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Arts

SUNDAY, MARCH 11, 2001

The Sculptor's Swell

*Martin Puryear, Giving
His Alluring Woodworks
An Elegant Avian Aura*

By PAUL RICHARD
Special to The Washington Post

Martin Puryear's "Alien Huddle" is not a throwaway sculpture. This one's going to last: 100 years from now, I bet you, people will admire that object of red cedar as much as I do now.

Bulbous, basic, beautiful, it is one of 12 big pieces in Puryear's exhibit at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. There are different ways to locate its anomalous position in the history of objects. Extend the long clean art line of geometrical abstraction and you'll see how far ahead it is. Trace another older path through American art history—the one that curves its way from the prints of J.J. Audubon, imaginer of birds, through the duck decoys still carved on Maryland's Eastern Shore—and you will get to it as well.

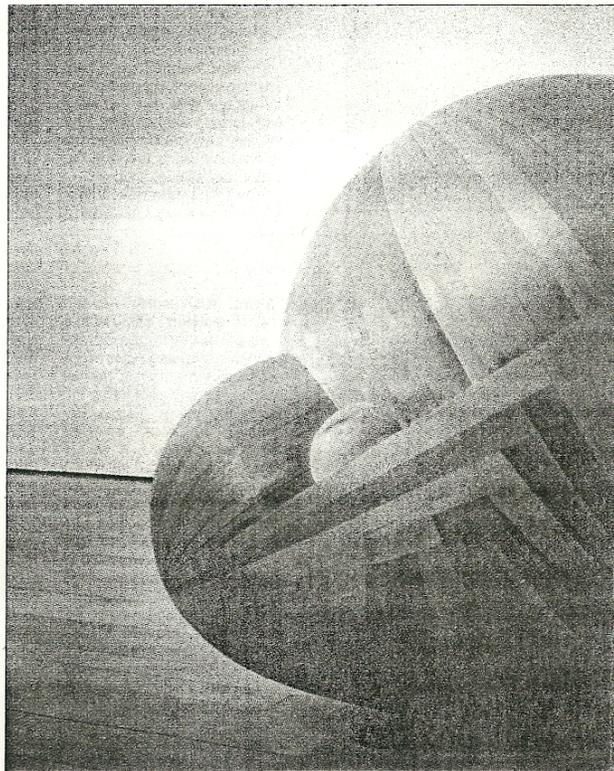
For Puryear is not only a constructivist reductionist. He's also a sort of a bird shaman.

Elegant and buoyant and 25 feet long, his 1989 sculpture "Lever #2," on loan to the exhibit from the Baltimore Museum of Art, is an abstract distillation of suave, beak-dipping swaniness. A blacker, big-eyed piece on view, borrowed from the Detroit Institute of Arts, suggests the hooting of an owl. Puryear used to study falconry. "Alien Huddle," too, is partly avian in aura. It bulges with suggestions of eggs nestled in nests.

Here's another of its pleasures: It declares itself well made.

At a time when other sculptors hurriedly deploy I-

See PURYEAR, G6, Col. 1



Puryear's five-foot-tall "Alien Huddle," which bulges with suggestions of eggs nestled in nes

A Bent for Fine Curves

PURYEAR, *From GI*

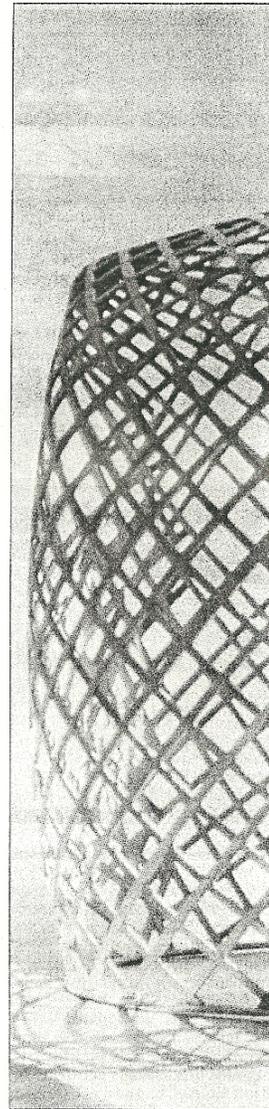
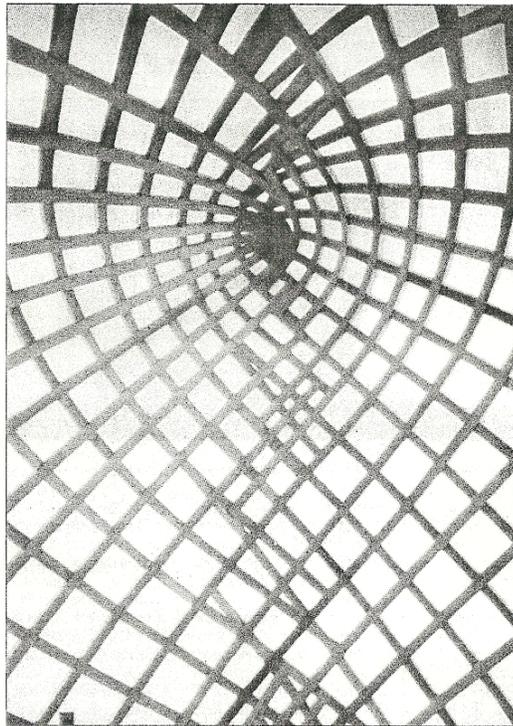
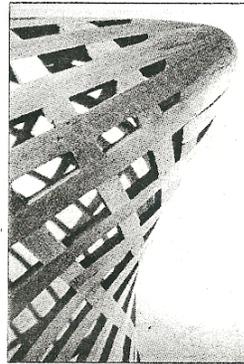
beams, logos, Lycra, television monitors and stuff found on the street, Puryear's are the deeper skills of a lute-maker, a boatwright. The slender curving triangles, the cedar laminations and "Alien Huddle's" surfaces all recall where they were fashioned—in a place of planes and whetstones, and shininess and sharpness, of blades as keen as sushi knives, and fine-toothed Swedish saws.

