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A Man, Stands Alone...

Tyler Gaston

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A MAN, STANDS ALONE...

A Thesis

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

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Indiana University of Pennsylvania

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A man, stands alone... is an exhibition of sculptures examining the conditions of mortality, utilizing the tree as a metaphor for the periods of hardship humans withstand. The minimalistic wooden forms allude to the human figure, embracing surface cracks and other natural defects. The incorporation of metal and concrete place the abstract forms into a moment of conflict or healing. As a sculptor, I use these materials to create visual situations which invite the viewer to contemplate the challenges encountered in life.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to dedicate the work in *A man, stands alone...* to my son, Townes.

Fatherhood has brought me both the darkest and brightest days in my 31 years walking this earth. Without Townes I never would have experienced the joys of being a dad, and my passion for creating art would have never been uncovered. I would like to thank my family, particularly my mother Donna Soriano for her patience and support in me pursuing a career in the arts, and my grandmother Betty Gaston for the grit and backbone that I carry with me today.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

There is a spiritual and metaphorical relationship that exists between people and trees. This relationship is built on similarities in physiological processes as well as philosophical theories which are a definitive part of my artistic practice. In affirming these connections between our species, I merge ideas of the ailing human condition with the life of a tree.

I harvest trees and begin creating a sculpture with the wood in a raw state. After cutting the log to size I remove the bark and exterior surface, often in pursuit of the heartwood. I predominantly view the log as a cylinder in which I extract a minimalistic form from within using reductive processes and tools such as the chainsaw and angle grinder. By removing natural facets of the tree that have been informed by nature, I seek to force my perspective and narrative onto the material.

The wooden forms I create typically range in scale from medium to large with the goal of establishing a relationship between a sculpture and the human body. I view these sculptures as abstract representations of the human figure which seek to bridge the connection between people and trees. As the wood dries and moves, large surface cracks emerge. I embrace these defects as a natural flaw, similar to a scar or the wrinkles in our skin. I use a variety of surface treatments ranging from rough chainsaw marks to smoothly finished surfaces. Occasionally I will burn the material with a torch to evoke a sense of death or decay.

I often use secondary materials in the composition of the sculptures, such as concrete or metal. These materials generally perform an action on the wooden forms, placing them into a situation of conservation or distress. Concrete and metal share characteristics of rigidity and permanence, establishing a presence which is superior to the durability of wood. The integration

of these materials speaks to the conditions of mortality and the barriers we are guaranteed to face throughout life.

As human beings there are certain aspects of life that cause damage. Whether it is emotional damage that is inflicted upon us by others or a self-sustained injury that requires months of rehabilitation, there are many stages in life which require us to adapt or react. We cope with these situations and uncertainties as means of self-preservation and healing because we know that life is only temporary. From these events some of us heal faster and stronger than our neighbors. Others crumble under the fragility of life. But the fact that we are all mortal beings causes us to periodically pause and reflect on these hardships as a means of understanding life and death.

Trees are not that different than human beings. In some instances they share the same internal processes and are vulnerable to damage that can be life threatening. They often work together and help one another when conditions around them are trying and difficult. Despite these conditions they fight for survival and longevity in life just as we do.

Through my creative practice I investigate the relationship between people and trees, with a dedication to the circumstances in life that serve as testament to our true will. The living nature of the material and the organic wooden forms serve as abstract representations of the human figure. Concrete and metal often act as rigid materials which perform an action within the composition of the work, whether it be debilitating or through an act of sustenance.

CHAPTER II

MAKING AS AN ACT OF SELF UNDERSTANDING

I began working with wood in the winter of 2013, not as an artist but as a curious young man seeking fulfillment in life. At the time I did not understand why I was interested in the material but I felt a connection with it. I did not come from a childhood with much exposure to the arts or crafts. My father was a coalminer later turned electrician, and my mother sold insurance. Besides the art education I had received in a rural high school, making things was a relatively new experience for me. Over the next few years I began taking short duration courses which strengthened my interests and enhanced my skills with wood. It became evident to me that making things with my hands was somehow feeding my soul.

Despite my growing interests in woodworking I encountered much resistance from friends and family. I felt misunderstood and often times discouraged for not pursuing a “real career”, even though I had already done that earlier in my life. What people did not understand is that I was beginning to experience that personal fulfillment which I was searching for several years prior. The journey I was embarking on was one of personal growth and self-transformation, regardless of salary, job placement or other factors which motivate the careers of most individuals. For me it was, “Better to be hungry and cold, but spiritually nourished, than to feast by a blazing hearth with spiritual emptiness gnawing away from inside” (Korn 17).

