

Out of the Woods

Exhibit Invites Viewers To Consider Wood and Woods

Years ago, after the Metropolitan Museum installed the Michael Rockefeller wing of African and Oceanic art, I had one of those experiences that's happened to me only one or two times: total art shock.

I was roaming around the spacious galleries staring at the Asmat war canoes and soul ships when I rounded a corner. There was a vegetal screen: an edge of tall, thick grasses that a viewer had to pass by, blinded momentarily to what was inside.

This installation isn't there anymore, no doubt having proved too terrifying to legions of schoolchildren and adults. For, when you turned the corner, you confronted an advancing corps of enormous mannequins clad in eyesless spirit masks and grass skirts.

Rockefeller — before he disappeared in New Guinea under unknown circumstances — acquired these objects from Papua New Guinea Highlands tribes including the Asmat people, who still practice rituals wearing such costumes.

This particular grouping of masked mannequins was dressed for a ritual to help the dead leave the village. The forest, manifested in the installation by the fringe, makes a literal curtain between the world of the living and the dead. The terror of the apparitions is real. In life, in the forest, the spirit dancers move out of the trees and disappear back into the dark once the dance is done.

I return to these figures when I visit New York, but I've always felt bereft since the museum tore down the vegetation and put up glass cases. They've preserved the living objects in a denuded setting.

I read, in an essay in Chris Rainier's wonderful book "Where Masks Still Dance" that a group of village elders was considering selling off part of the forest to a Malaysian timber company. "Once we have eaten the money," the village chief asked, "what shall we

About Art



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For the Journal

eat then?"

Along these lines, "A Celebration of Trees" pulls our attention to the interdependence of trees and humans. The exhibit bids us — but, happily, without proselytizing — to consider wood and woods in ways that are lively, playful, body-conscious.

I got happy right away at the front door on an encounter with two excellent pieces, one by Chris Olson and the other by Gaal Shepard. Olson's wood-carved sculpture (he is incredibly skilled as a carver) manages to consistently gather the theatrical moment right into itself. The long-faced and bearded figure called "Father Time" may be partially autobiographical: Once you've met Olson, you can't help but see an aspect of him staring out at you.

The fact is that Olson was raised in Africa, so that there is expressed in the overt and identifiable reference to African wood carvings both a debt of his skill and also some cultural dislocation.

We have to ask: What role do these carvings play here? How do they fit into our highly individualistic society, compared to the role they play in Africa? In Africa, as I understand it, the sculptures follow form, with variations in how they look according to who carved them, but with a much lesser variation in their general composition and understood role in village and ritual.

These issues make Olson's

"Celebration of Trees"

WHEN: Monday to Friday, 8 a.m. to 7 p.m. through Aug. 24.

WHERE: The New Mexico State Capitol, intersection of Old Santa Fe Trail and Paseo de Peralta

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carvings interesting. I see in them deep allusions to problems of identity in our world. Just think about it: The Western artist and man (or woman) prize independence — or originality, you name the attribute — over a part in the greater ecology.

I had to go to my copy of Macbeth, symbol of Western man done in by trees (sort of): "Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane hill shall vanquish you," he was warned by the ghost. He scoffed in reply: "Who can bid the tree unfix his earth-bound root?"

Olson's "Nuclear Jesus" has mobility problems of his own, gimping along on pipe crutches with circuit boards for forearms, red wires for hair and a tight little monkey butt. "Ancestor," on the Don Gaspar side of the Capitol, is also great, reminding me of Gabon masks I've seen.

Gaal Shepard is a new artist for me: I hadn't known his work before, but his "birch bark quilt," with a slightly Kiefer-esque feel to it, is a beautiful piece. Shepard also contributes many sculptures to this show, demonstrating his range of skill and also a real conjuring of animistic presence in wood.

The intersection of Shepard's 2-D "quilt" piece with Dean Michael Walsh's photo called "No Firewood Cutting" and Diane Marsh's "Do Not Go Gently" makes a great moment.

Marsh, a skillful photorealist painter, gives us on the left a portrait of a handsome if

anguished-looking man and on the right a panel depicting huge old trees fallen (or logged). The sense of polluted life is evident: I thought because of the title (from Dylan Thomas' poem "Do Not Go Gently into the Good Night") of the medicine we derive from trees: They go, we go.

Another inspired arrangement is the interplay between Gina Teloccci's playful "Tree Ring" circles and Steina Vasulka's wavy, shimmying videotape called "Organ Pipe Park." Teloccci, who forms branches so expertly that you can't tell where the seam is, has made a living mobile out of her round forms. I thought of hula hoops, bird perches; in short, it's an incredibly kinesthetic sculpture. You can stand in the corridor between it and the Vasulka video, in which blowing branches sweep and fade, and you start swaying.

Ramon Jose Lopez's tour-de-force creation story made of sawdust and straw also deserves mention. Among the photographs, I especially enjoyed Penny Harris' Fuji prints of Huangshan Mountain: a sense of Chinese timelessness captured.

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