

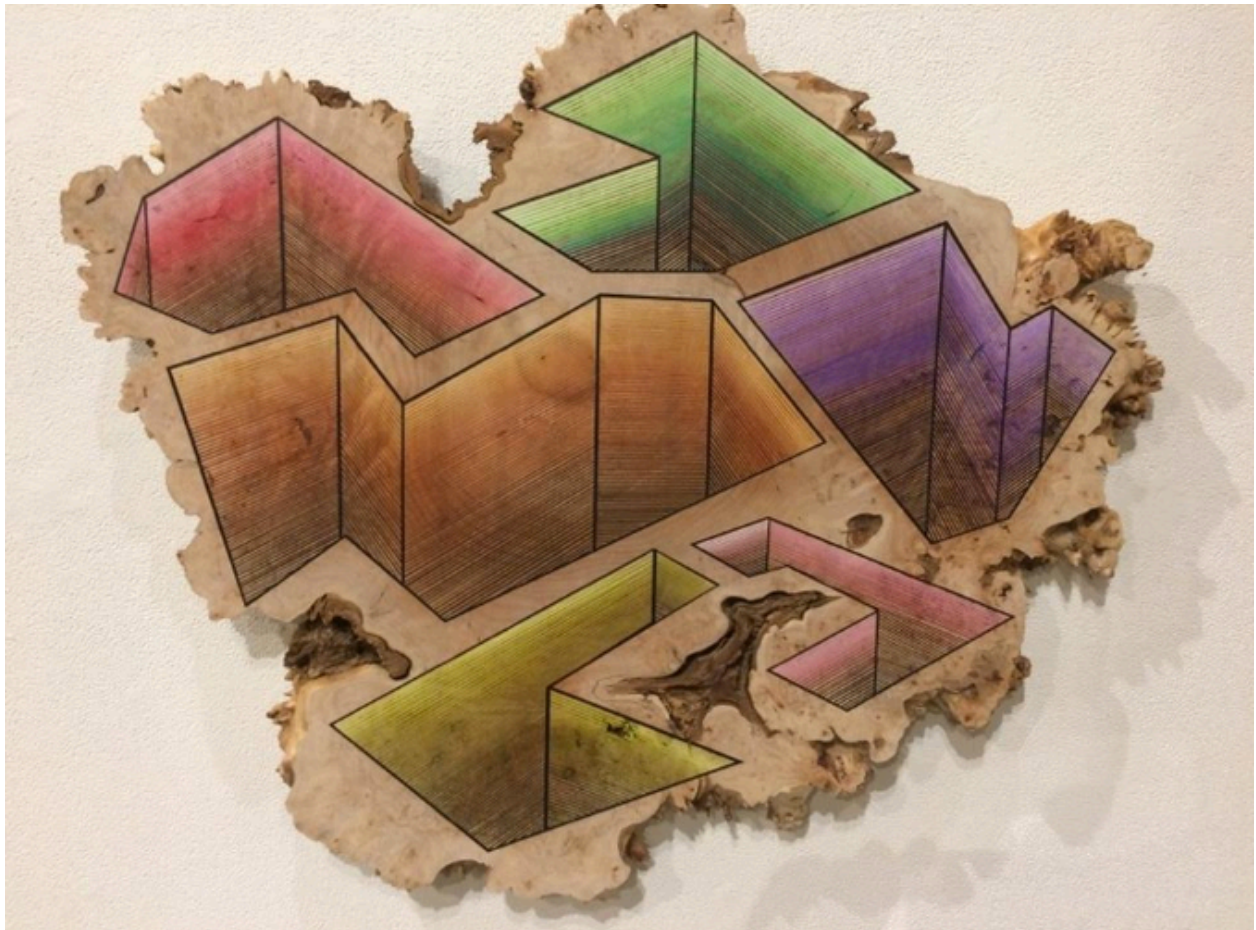
MORGAN LEHMAN

534 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011

SouthCoastTODAY

Exhibit brings together stunning and diverse wood works

By Don Wilkinson on August 17, 2017



We Dug Our Own Holes by Jason Middlebrook

*“Let me bring you songs from the wood: to make you feel better than you could know.” —
Jethro Tull*

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Currently at the Art Complex Museum in Duxbury, there is an exhibition extolling wood as an artistic medium, inspirational spark and an almost spiritual calling.