Studying art has been a life changing experience for me. It has taught me a lot about myself and how I perceive the world around me. I have learned patience and persistence, but more importantly I have learned how to think visually. During the process of making, there is a level of personal engagement between the mind and the body that cannot be experienced while performing most other tasks. The periods of analysis and self-reflection that follow the process

of making are building blocks to achieving a higher level of intellectual thought and understanding.

As an artist, I believe the work is never done. Creating art is an act of self-understanding; a means to visualize the mind's thoughts, emotions and perceptions. Every creation has something to offer, to learn and to grow from, which informs the next. Making becomes a never ending process with the goal of fulfilling a vision. Depending upon the level of transparency within the work, "Anything I create becomes a doorway through which others can access my ideas and concerns, if they care to" (Korn 63). Art objects become channels of communication between our internal selves and the external world.

Objects bring meaning to the world in two ways: meaning assigned to them by the maker and the meaning assigned to them by the viewer. Korn explains that objects provide a sense of identity with regards to how they relate to personal experiences and through the emotions they instill:

Once an object is made, it becomes a physical fact of the universe, essentially unchanging in the scale of human time. To the human mind, where thoughts spring up unheralded only to vanish just as capriciously, the object becomes a memory device – a tablet on which the maker inscribes a complex of ideas so that he can have recourse to them for further thinking. (60)

Through the act of making we turn inward to promote growth within ourselves, both emotionally and spiritually. Creating art is about finding the inner truth which resides inside oneself and sharing that with others. Throughout my life I have battled many obstacles, both emotionally and physically. Difficult aspects of life have turned to inspiration. Art has become

a vehicle for me to further analyze the challenging experiences we encounter and how we cope with those situations in order to survive as mortal beings.

It is a universal philosophy that all people endure periods of hardship throughout their lives, which we must either persevere and overcome or submit to the vices which lead us to death. In seeking to better understand myself as an individual, I create art that is inspired by personal experience as a means to address subjects of mortality and human condition on a broader scale. As result, there is a bilateral relationship between the maker and the act of making. One informs the other and vice versa.

I now understand the connection I share with wood. When I encounter a forest of trees, I see a group of people. I see diversity, dominance, struggle and a number of other characteristics which define society among humans. I am attracted to wood because it is alive; it grows and decays just as we do. As an artist, my ideas are already present in the material and in the forest. I am simply intervening with the tree to add human perspective and experience into the equation.

CHAPTER III

TREE AS A METAPHOR

Trees are spiritual beings that are often recognized for their colossal presence and symbolism of life and growth. They possess a power that is far superior to ours as human beings. One of the oldest trees on earth located in Sweden is more than 9,500 years old (Wohlleben, vii). At this age, the history and knowledge that a tree accumulates throughout its lifetime is unfathomable.

The life of a tree shares many connections to human life, and for me as an artist these connections carry through in the materiality of wood. Like people each tree is different, having its own unique arrangement of wood fibers that correlate with its distinct history. There are many physiological processes that are native to the tree which relate to the bodily functions of human beings. Additionally, there are spiritual and philosophical aspects of a tree's life that are metaphorical to humans and how we exist on earth. For these reasons, I use wood in my sculptures as a stand-in for the body.

As human beings we communicate with others through various forms of language, primarily verbal and written. Through modern science it has been discovered that trees also communicate with each other in various ways, although the average passerby would never detect it. Trees are capable of communicating via the transmission of electrical, visual, and olfactory signals. New research also suggests that trees may be able to communicate by sound through faint vibrations in their root system (Wohlleben, 12-13).

Aiding in this intercommunication, scientists have discovered subsoil fungi interwoven between the root systems of trees which act as a fiber optic cable transmitting information and nutrients. There can be up to several miles of fungi in just a teaspoon of soil and over a hundred

different species attached to the roots of a single tree. Under these conditions, trees are much like a community of people that help one another in times of need. Sick trees are supported by the community and nourished until they recover because any gap in the canopy would invite further damage within the forest (Wohlleben, 4). Trees care for each other and the ones that are isolated live far shorter lives than those that are interconnected (Wohlleben, viii). The same holds true for humans in that, “Socially isolated adults are less likely to survive trauma and disease than those embedded in family and community” (Ehrenreich 193).

