

THE SCULPTURES OF SAM PERRY,
BETWEEN WILDERNESS AND CIVILIZATION

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Sam Perry looks at the tree and sees the sculpture within. It is not that he cannot see the forest for the trees, it is rather that he draws the very life of the forest from the dead tree, now transformed to sculpture. Perry's job keeps him in the forest because he is the conservator of Runnymede Sculpture Farm, located in Woodside, California. He has been working there for some 25 years and while he cares for the sculptures, he also studies the trees, not like a hunter; but more like a park ranger. His eye trained on their forms, he removes the best of the dead trees to his studio where they bide their time, drying out for years before Perry begins to elaborate the forms they contain.

There is something cyclical about this artistic process—to make sculptures from trees that fall in a sculpture park—it seems eternal, or at least universal. This cycle is thematized in his sculpture *Seeing But Never Meeting* (2016). It is a Möbius strip, in other words an interlaced loop that never ends. This could be the movement between tree and sculpture, sculpture and tree. There is no beginning; it must have been like this forever. The sculpture is smooth, but worn; it is curving yet solid, even block-like. This thing does not seem to want to move yet it never stops. Accuse me of riddling but I can only suggest the meaning here; the torquing movement of this form is nothing if not evasive, self-contained. There is so much more than what you can see but it is hard to name. The form is broken and mended, ever so

tenderly, at the very moment where one loop passes through another. This exquisite detail reveals the true nature of the material—its pithy, febrile imperfections—at the symbolic intersection where the tree meets the sculpture, or vice versa.

There is something so resourceful in the way that he conjoins the particularity of these organic forms to create a sculpture that reveals the form inherited from the tree. This is not like Michelangelo releasing the life captured in the stone. Rather the wood is a manifestation of the natural growth of the tree; it is the husk of a living being which has produced its own unique structure. Working with that matter demands attention to the presence of a particular form that has developed over time. Perry's sculptures are collaborations with the dead whose bodies inspire the artist to draw new life from them.

Given the mutability of his forms, it should come as no surprise that Perry got his start with ceramics. The construction through forms, the use of positive and negative space, and the plastic character of the structures are closely aligned with ceramic sculpture. But it is hard to realize sculptures at this scale in clay. Perry was formerly Viola Frey's studio assistant and she tested and explored the limitations of large-scale ceramic sculpture throughout her career. Her over-life size sculptures are assembled from smaller units, requiring some flexibility in construction in order to realize the larger whole. Though Perry's works are carved, not built, the element of construction is not foreign to his work and he admires particularly the assembly process of David Smith who worked in steel. This interest in assembly is visible in *Strop Bend* (2015) and also in *Three Rings* (2016). *Three Rings* is a marvel of three-dimensional form in which each ring seems carefully placed to generate a series of engaging profiles, as

well as views through the object. The impression of a simply constructed form yields to complexity as the viewer moves around the work. Perry brings malleability to a non-malleable material but the greater surprise is perhaps that this object is not assembled at all, but carved with a chainsaw.

Admittedly, there is some detail work with finer tools but this brutish mechanical chiseling suited to burl wood animals sold by the roadside can also render the most delicate and sophisticated structures. Perry never lets his viewers forget that these works are made of wood, not clay, but he cuts against the grain, and overcomes our expectations of what kind of sculpture it is possible to make from a fallen tree. He does not commonly use redwood; most of the work is in oak, bay, buckeye. Yes, the artist is a naturalist too for every tree has its own characteristics and any of these may be useful to give the finished sculptures character that clay simply does not possess.

To take another tack, one could liken Perry's sculptures to the work of J.B. Blunk, a Bay Area wood sculptor whose works sometimes hearkened back to the exquisite modernism of his friend Isamu Noguchi. Every San Franciscan must have seen one of Blunk's masterworks, the carved centerpiece of Greens Restaurant (figure 1). Blunk too began with clay and moved to wood sculpture. He did use redwood which made it



Fig. 1 J.B. Blunk, *Greens*, 1979, installed at Greens Restaurant, San Francisco, CA. Photograph © J.B. Blunk Estate.

possible to work at an architectural scale. He hewed carefully to the nature of the material, sometimes cleaving it to generate modernist linear structure and, at other times, heightening the effect of natural growth by allowing it to escape the sculptural straightjacket. Like Noguchi, Blunk appreciated the beauty of the material and studied its characteristics to allow them to emerge, blending nature with culture, as he must have learned studying with master ceramicists in Japan.

Perry demonstrates a similar sensitivity but he approaches the material differently. First of all, he knows his trees intimately and has an image in his mind for each block of wood curing in his studio. He works with foam models to begin to play with the idea in three dimensions. Then he “draws” on the trees with spray paint in order to form the intersections where his chainsaw will shape the lines of the work. When the rough cut is made, he moves the piece to a table where he finishes the carving with finer tools, deepening the grooves and polishing the surfaces. Perry does not go in for the rough woody extrusions one can find in some of Blunk’s sculptures, but he uses the grain as a natural linear element that provides pictorial detail to his works. While wood is a very resilient material, each tree has its own weaknesses and if a piece of wood breaks, revealing a structural weakness in the sculpture, he carefully mends it but includes this within its final form. This is not an expedient, but a concession to the nature of the material. Sometimes this can be the central expressive gesture of the sculpture, like the missing knot that makes a hole at the center of *Origin and Endings* (2016). This work is made of coil in the shape of a human head lying on its side but this missing element, combined with the title, signals a cosmic inquiry into the nature of life.

Just because his works can be cosmic does not mean that they are not also sometimes funny. *Coiled* (2016) is like that, funny and cosmic too. The coil is one of the central techniques for making ceramic pots so to make a coil from a tree is something of a trompe-l'oeil, a nod to Richard Shaw perhaps, whose ceramic sculptures can pass as wood furniture, stacked with books. It could also refer to the spirals first drawn as petroglyphs, but shared among prehistoric cultures world-over, a kind of Jungian universal symbol. But this coil is enormous, measuring six feet, approximately the height of the artist. Perhaps it is a kind of double for him but the center is hollow so the viewer looks right through. Even the modulation of the rope, the lumpiness of the coil, generates an expressive, funky form, alluding to the decorative arts, a kind of San Francisco Art Nouveau, so different from the crisp, linear elements and the clear duality of *Part of You Part of Me* (2015). *Coiled* is a singular form but it is somehow personable, even loquacious.

While there is clearly a Perry approach, it is quite possible that there is no signature Perry style. His work balances wilderness and civilization on a fine edge and that balance will be different for each plastic investigation. It could be said that this body of work represents different moods of the artist, but it may be more accurate to say that each sculpture is the product of an interaction with a particular tree to implement its form and so it is impossible to resolve his sculptures in the same manner each time. Perry possesses a keen sensitivity and transmits to his works attention and perspicacity, yielding to the inherent form while finding the image in his mind's eye.