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Histoires de bois : *Wormwood*

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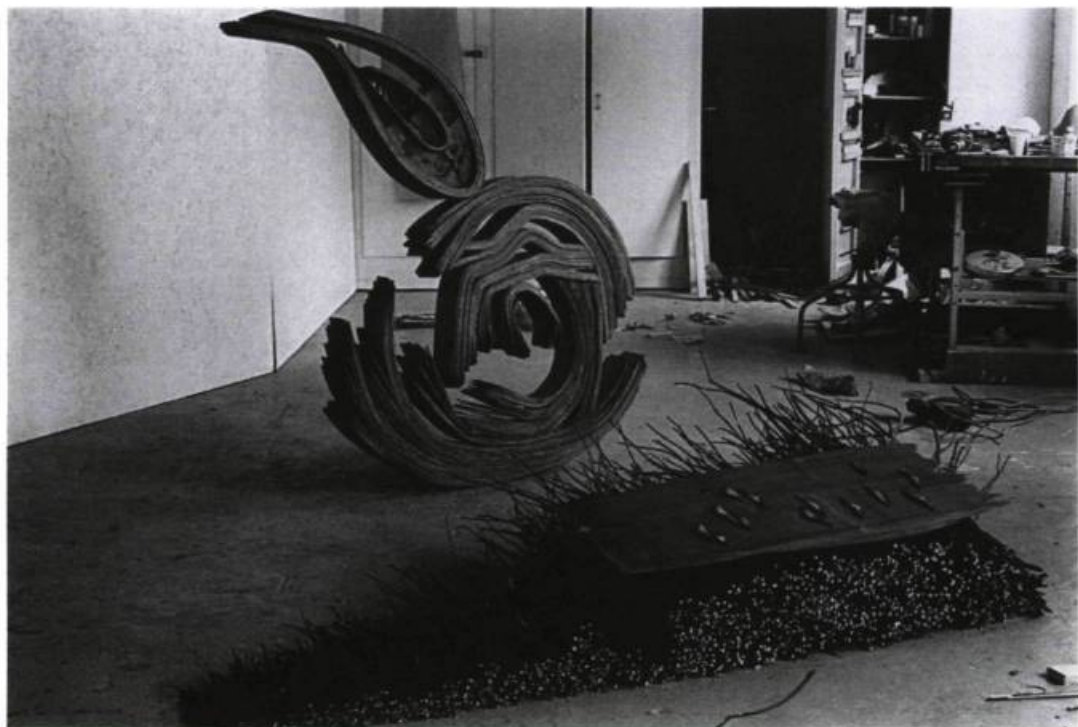
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Danielle Sauv , *Paysages domestiques* (in progress), 1988.
Wood and pigment, 150 x 240 x 300 cm. (sight-installed)
Photo : Roberto Pellegrinuzzi

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Not since the closing decades of the eighteenth century has wood — that “celestial goodness in its lowest corporeal plane” (Swedenborg) — received such widespread embrace as a sculptural medium in the province of Quebec¹. Two hundred years ago Fran ois Baillaireg  et al deviated from Louis XVI and classical revival tendencies to emphasize the necessity of a return to the study of the indigenous (i.e. observation of Quebec’s unique natural and cultural environment) and to introduce more “countrified” (read : rustic) stylizations in wood-carving. At the time, Baillaireg  and his Quebecois contemporaries were both lauded and condemned — praised as “savants et naturels”; criticized for occupying the much disputed stylistic mid-ground between the ancients and the moderns. As if to lend a measure of credibility to that age-old credence that history repeats itself, the majority of 1988 participants in the “Studios d’ t ”, under the project title *Histoires de bois* (Saint-Jean-Port-Joli, June 15 — August 15, 1988) can, in the broadest sense, be located within an analogous historio-aesthetic

construct. All seven artists took up residence along the banks of the St. Lawrence River to pass the dog-days summer in contemplation of (or at least in experience of) nature and to benefit from the expertise of regional carvers, who, over the course of the past half-century, have established Saint-Jean-Port-Joli as the provincial centre of wood-sculpting and the last-surviving locus of a diminishing “esprit de patrimoine”. In effect it might be reported that the seven participants became proponents of a so-called “arri re-avant-garde”, melding their import of contemporary aesthetic concerns with a localized “folk-art” tradition — at least this is the impression put forward by project initiators.