Outside of communication there are several other physiological processes that are native to both trees and humans, such as capillary action and osmosis. Capillary action aids in the flow of water in and out of cellular structures through very thin vessels. In trees this process supports the movement of water from the root system up through the trunk and throughout the branches and leaves (Wohlleben, 56-58). Within the human body, the flow of water through capillary action helps to rehydrate our cells and distribute critical vitamins and nutrients. Osmosis is another process in the human body in which water molecules flow between permeable cellular membranes, from cells with lower solute levels to cells with higher solute levels. Through this process concentrations of salt and glucose within the cells reach a level of equilibrium. In trees, “When the concentration of sugar in one cell is higher than in the neighboring cell, water flows through the cell walls into the more sugary solution until both cells contain the same percentage of water” (Wohlleben 57).

The exterior bark of a tree is also very comparable to the human skin. “Our skin is a barrier that protects our innermost parts from the outer world. It holds in fluids. It stops our insides from falling out. And all the while it releases and absorbs gas and moisture. In addition, it blocks pathogens that would just love to spread through our circulatory system” (Wohlleben

60). Bark performs a similar function with regards to trees. It holds in moisture and prevents the tree from drying out. Bark protects the cambium layer of the tree which is the sensitive, actively growing area located in between the bark and actual wood. Just as with a laceration of the skin, a tear in the bark of a tree can cause pain and discomfort. Trees are also constantly renewing their bark by shedding cells as the mass of the tree grows, just as our skin regenerates as we shed skin cells every day (Wohlleben, 61). Similar to skin disorders, trees are susceptible to disease in the bark which invite bark flies or cause moist wounds that are favorable to harmful bacteria. Believe it or not, tree bark is also sensitive to UV radiation which can cause cracking (Wohlleben, 64).

As humans we nurture and protect our offspring just as trees do. The research of Dr. Suzanne Simard, professor of forest ecology at the University of British Columbia, led to discoveries in how trees are believed to share maternal instincts similar to those in humans. Parent trees typically live together with their children in the forest and they are capable of regulating the growth of their offspring through shade. Slow growth is an important factor for young trees if they are to live to be an old age (Wohlleben, 33). Slow growth results in a shorter, wider trunk whereas fast growth results in a taller, slender trunk. Similar to a child, infant trees expend a lot of energy in their early years of growth. Their internal cells suck up food, oxygen and space as they mature. Trees struggle with one another as they fight for local resources. Like the human ego, they strive for competition in order to enhance their performance and push out other species. They must extend their branches and widen their trunks for stability in supporting their ever increasing weight and mass.

From childhood to adolescence and even into adulthood, we are constantly learning from our mistakes. This occurs in trees too, but it is still not fully understood how. Trees are capable

of learning from experience just like people. They adapt to situations of pain and hardship, suggesting that the tree is somehow capable of memory (Wohlleben, 82). If a tree uses up too much water and dries up during a severe drought period, it learns to reserve and ration water the next time (Wohlleben, 44-45). Much is still unknown in medical science with regards to the complexities of the human mind and body. This is also the case for trees. The root system is a good candidate for being an organ comparable to the human brain, but it is still unknown where exactly a tree is able to store experiences and memory.

The specific lifespan of a tree is also largely unknown. These statistics are about as useless on trees as they are on human beings. Our expectation of the age we will live to be can change at any given time (Wohlleben, 155). Bacteria, fungi, and pests always pose a threat to the lifespan of a tree. Aside from the diseases caused by these foreign invaders, trees suffer many injuries throughout their lives. Side by side, they fight through harsh conditions as a will to survive, waiting the day when they will come crashing to the forest floor.

Like humans, trees often withstand difficult conditions and are subject to periods of struggle and repair. Trees are often able to heal themselves when they suffer a small insect attack or wound in the bark. However, when an area is largely compromised such as the breaking of a branch at a fork in the trunk, the tree is imminently doomed. Water eventually penetrates beneath the bark which causes it to rot. "The large gaping wound never heals, and fungi begin to devour the tree slowly from the inside out" (Wohlleben 39). The fungi break through the trees protective barriers down to its core. Similar to the metastasis of cancer cells, the tree may live awhile longer but death will ultimately prevail. The long life of a tree also equates to a long death for a tree, as it can take decades for the certain areas to fully decompose and die (Wohlleben, 135).

