

KURT ERNEST STEGER SCULPTURES

REVIEW

Kurt Ernest Steger has been taking quantum leaps in his development as an artist. This young sculptor's current exhibit in the main gallery at S.MOVA creates a magical environment focusing particularly on several new series of works; carved and fitted wooden pieces; paper covered sculptures; and combinations of these two forms.

Steger grew up near San Diego, where he became a woodworker, building cabinets and fine carpentry projects by commission. His personal taste leaned toward plainness and a directness in craftsmanship that is a common theme in much American art. This tendency grew more sophisticated as he worked with Green and Green-like designs from the Arts and Crafts Movement; he developed the skills and subtlety associated with Japanese esthetic which influenced that style. Several years after moving to Sonoma County he began making non-functional work, and had his first exhibit in 1993. With his traditional craft training Steger shares a background with some of the major sculptors of the 20th century: Constantin Brancusi worked for a while in a Viennese furniture factory; as a teenager, Julio Gonzalez was apprenticed in his father's metalsmithing shop; David Smith worked as a factory machinist and welder during World War II.

Steger's first art works, in a series entitled "Altars to the Earth" used exotic woods left over from furniture projects, all highly polished and with fine finishes. A strong ecological bent led him to focus on natural media. Typical pieces were open wooden structures in the center of which uncarved stones were

"floated" on wires. Balance and proportionality, among the strong points in Steger's furniture design, were characteristic of this series. They had an overall Japanese look and shared some similarities to works by the Japanese-American artist Isamu Noguchi (1904-1988), whose career continues to be an influence.

Steger's next series combined architectural and ritual forms. In one such work he left his tool marks in the roughly textured walnut wood that was shaped into trays that he filled with bones and stones. The trays were stacked in the shape of funeral pyres, with a fire pit in the center in which incense or white sage was burned in what seems, in hindsight, like a rite of passage. Thereafter, phoenix-like, his "Walking Stick Project" developed.

These were mostly slender vertical wooden pieces formed from eucalyptus saplings, and were made in male/female pairs. Each one was carefully curved and assembled, and were partially painted. Some had stones attached near the tops suggesting heads, arms or wings; others had loops and hollows to outline negative space as a formal element. When exhibited in 1997 at the Cultural Arts Council in Santa Rosa most of the Walking Sticks were suspended from the ceiling.

The works in this S.MOVA exhibit were mostly produced at Steger's current home and studio in Grass Valley. The all-wood pieces display an intriguing variety of formats, but most have bilateral symmetry, suggestive of a relationship to the human body. Neophyte and Long Pod, one vertical and one horizontal, are solid carved and assembled forms that have circular symmetry perpendicular to their long axes; their bases, however, reduce the symmetry of the whole. Dialogue is also solid, but where the center points meet in a "kiss" is the

key stone of an open arch. The play of structures in that work is based on a wonderful combination of woods: the rough incense cedar that forms the bodies of the piece has natural slots that Steger uses to indicate organs, perhaps eyes or ears, on one side, and he laminated dense purple heart wood to create the smooth, thin meeting point. Navigator and Ogatha, by contrast, open forms dominated by the presence of taut long elements pulled by wooden joints and artificial sinews toward the base. Both are evocative of fine instruments, perhaps for navigation or musical purposes. Both also seem to refer to the inherent tension of male female pairing.

In 1998, Steger began making sculptures like model airplane wings or fuselages, using 1/4 inch plywood to create open forms that were covered in layers of wet paper. Once dried, the shrunken paper indicates the ribs and struts of the underlying structures. Some of these works are painted over to give a matte finish; others have been coated with melted wax and then with acrylic paint, resulting in one instance in a leathery cover and in another, a metallic surface. These pieces bear resemblances to works of the minimalist American sculptor Martin Puryear (born 1941). Their apparent hollowness, bilateral format, and closed curves are biomorphic elements. Indeed, the shape and appearance of Orphan Pod and Vigorous Pod suggest microscopic primitive organisms expanded to human size. Steger's creativity includes considerable wit: The papered portion of Vigorous Pod is reminiscent of the classic symmetrical Studebaker car that appeared ready to move either forward or backwards; but it seems that its 100 "legs," pointing in every direction, are uncertain as to what path, if any, to take. In the past, biomorphic forms have been used by surrealists, such as Miro and Ernst, for sexual inferences in Steger's sculptures allows the long, slow surface curves to develop a mysterious, sensual quality. These works invite touching, even caressing.

The pieces that combine solid wood elements with paper covered parts are engagingly enigmatic. Mutual Fate may be the ship of fate anxious for its voyage to continue. Sealed bags that dangle on strings from rafters suggest the prize that would be at risk in the adventure. By contrast Monolith is an arched monument of firm stability. Its array of black-bordered broad rectangles in the paper covered center appears as if it could contain, like the Rosetta Stone, a secret of the ages. Ocher paint unifies the surface; the whole form is austerey beautiful.

This exhibit will last through February 18. At 4 pm that day there will be a concluding ceremony at the S.MOVA gallery involving a professional dancer who will use Ogatha as her partner. It is interesting to note that Isamu Noguchi is well known for having designed set pieces and costumes over a period of two decades, 1935 to 1955, for dances produced by major choreographers - Martha Graham, Merce Cunningham, and George Balanchine. Thus dancing his work off the gallery stage Kurt Steger tells us that, as he moves forward, he will continue his creative dialogue with the past.

By Robert Berg copyright Feb. 16 2001

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