Organized by guest curators Donna Dodson (she of the Route 18 “Cinderella Seagull” nonsensical controversy of last summer) and her husband sculptor Andy Moerlein, “Wood as Muse” features 11 artists who utilize wood in decidedly non-utilitarian ways to produce a series of stunning works.

Dodson notes, “Each artist has an affection for wood that comes from a personal place. In fine art, the mastery of materials and craft must serve the aesthetics of the work.” In an era in which much art seems to be produced with twine, a hot glue gun, and crossed fingers, it is refreshing to see a true commitment to quality material and artisanry.

Cape Cod sculptor Mike Wright’s “natura morta” series reconsiders paintings from the early Provincetown Modernists. With “After Kenneth Stubbs’ Red Tabletop, White Window,” Wright references the elements of his Provincetown predecessor’s 1952 painting and projects them off the wall. The second dimension becomes the third, and the once-flat tabletop and window frame juts out with carefully considered composition. Three green spheres, perhaps meant to be Granny Smith apples, complete it.

Boston sculptor and architect Martin Ulman presents a series of pedestal-mounted assemblages depicting events from World War II Europe, particularly the Holocaust. Using wood trim, toy trains and track, chair parts and a waffle maker, his “Swiss Bank” also features tiny Swiss flags and swastikas, and does not shy away from the despicable neutrality and its implications.

Amy Archambault’s site specific installation utilizes blond, white and brown molding, as well as enamel paint, carpet and assorted hardware to create a playful take on a carnival shooting gallery. Caulking guns take the place of the arcade pistols and the targets are handmade red centered bullseyes.

Colored pencils and Ticonderoga #2 yellow pencils (complete with eraser nubs) are the wood medium of Jen Maestre. The South African born artist, now a Maynard, Massachusetts resident, cuts pencils into one-inch lengths, drills miniscule holes through them and then sews them together with a beading technique known as peyote stitch. They are astonishingly intricate. Her “Naiad” appears dangerous with highly sharpened points, but beautiful with bright blue, green and teal.

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Vanessa German is an African-American artist living in Pittsburgh. She creates complex mixed media assemblages that reference what the Urban Dictionary refers to as “Negrobilia,” the collections of black culture that dates back the slave trade, include Mammy figures with exaggerated ethnic features, lawn jockeys, Little Black Sambo and the like.

She confronts the ugliness and brutality of these collections, while recognizing (in her words) “complicity and complexity.” Her appropriation of a vile offshoot of Americana seeks, with some success, to make the symbols her own and find beauty and reconciliation within. “Play Things” features a young black girl — her lips are cowrie shells — wearing a dress made from an American flag. She holds a tiny mirror. Reflection matters.

Sculptor Pat Keck’s sculptures and kinetic dioramas conjure up Punch and Judy, sideshow freaks, and animated films like Tim Burton’s *The Nightmare Before Christmas*.” Her somewhat funny, somewhat creepy wooden beings almost seem like they could come to life to be one’s friend or one’s worst bad dream.

Keck’s “Seated Giantess” with a blonde ropey pageboy, scarlet lips and fingernails is comfortable ensconced in an enormous chair. And if she stood up, she’d be near 20 feet tall.

The show is rounded out by Breon Dunigan’s re-purposed upholstered furniture made to resemble a hunter’s animal head trophies (if hunters stalked sofas and loveseats); Thomas Beale’s cerebral and sensual “found wood” objects (see “Venus”); Jason Middlebrook’s lovingly detailed and exquisitely patterned wall mounted forms; Moerlein’s three-dimensional musings on wood and nature itself, and Dodson’s ever-increasing pantheon of animal goddesses.

“Wood as Muse” is on display at the Art Complex Museum, 189 Alden Street, Duxbury until Sept. 3.

*Don Wilkinson is a painter and art critic who lives in New Bedford. Contact him at Don.Wilkinson@gmail.com. His reviews run each week in *Coastin’*.*