The challenging circumstances trees must endure specifically correlate with the conditions of mortality outlined in Chapter IV. Not only is this critical to my material selection, but also in my understanding of life and human condition. In my work, I express these undeniable situations through the use of heavy and dense materials like metal and concrete. The tree and human beings are mortal; metal and concrete are not. These materials are guaranteed to withstand certain forces, or in the case of my work, act as forces themselves. The lifelessness of these materials creates tension with the organic wooden forms.

The relationship we as people share with trees is quite extensive. With regards to mortality and human condition, our life experiences parallel in many ways with that of the tree. These similarities are a vital component to my artistic practice. Beginning with the log as a raw material, I construct sculptures which share my perspectives on human experience through the life of the tree and material characteristics of wood.

CHAPTER IV

MORTALITY / HUMAN CONDITION

Life is a journey with a beginning and an end. In the middle are various periods of conflict and growth influenced by the events and situations we encounter throughout our existence. As we experience stages of deterioration and hardship, both physically and emotionally, the certainty of death weighs on our conscious.

As a child I was raised of the Catholic religion and the concept of mortality was introduced to me at an early age. I remember lying in bed having difficulty sleeping at night, fearing the thought of death after recently reciting the Hail Mary prayer. Like most children, I was seeking to understand the world around me. Decades later, I continue to contemplate the meaning of life.

I am not interested in the concept of mortality from a religious standpoint, but instead one that is part of the human condition. Death is an event that is guaranteed to all human beings. There are certain aspects of life that are bright and optimistic, such as the event of child birth or experiencing the emotions of joy and pleasure, but these do not bring us closer to understanding mortality. I believe it is the difficult times in life which we must overcome that help us confront the terms of our own death.

Among others, the most detrimental event I have experienced in my life was being separated from my son at infancy. As a father I have been given minimal time and parental rights with my child. During the past six years I have struggled to find light in my life. I have contemplated death and the purpose of my existence for quite some time. Everyone has their own unique circumstances which they must overcome throughout their journey. For me, the

separation from my son challenges me far greater than anything else I experienced as a young man.

In contemporary Western culture we are encouraged to remain silent about death in order to protect our personal happiness (Schumacher, ix). People rarely die in the presence of their home anymore. Hospitals have provided a means to segregate the dying from the living. Death has become something in which we celebrate and mourn only during the time of loss, then tuck away into a dark internal void just as a casket being lowered into the earth (Schumacher, 1). Throughout the process of life we experience the death of others, but are in denial about our own death and when it may occur. Contemporary philosophy on mortality is inspirational to my art making because it forces us to confront the idea of our own personal death. As result we gain a better understanding of our existence (Schumacher, 2).

We experience death in two ways: death of the human person and death of the human body. Death of the human person refers to our loss of consciousness and awareness of the self. When this occurs we are no longer capable of making moral decisions. In order to be considered a person, one must be able to experience misery and happiness and possess the ability to differentiate between the two. When these mental functions are permanently lost, the individual is no longer considered a person (Schumacher, 20-25). Death of the human body is concerned with the failure of internal components and processes of the specimen, such as the cessation of respiration or heartbeat. In this case the cells of the body physically die and are no longer capable of performing their assigned function (Schumacher, 17, 37). In life we often view mortality as a singular event. We typically do not differentiate between the death of our mind and conscious versus the death of our body.

As part of the human condition there are internal and external factors that influence our mortality. These variables affect the onset of death, bringing it closer to reality or delaying it for a later time. Internal factors include aging, the development of cancer, and degradation from infectious disease. External factors deal with environmental variables and socioeconomic conditions such as poverty, race, or occupation (Ehrenreich, 64). These conditions can deteriorate our physical bodies, emotional wellbeing, and self-consciousness, impacting both the death of the human person and the death of the human body.

In my art practice I draw inspiration from an investigation of mortality and the human condition. I use dense materials such as metal and concrete as a stand in for the circumstances which impact our death. These materials interact with the wooden forms to address the situations and experiences we must overcome in life in order to survive. In some situations metal and concrete play a role which is damaging and problematic; in others, they are materials which aid in healing and recovery.

