

CHARTERED  
WOOD



INTRODUCTION by April Kingsley

## **CARVED WOOD**

**Leonard Cave**

**Bill Hochhausen**

**Ron Mehlman**

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The Sculpture Center  
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New York City 10021

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## INTRODUCTION by April Kingsley

Wood is a material with a mystique that probably goes back to the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden. All wood carvers feel its inherent power, no matter how differently they respond. Trees mediate between heaven and earth and act as a passageway for the movement of vital substances through the earth's crust. We echo the tree's structure, our feet reach into the earth like its roots, our spinal column supporting our upper torso like the tree trunk supports its umbrella of leafy branches - and sculptors have traditionally emphasized this resemblance when carving wood. But trees are also nature's architecture, their cantillevered branches offering shelter, and the tree trunk is the basic unit of our architecture as well. Stone columns and even steel "I" beams are descendants of the tree trunk. Modern sculptors explore both frames of reference, and particularly relish the added implications of strength that come with these architectural connotations.

The three artists in this exhibition are more involved with making architectural references than human ones, but hints of the figure appear nevertheless. Ron Mehlman's NARAGANSETT RUN, for example, combines the post and lintel structure of doorways with a twisting organic form which seems vaguely human. Certain of Leonard Cave's sculptures remind one of seated figures from some angles despite their open-centered compositions, and Bill Hochhausen's tall serpentine VENUS PHASE conveys the feeling of contrapposto, or the "S" curve in a Gothic Madonna, even though it makes overt reference to Brancusi's ENDLESS COLUMN.



Brancusi, of course, is the principle source of inspiration for all subsequent wood carvers. He too mixed architectural and figural references in his work, and even in a single work. His studio was full of chunky beams and blocks of wood which he used as bases for stone or bronze pieces (as well as for carving), stacking them up along a single vertical axis crowned at top by "the piece." Brancusi's constructive attitude toward wood as building block is as important to contemporary wood carvers as his purity or truth to materials was to his contemporaries. Henry Moore, clearly inspired by Brancusi in the 1920s, struggled with the material. "To begin with I didn't much like working in wood," he said. "You can't knock big chunks off a piece of wood - you have to saw them - but you can only saw in a straight line. And the finishing of wood is (or was) a slower process because you have to cut across the grain instead of down it. Otherwise it splits." Later on, when he became proficient as a wood carver he came to love it, even for very large pieces. "What wood can do that even stone doesn't is still give you the sense of it having grown," he says, and he has always stressed the grain of the wood as if to underline the idea of the material's aliveness.

Henry Moore has also stated that trees give the "ideal" for wood sculpture - "an upward twisting movement" - and even though he rarely went upward, he does explore the twisting forms of tree trunks and limbs in many works. Of the three artists here, Bill Hochhausen probably comes closest to Moore's vision of sculpture as it aligns with Brancusi's. THE EVE AND ADAM CANON, for instance, holistically maintains the original form of the tree trunk while incorporating both the chunky (masculine?) rectilinear nature of wood and its cylindrical (female?) roundness. The tri-partite divisions relate to the three places of axial shift in the human body (shoulders, hips, and



knees) which African wood carvers so often stress, yet the triangles and spheres need have no extra-geometrical implications to be sculpturally interesting. Nature's rhythms are not only expressed in the repeated diminishment of sphere size in each three-unit section and the flow of planes through those spheres, but also in the tool-marks that inflect the entire surface of the piece. Henry Moore once noted the extraordinary resemblance between ripples in the sand on a beach and the gouge-marks in wood carving. But it is the entirety of Hochhausen's conception, even more than any of its parts, that is so in tune with nature. All natural matter is water-permeated or has resulted from the action of water, and water always tends to return to the spherical water drop. Gravity's constant pull on that drop turns all water action into a spiral movement, which is why we have curling waves, conch shells, and meandering rivers.

Humankind tends to work against nature, building straight piers and bulwarks, roads and skyscrapers. We turn the cylinder of the tree into a four-sided beam, then slice it into flat boards. Instead of fusing these two antithetical concepts into a single image the way Hochhausen does, Ron Mehlman forces them into uneasy co-existence, the way Picasso did the real spoon on the painted bronze GLASS OF ABSINTHE. Mehlman juxtaposes chip-marked, wriggling curvilinear units with perfectly straight rectangular masses that seem machined. The lively twisting forms appear to be wrenching the straight units out of alignment, their gusto destroying the equilibrium of rational order. In his big NARAGANSETT RUN the angular gestural thrusts of the central unit is framed by a squared-off archway which seems to constrain its muscular energy. But two somewhat eccentric units attached to that arch echo



the idiosyncratic quality of the central unit and reinforce or support it, the way John and Mary do Christ on either side at the Crucifixion.

Leonard Cave uses wood constructively, pushing its architectural implications and its flexibility when unconstrained by the form of the tree trunk. He assembles his pieces out of hunks of different wood, bolting and gluing them together in thick, ungainly laminations. Each different wood's characteristics are revealed by the way he handles their surfaces. Using traditional chisels, gouges, and rasps, but also employing electric drills with spur bits and even a chain saw, he attacks the wood so vigorously his action can be seen as a destruction or violation of the purity of wood's natural state. But this very act of aggression also functions to release the inherent nature or natural condition of the material - the penetration is a revelatory process. Cave says that this "somewhat chaotic handling of the forms keeps them in a state of continuous animation, or restlessness, in which its past, present, and future are simultaneously expressed." His textural treatment of the surface is not an exterior application to a form (like stain or wax polish), "but an integral part of the form that reveals its character."

The work of Cave, Hochhausen and Mehlman lends credence to the ancient, primitive notion of the spirit of the tree continuing to inhabit the wood long after its been cut down. While they don't sprinkle tobacco offerings around the base of the tree like the Amerindians, or worship a gnarled root like the Chinese, they do respond to their material more spiritually than say, a welder might respond to a sheet of aluminum. The tensions and forces at work within a given



piece of wood - evident to the sculptor who knows his or her material intimately - are transferred to the resultant sculpture, whether intentionally or simply instinctively. The life the tree lived is imprinted on the form the sculptor senses and reveals; the tree receives another life.