4". Lent by Margo H. Leavin, Los Angeles.
- 12. Nexus, 1978, wood and gesso, 1-1/2 x 45" diam.

Selected one-person exhibitions:

Henri Gallery, Washington, DC, '73; The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., '77; Protetch-McIntosh Gallery, Washington, DC, '78, '79; Young Hoffman Gallery, Chicago, '80, '82; University Gallery, U. of Massachusets, Amherst, Martin Puryear, '84 (traveled, catalogue); Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles, '85.

Selected group exhibitions:

Swedish Academy of Art, Stockholm, Annual Exhibition, '67, '68; The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, N.Y., Young American Artists, 1978, Exxon National Exhibition, '78 (catalogue); Whitney Museum of American Art, NY, Biennial Exhibitions, '79, '81 (catalogues); Afro-American Abstraction, AMA traveling exhibition, '82-'84 (catalogue); The Museum of Modern Art, NY, An International Survey of Recent Painting and Sculpture, '84 (catalogue); The Museum of Modern Art, NY, Primitivism in 20th Century Art, '84 (catalogue).

Selected bibliography (see also catalogues under exhibitions):

Bourdon, David. "Martin
Puryear at Henri 2," Art in
America, Jan.-Feb., '74.

Tannous, David.

"Martin Puryear at the
Corcoran," Art in America,
May-June, '78.

Crary Jonathan

Crary, Jonathan.

"Martin Puryear's Sculpture,"

Artforum, October '79.

Russell, John.

"Abstractions from Afro-

America, The New York Times,
March 14, '80.

Glueck, Grace. "Serving
the Environment," The New
York Times, June 27, '82.

Brenson, Michael.

"Sculpture: Puryear
Postmodernism," The New York
Times, Aug. 10, '84.

Menzies, Neal.
"Umbellished Strength of
Form," Artweek (Oakland, CA),
Feb. 2, '85.

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