Although there are a vast number of variables to consider with regards to mortality, all place the subject in an embattled situation which must be overcome if life is to continue. As a result, there is a constant internal struggle of the mind seeking control over the body (Ehrenreich, 71). By practicing mindfulness we attempt to be in control of our consciousness and physical bodies, but the enigma of death remains unscathed. I am intrigued by the power possessed by these two entities (mind and body); power that can be both incredibly healing and damaging.

Many holistic approaches to health such as meditation and yoga seek to unify the mind and body (Ehrenreich, 112). However, the “mindbody” is not an independent machine that functions in harmony for the benefit of the entire system. “It is at best a confederation of parts – cells, tissues, even thought patterns – that may seek to advance their own agendas, whether or

not they are destructive of the whole” (Ehrenreich XIII). We are not fully in control of our own mind or body. Instead we are a composition of matter and cells which are capable of behaving in rather unpredictable ways as they internally battle for fuel, oxygen and space (Ehrenreich, 161). Certain cells within the body make independent decisions without any orders or instruction (Ehrenreich, XIV). In all cases the cellular conflict that occurs from these decisions ultimately results in death (Ehrenreich, XV, 136).

Despite this truth, in society we are taught that we have agency over our death. The medical industry, pharmaceutical companies, fitness camps, consumer products, etc. all promote ideologies that promise a longer, healthier life. The marketing of these services misleads us into believing that we have total control over our health and our bodies if we follow certain protocols and carefully monitor our personal lifestyles.

Medical physicians primarily focus on the practice of preventative medicine, meaning that regular screenings and the early detection of problems will result in successful treatment of the patient (Ehrenreich, 1). We are fooled into believing that if we follow the recommended schedules for exams then we will be in control of our health, and ultimately our death. However, there have been significant international statistical studies that have shown regular screenings to prevent cancers such as breast and prostate did not attribute to a decline in the mortality rate of those diseases (Ehrenreich, 36-37).

In society we often judge a person’s death by their lifestyle factors such as smoking, drinking, or fat intake. In this sense we seek to assign blame for their cause of death (Ehrenreich, 92-93). Ehrenreich explains the impact this has on human perspective:

We can, or think we can, understand the causes of disease in cellular and chemical terms, so we should be able to avoid it by following the rules laid down by medical science:

avoiding tobacco, exercising, undergoing routine medical screenings, and eating only foods currently considered healthy. Anyone who fails to do so is inviting an early death.

Or to put it another way, every death can now be understood as suicide. (97)

The reality is that we are often in denial about death and hold little to no power over when and how it occurs.

The message behind the work in *A man, stands alone...* is universal to all, whether you are a person who resists death or embraces it as part of life. Through my art practice I seek to confront reality and the aspects of human condition which impact our mortality, regardless of your age, lifestyle factors, or fitness regimen. By creating work that is minimal and abstract, I seek to speak a language which applies to all people, despite popular beliefs that mortality can be avoided or delayed.

When we learn to accept death as a normal part of the human condition, we begin to look at life in a different way. The journey of life is full of beautiful experiences, but we also must embrace the parts of it that are not so beautiful as we seek to understand our own mortality. We all suffer, whether it is emotionally from the loss of a loved one or physically from the diagnosis of a life threatening disease. We all heal, whether it is from an abusive relationship or a laceration of the skin. But we also all die, and the periods of struggle and repair that are endured throughout life help us find meaning as we near the hour of our death. This cyclic action of hardship and mending that is endured throughout life forms the foundation on which my art practice is built.

CHAPTER V

THE WORK – MATERIALS & PROCESS

A man, stands alone... is an exhibition of sculpture at the Annex Gallery in Sprowls Hall on the Indiana University of Pennsylvania campus. The exhibition consists of six sculptures which analyze mortality and human condition. Upon entry into the Annex Gallery, viewers are greeted with a small wall sculpture at the end of a long hallway. Entering the main room, five large scale sculptures fill the exhibition space. Viewers are confronted with works that draw connection to the human body through material and scale.

The first piece encountered by viewers, “*Compromised*”, is a wall sculpture made from cherry and aluminum. To create the wooden form, I began with a section of cherry log and cut it into the shape of a rectangular prism with a chainsaw. I squared up the four faces of the form using a router sled jig, and cut a slight bend/angle into the bottom portion of the form using the band saw. The aluminum component was created through lost wax casting. I began by melting wax and pouring it into a rectangular mold. This gave me a blank stock of material which I turned into a tapered cylinder using the wood lathe. I then made a two part plaster mold of the cylindrical wax form. By filling the plaster mold with wax and dumping out the excess, I was able to make a hollow shell of the tapered cylinder form. The final step of the process was to create an investment mold of the wax form and translate this into cast aluminum. After casting, I did the final clean up and shaping by putting the aluminum cast back on the wood lathe, prior to inserting it in the wooden form.