Though carpentry may not be the highest of the arts, there is a certain noble rightness in a slender lathe-turned spindle or a perfect piece of dovetailing. Puryear's modern sculptures, unlike so many others, offer to the eye and hand just such satisfactions.

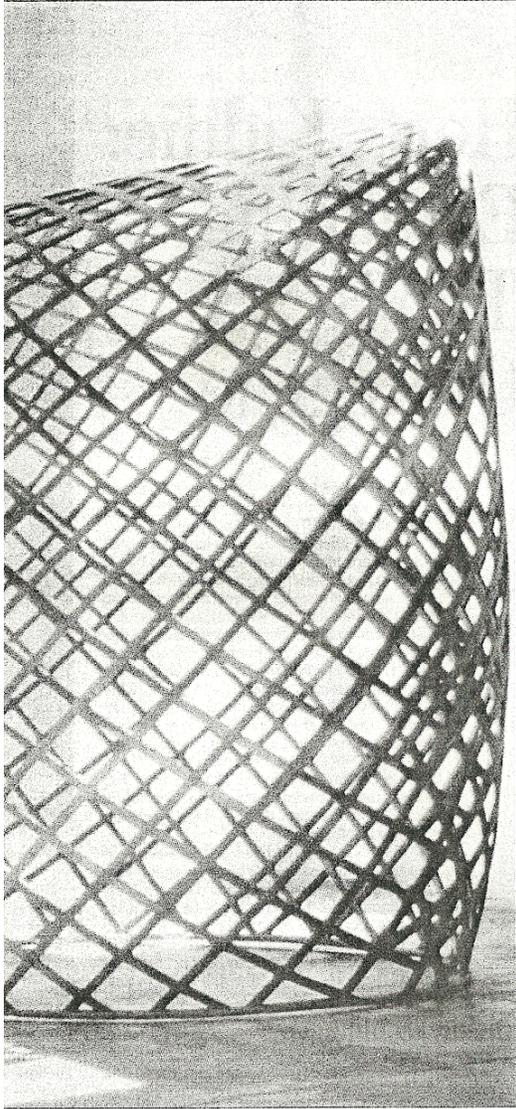
His woodworking is finely gauged, intelligent, efficient. It's sure but never prissy.

When he glued his bending laminations to "Alien Huddle's" skeleton he stapled them in place, waited for the glue to dry, and then removed the staples. Look closely and you'll see the tiny holes they've left. (You'll also catch the cedar-whiff of newly sharpened pencils.) The punctures form no pattern—though they do come in pairs. They lend the warm red wood a sort of a patina. Sprinkled on that dome as if across the heavens they start to look like stars.

Gaze on them a while and the fecund evocations that "Alien Huddle" summoned up at first—of eggs, pregnancies and nestings—begin to swell and open. Now mingled with the echoes of lute-strummings and bird song is the music of the spheres.



Nearly eight-foot-tall "Brunnhilde," with details: A latticework of laminated cedar suggesting the air-filled lungs of some b



PHOTOS BY KATHERINE WETZEL—VIRGINIA MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

agnerian soprano, or the upward pointing of her helmet's horns.

Finding the Faraway

Such mind-drifts are a constant gift of Martin Puryear's art.

Many of the sculptures in the Richmond exhibition are relatively new. All of them were fashioned, carefully and slowly, in the last dozen years. None looks the least old-fashioned, all feel up to date, but the thoughts they breed are old ones—night-sounds-in-the-wood thoughts, smoothness-of-an-egg thoughts.

What would it be like to look out at the world through the image-breaking, faceted, blank eye of a housefly? How tangled is a thicket? How is one to visualize the shadowed sacred power beyond the grille of the confessional?

Answers to such questions are offered by this show.

Puryear loves the faraway. He's lived in Lapland and East Africa. He's slept in huts and shanties. He's canoeed through Alaska (with paddles he carved himself). His studio is in the countryside in upstate New York. "I think of moving," he once said, "as a kind of saving grace," and something of this distance is felt always in his art.