A number of *Histoires de bois* organizers² and artists identified our “postmodern” moment as an appropriate juncture in time to (re)trace traditional (i.e. not of frequent “modern” employ) wood-working techniques — a convenient and perhaps facile vindication for an interaction with artisan-producers of carvings which are often but not always justly categorized as “kitsch”. Although it is true that a recouping of technical skills associated with neglected (i.e. bypassed by modernity’s implicit industrialized



David Moore, work in progress, 1988.
Wood; 210 cm. h. (sight). Photo : Roberto Pellegrinuzzi

biases) crafts and indeed a more tenable view of popular "culture" are among manifestations of our current fine art milieu, they are but shoots tangled in the thicket of a postmodern growth. To perceive the "raison d'être" of the *Histoires de bois* project in largely recuperative (historicist) or parochial (stylistic) terms would be to deny the necessity of complementary diachronic and synchronic perspectives.

Assessed in consideration of many gloomy philosophical reports on the state of our fin-de-millennium culture, *Histoires de bois* might be interpreted less as a "Wood of Experience" (Blake) rooted in the past, than as a "Wood of Error and Spiritual Death" (Dante) ingrained by the present. The apparently growing interest in the sculptural employ of wood may well be associated with the notions of a recovery of subjectivity, but also with a fascination for the fate of the human body in recent aestheticizations. As an organic substance, wood carries a record of its growth in its physical make-up. Its harvesting marks the instant of its death; its utilization by man signals the beginning of an aftermath. This is a sequence fraught with symbolic implication that cannot be subsumed by the artist's narrative intent or formal concerns. The expressive potential of the medium itself lingers as an afterimage. The sculptor's subject matter becomes a strange fruit (sometimes an appendage) born(e) on a dead tree. The obvious analogy between the physicality of a tree and humankind (heartwood — spine, sapwood — vascular system, cambium — flesh...) is also significant. References to contemporary man as "a disappearing body", "a body in ruins", "a body obsolete" are prevalent of late — signs and symptoms of a cultural burnout. Wood becomes the ideal metaphor-medium for the (human) body under

attack. Forests are in decline, susceptible as they are to similar environmental threats (read : fire, drought, flood, disease, pollution...) as mankind. In certain societies it has been customary to hang the condemned on a dead tree. Through symbolic necessity that tree became vital to those cultures. In an analogous fashion, *Histoires de bois* wood sculptors may also be nourishing the dead (or dying) with death. If such comparisons seem cursory or gratuitous, weigh the subject matter and/or methodology of artists involved — "selections" from the summer workshop exhibited at Optica (October 29 — November 20).

David Moore's largest summer composition was a volume in disintegration precariously poised between the static and the phrenetic. Viewed from the portside it appeared as a "classically" solemn, rough-hewn, cedar figure holding out two humanoid fragments for examination. Circum-scrutinized, it came to light that the upper righthand side of the body had been cut away and a second smaller figure grafted in place. It was the latter figure that, in fact, held the progressively scale-reduced humanoid forms — an implant that launched a sinistorse dissolution of the body into a semiurgy of floating body parts — the seed of the body's own unmaking. It was in viewing this sequential deconstruction that an accompanying component came to attention. Cropped at the waist and rising from (or sinking into) the ground plane, this figure mimicked the floundering gesture of the smallest held human-form and dispelled any illusion of the existence of a terra firma.