This sculpture is an abstract representation of a figure that is pinned to the wall with a spike. In order to avoid religious connotations, I wanted both the wooden form and the spike to be minimal and abstract. The bend in the wooden form represents the separation between the

upper body and the legs. The cast aluminum spike gives the illusion that it penetrates through the wooden form, holding it in place against the wall. The concept of being pinned to the wall evokes feelings of restriction, injury and helplessness. As discussed in Chapter IV, this piece is inspired by external forces in life such as harm done to us by others, restraining one in a damaging and purposeful way. Although potentially life threatening, it is unknown if the spike will ever be removed.



Fig. 1. *Compromised*, 2019.

Another piece in the exhibition exploring similar themes is “*Motionless*”. In this sculpture a large free standing concrete wall internally holds a cylindrical wooden form in space. The wooden form is encapsulated by the wall. Similar to “*Compromised*”, the wooden form is being restricted. In both pieces the secondary materials are performing an action on the wooden forms, although this action is much less violent and intentional in “*Motionless*”. The massive

and dense concrete wall stands on its own, making it more permanent and certain than the spike in “*Compromised*”. I view the concrete wall as something that cannot be defeated, a condition which exists for the remainder of life. It is inspired by circumstances that never change, such as my experiences of being a parent separated from his son as discussed in Chapter IV.



Fig. 2. *Motionless*, 2019.

“*Motionless*” is the most technically demanding sculpture in the exhibition. The concrete wall began as a welded steel substructure consisting of various diameters of round rod. It was then lined with metal lathing to reinforce the exterior layer of concrete, and stuffed with foam to reduce weight and prevent the concrete from entering into the interior space of the wall. Concrete was applied by hand with a trowel to the exterior surface of the wall in two layers. This allowed me to control the thickness of the concrete application and selectively expose areas of its internal steel substructure, suggesting that it is lightly worn yet stands strong. The wooden form

was made from a section of cherry log, which was separated into two pieces and turned on the wood lathe. A slight taper was turned on the ends that were to be inserted into the wall. A steel hub was constructed inside the wall in order to receive the wooden forms. The hub was made from rolled sheet steel at a slightly greater diameter than the cherry logs. This hub was then reinforced with round rod and welded in place via various points of attachment within the interior steel substructure of the wall. Each of the two sections of cherry log are held together inside the wall by steel plating and a nut. A piece of all thread spans the interior gap between the logs, allowing them to tightly thread together as a single unit or be disassembled into two pieces.

There is a level of duality existing in the meaning of “*What Lies Ahead*”, another large scale sculpture in the exhibition. This piece is installed in the corner of the gallery space and consists of a tall standing section of cherry log with a perceived bend in the middle. Above the bend in the wooden form rests a steel cube which is tucked into the corner of the wall. The rust patina on the cube suggests age or the passage of time. Regardless of how it is perceived, the cube is a burden for the wooden form. The cube may be a heavy load that is carried throughout life such as the diagnosis of a terminal health condition, or it may be an obstacle which is encountered that redirects one’s path forward. This piece is inspired by the difficult circumstances trees endure as discussed in Chapter III, as well as the human conditions for mortality outlined in Chapter IV.

“*What Lies Ahead*” is unique compared to the other sculptures in that it was conceived based upon the original characteristics of the log. This section of log was specifically used for its unique bend which occurred in nature, and the resulting sculpture was a direct response to this form. On the contrary, most of the other sculptures began as an idea or sketch which was then realized. The bent log was harvested in nature and skinned of its external surface features with

the chainsaw and angle grinder. This resulted in a clean, round wooden form with the inherent bend in the middle. It was natural for me to respond to this bend with a heavy secondary material, creating a force which aided in this redirection of wood growth. The steel cube was welded together from sheet steel. I then removed the exterior surface of the steel with a belt sander and applied a vinegar, water, and salt rusting patina.



Fig. 3. *What Lies Ahead*, 2019.