It doesn't deal in the voguish, in grievance art, for instance, or fashion or celebrity. It is unafraid of beauty. It feels utterly un-urban. And somehow torn from time. To absorb a Puryear sculpture is to leave the twittering here and now.

What makes his work so eerie is that it feels inhabited. It seems to contain presences. This is, of course, old magic. Pygmalion in the myth made cold marble come alive. The seated Lincoln on the Mall, far more than a chunk of stone, seems sleepless in his pondering. Most modernist abstraction shuns that tone of wizardry. Puryear's art retrieves it.

His sculptures have bodies, or suggestions of bodies. They also have complexions. The surfaces presented—of painted and unpainted wood (basswood, cypress, cedar, ash), of steel mesh and tar—make one think of skin.

Sometimes works of art transcend the stuff they're made of. What's required is belief. These days Puryear hesitates to speak about his sculpture. But he once acknowledged that "if you believe strongly you can pump life into materials. You can, you really can, see them lifting off the ground like some hot-air balloon."

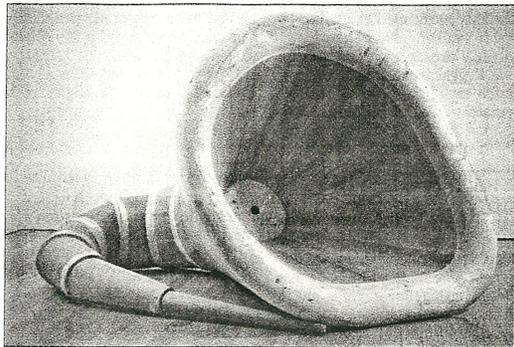
The sculpture he calls "Housefly" (1996-2000) is hollow, dark, translucent, insistently alert, and more than eight feet high. Rising from a thick



BY KATHERINE WETZEL—VIRGINIA MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

black coil on the floor is a hollow, rounded shape that is, I guess, the insect's head, for it is mostly eye. Or eyes. The eyes are oval and inhuman. Each has been constructed of 19 separate gridded panes of green and gray-green bubbled glass. Move your head but half an inch and those big eyes seem to follow.

The lightest of the pieces here is among the most impressive. "Brunhilde" (1998-2000) suggests a goat-skin water bag suddenly inflated, or perhaps the air-filled lungs of some



BY SARAH WELLS—COURTESY MCKEE GALLERY, NEW YORK

Puryear's "Plenty's Boast," above, and the tar, wire, steel, cedar and particle board "Untitled." Both are more than six feet tall.

Wagnerian soprano, or the upward pointing of her helmet's horns. It is sort of like a wood balloon. Its thin skin is a latticework, both ordered and irregular, of countless little lengths of laminated cedar. How he figured out their curving shapes, and fitted them together, is anybody's guess.

Puryear's Purview

We used to call him "Washington's Martin Puryear." We don't anymore. He's well beyond that now.

To make it as an artist is anything but easy. The competition is stiff, allegiances don't last, the fashions keep

on shifting. The obstacles are endless.

Somehow Martin Puryear paid them no attention. He simply rose right past them.

One of seven children raised in old Southwest (before they cleared the neighborhood), he didn't come from privilege. His mother taught school in Northeast (at Eckington). His father worked in the Post Office. After Catholic University, and two years in the Peace Corps (in Sierra Leone), he began to study art in Stockholm, at the Swedish Royal Academy. Henrietta Ehram, the longtime Washington art dealer known as Henri, gave him his first solo show in 1972.

After that, or so it seems in retrospect, he went straight to the top.

He'll be 60 in May. These days he is seen as among the most accomplished sculptors in America.

This isn't really in dispute. Among the smart, important watchers who scan the land for talent, it's a matter of consensus.

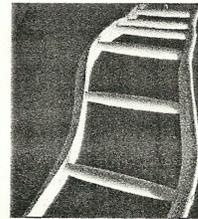
People who hand out major grants and honors—Yale University's honorary degrees, the Guggenheim Fellowships, the MacArthur Foundation's "genius" grants, the artist-in-residence posts at the American Academy in Rome, the Skowhegan Medal for Sculpture, and membership in the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters—all have turned to Puryear.

In 1989 he was his country's sole representative in the Sao Paulo Biennial—where he was awarded the grand prize.

His mid-career museum retrospective was organized by the Art Institute of Chicago and was seen here at the Hirshhorn, and at museums in Philadelphia and Los Angeles.

If you want a major Puryear now (he doesn't make that many) you will have to wait. Collectors stand in line for a chance to buy his objects. And when at last their time arrives their purchases will cost them \$500,000 each.

But, after all, his work's not bluffed. His is not an art of shortcuts. It's as powerful as ever, as peculiarly condensed, as well wrought, as poetic.



BY KATHERINE WETZEL—COURTESY MCKEE GALLERY

Detail of Puryear's "Ladder for Booker T. Washington."

PURYEAR POWER

"Martin Puryear" at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts will remain on view in Richmond through May 27. His show—of 12 big sculptures, all meticulously crafted—is sponsored by the Truland Foundation. Margo Crutchfield is the curator. The museum, at 2800 Grove Ave., is closed Mondays. For information call (804) 340-1400.

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