Moore's colleagues furnished equally ominous purports. In a bipartite sculpture Danielle Sauvé apparently dealt with the concept of "bad seed" both in terms of genetics and dissemination. Utilizing a steam



Serge Murphy, *Sans titre* (environment component), 1988.
Mixed media; 110 x 40 x 30 cm. (sight).
Photo : Roberto Pellegrinuzzi

treatment technique (lamellage) Sauvé floated a cross-section model of a mutant seed (its plumule inverted so that growth was turned back into the embryonic centre) on wooden stylized gusting wind and tossing wave. In the companion piece a debris-scattered sheet of water swept over a bundle of saplings brought to ground. Cellular miscombination or environmental mismatch signaled eminent early demise.

Louise Viger and Ginette Legaré became preoccupied with avian imagery. The former experimented with duplicating apparatus utilized by local craftsmen (specifically a cutting machine that produced six likenesses of a traced original) in the mass production of laminated, pre-tinted, decoy-like forms. These teardrop-shaped bodies, surmounted on candlestick-pedestals, evoked a paradoxical double reading — at once the mother symbol (fuel) and the spirit (combustion) of a sacred flame.

Legaré focussed on a single contour/perspective of the bird — not a silhouette of graceful flight or dramatic outstretched wing, but a dorsal view in repose. The bird's streamlined body was metamorphosed into a dart — a projectile destined to plummet and impact.

Françoise Sullivan was, as well, initially preoccupied with waterfowl, painting studies of flight patterns over nearby islands. The workshop environment, however, lured the artist to a career-first — the execution of a sculptural series in wood. Following a *modus operandi* not antithetical to that of the celebrated "Cycle crétois", Sullivan "collaged" sections of log into "patchworks" of anthropomorphic creatures. Where some of Marcel Duchamp's early works of analogous imbrication were referred to as "explosions in a shingle factory", radiating the ideology of the avant-garde, Sullivan's current (de)constructions must be considered as the inverse — a "postmodern" implosion back into a standard modernist strategy, that of displaying the dynamics of realization.

Finally with the oeuvre of Serge Murphy and Steven Curtin we realize the dark sign of the prophecy of "a disappearing body". Murphy gathered riverbank debris (read : evolutionary detritus) and incorporated it into numerous, whimsical, small-scale assemblages — ironic reformulations of our "throw-away" society. Like bits of commemorative jetsam, tossing in the wake of ultramodern technomania, Murphy's sculptures provided the solicitude of a post-scriptum.

Curtin's architectonic works exemplified a much reported recent loss or abandon of reality. Three towers (in pine, cedar, and oak) existed as aberrant constructions of the house rendered physically and visually inaccessible. There were no entrances (no doors, no stairs); only peep-hole openings which permitted a glimpse into illusory interiors of multiplied and shifting dimension and perspective. The observer was left with a sense of directionless that effectively underlined the semantic instability of our present historical moment.

History is a continuum. *Histoires de bois* was an incomplete project. It nonetheless "made me drunketh with (its) wormwood". (Shakespeare)

Allan Pringle

NOTES

1. Witness the Musée d'art contemporain's *Les Temps chauds* (June 1 — September 11, 1988). The widespread employ of wood is perhaps the single most evident aspect of the exhibition. David Moore, Michel Saulnier, and Christiane Gauthier continue as Quebec's frontrunners in the utilization of the medium, particularly in a "purist" (i.e. truth to material) mode. Roland Poulin also uses wood exclusively but in a more incidental manner. Martha Townsend shows wooden sculptures for the first time. Dominique Blain, Andrew Dutkewych, Pierre Granche, Gilles Mihalcean, and Danielle Sauvé all underline or reference the obdurate identity of wood in some key sculptural component. Even the Carresque landscape of Sylvie Bouchard depends upon the weathered wooden planks beneath a transparent watercolour wash to manufacture "effect".
2. *Histoires de Bois* was organized jointly by Johanne Blanchette, Jean-Pierre Bourgault, Jacques Doyon, Roberto Pellegrinuzzi, and Michel Saulnier. Doyon functioned as guest-curator/essayist for the Galerie Optica exhibition.