The only other sculpture in the exhibition that was created based upon the original features of the log is “*Transcendence*”. Similar to “*What Lies Ahead*”, “*Transcendence*” was a response to the logs original state in nature. This section of log sustained some form of damage earlier in its life. It looked as though the new growth of the log had been separated from the old growth in the center. The new growth was wrapped around the old growth like a blanket with a

large opening that meandered down the exterior. I always perceived this wooden form as a hollow shell, so as response I extracted and carved away the entire interior of the log through the exterior opening that spanned its length from end to end. This task was physically demanding and achieved through days of carving and chiseling using the electric chainsaw, hammer drill and angle grinder. After removing the bark, the exterior surface of the wooden form was lightly sanded to expose the uniform coloration of the sapwood. The interior space was charred black and burnt with a torch. I then fabricated a giant steel substructure which the wooden form nests into as it lays horizontally. This substructure is a hollow framework constructed of various lengths and dimensions of steel round rod that were bent and welded together.

The steel substructure was sandblasted to remove the exterior coating on the steel. This allowed me to apply the same rusting patina which I used on the steel cube in “*What Lies Ahead*”. The rust patina gives the steel substructure age and history. It speaks to death, something that is always present and will always be there, waiting for everyone. As you move from one end of the substructure to the other, the round rod framework begins to diminish. I view this as separation between mind and body as discussed in Chapter IV, or the diminishing presence of the human being from the surface of the earth as death approaches. The scale of the steel substructure is about that of a gurney, evoking a sense of death or hospitalization. The wooden form rests halfway inside the steel substructure, leaving the top half sitting just above the implied surface. It also overhangs one end of the steel substructure, suggesting it is contained yet it is exposed. The visceral characteristics the wooden form draw a striking connection to the human body. The lightly sanded surface of the wood creates tension against the rusted steel substructure, and its burnt interior evokes a sense of death and internal decay.



Fig. 4. *Transcendence*, 2019.

In all of the work discussed, secondary materials of concrete and metal are performing an action externally regarding the wooden forms. “*Day, After Day*” visually adheres to the same principle; however, in this sculpture the concrete form represents something that is internal to the wood itself. This sculpture explores themes of self-destruction or the proverbial term of being your own worst enemy. The composition suggests that the wooden form is aiding in its own distress through the action performed on itself by the concrete form.

The walnut beam was harvested from a log using only a chainsaw and router sled jig to achieve a rectilinear form. Using the very same dimensions, a concrete beam was cast in a melamine box in order to duplicate the wooden form in an alternative material. Internally, the concrete beam is reinforced with a steel substructure which is filled with foam to reduce weight. The walnut beam rests flat against the wall, slightly elevated above the surface of the floor. It is held in place by the leaning weight of the cast concrete beam, which is positioned at an angle by the walnut wedge beneath it on the floor. The wedge is a cut away section from the main walnut

beam. In this situation the wedge, an extension of oneself, is assisting the concrete form in performing a debilitating action.



Fig. 5. *Day, After Day*, 2019.

The final sculpture in *A man stands alone...* is titled “*Remedy*”. This is the only sculpture in the exhibition which speaks to themes of healing or repair. The act of mending occurs after the fact or in response to damage that is sustained. “*Remedy*” is composed of a large maple log with a slight curvature in form. The log was dissected and then rejoined with an intricately fabricated steel apparatus. The style of construction of the steel mechanism speaks to its rigidity and capacity in holding the form together.

In this sculpture one section of the log is burnt with a torch while the other end is clean and smooth, suggesting the passing of time or a sequence of events. The form is not the same as it once was. The burnt end is dead or damaged. Its reattachment with the metal sleeve suggests

the form is seeking to become whole again, but the fact that it is burnt also speaks to the idea of carrying dead weight. “*Remedy*” is the summation of the cyclic action we experience with periods of hardship.



Fig. 6. *Remedy*, 2019.

CHAPTER VI

ARTISTIC INFLUENCES

My art practice is significantly influenced by the works of three sculptors. I am inspired by these artists' processes, concepts, and approaches to materials, primarily in wood and metal. The works of David Nash, Martin Puryear, and Richard Serra have played an important role in my thesis research and in the development of the sculptures in the exhibition *A man, stands alone...* Although their sculptures are quite different from one another, I have adopted certain aspects of their work to inform my own artistic endeavors.

David Nash, a British sculptor and land artist, is best known for his large scale wood sculptures, land art installations, and working with living trees. Nash studied at Kingston College of Art and later did his postgraduate studies at the Chelsea School of Art. Nash spent a significant period of his life working alongside trees. As a young man, he worked for his father clearing and replanting a forest that he owned. Later, he worked for a commercial forestry group (Royal Academy of Arts par. 1).

Nash's art work is often divided into two categories: sculptures connecting with, and placed in the landscape; and sculptures presented indoors in relationship to architectural structures. Nash enjoys working outdoors and believes that the environmental elements actually become part of the finished pieces. In regard to the environment, he believes time is the 4th-dimensional element in sculpture because it will ultimately impact what the sculpture becomes. In his land art and outdoor work, he strives to create pieces that exist in harmony with the natural landscape as if they had always been there.

Nash's work is inspired by the connection and interaction between humans and the natural environment in which we live. His sculptures often reference geometric shapes such as

the cube, sphere, and pyramid. He has a deep appreciation for wood as a material and is known for saving and reusing all parts of a fallen tree, even if they are for other projects. Nash has a slightly different approach to wood than most sculptors. Instead of using chisels and abrasive tools, he uses a chainsaw, axe, and blowtorch. He believes that the charred carbon surface left from burning adds drama to the work, and provides exaggerated depth in a given space.

I am inspired by David Nash in many ways. His interests in the connection between humans and the natural environment are a direct parallel with my research regarding the metaphorical relationships existing between people and trees. I am motivated by his technique in using the chainsaw as a tool for creating sculpture, which became a particularly important instrument for me when creating "*Transcendence*". This sculpture is also influenced by the scale of his work and the burnt surfaces they often hold. The scale of my work is comparable in stature, as it closely relates to the human body. The charred surfaces allude to death and the decay of organic matter. Nash believes that wood grew from the land and will ultimately return back to the land, which relates to my research investigating mortality and human condition through the life of the tree.

Another artist of significance to me is Martin Puryear, an American artist born in 1941 in Washington DC. Puryear received a B.A. from Catholic University and later volunteered with the Peace Corps in Sierra Leone, Africa. Puryear later studied in Sweden and also earned an MFA in sculpture from Yale. He resides in the Hudson Valley in upstate New York (Nayeri par. 3).

Martin Puryear is known for his traditional craft techniques and for working in a variety of materials such as wood, bronze, stone, and wire. The influence of craft in his practice is diverse, spanning various disciplines such as carpentry, furniture, guitar building, boatbuilding,

stone masonry, and basketry. Puryear creates forms that are abstract and geometric, and familiar yet mysterious. His work shares both formal and minimalistic qualities, often inspired by his interests in objects and their respective narratives / histories. Regarding wood, he often uses reductive processes and techniques, but also appreciates the versatility of the material and its ability to be used both an additively and subtractively.

There are certain aspects of Puryear's work that have informed my art practice, which has migrated in a direction that is minimal and abstract. I am inspired by the duality and ambiguity of his work, primarily in the forms which are familiar and unfamiliar, and formal yet minimal. The sculptures in *A man, stands alone...* share these qualities, a blend of formal and minimal decision making. "*What Lies Ahead*" is a sculpture influenced by the duality of Puryear's work, containing more than one meaning, and "*Motionless*" is inspired by the mysterious and ambiguous characteristics often seen in his sculptures. His interests in objects and the stories they hold is also something I admire. Additionally, I appreciate the influence of craft in his work, which is where my foundation in wood began.

Richard Serra has also inspired the art work in *A man, stands alone...* He was born in 1938 in San Francisco and received both a BFA and MFA from Yale University. Serra spent several years of his life working in steel mills, which later became his primary medium to work with as an artist. After receiving his art degrees, he spent time in Paris and Florence. Serra is widely known for his site specific steel sculptures of grand proportions, often containing minimalistic shapes such as ellipses, arcs, and spirals. He is one of the most prominent artists of his generation and currently lives and works on the Long Island of New York (Guggenheim par. 1).

Serra's sculptures provide the viewer with an altered experience of weight, gravity, and space. In 1967 and 1968, he developed the "Verb List Compilation: Actions to Relate to Oneself". He imagines sculpture as the physical manifestation of actionable verbs, such as "to splash". By performing these actions, he feels that the psychological aspect of making is removed, resulting in a creative process relying strictly on material and body movement. This list of verbs is important and fuels his art practice in the development of new work.

Serra is inspirational to me through his use of large scale minimalistic forms and the simple gestural actions he portrays in such a rigid material as steel. I am largely influenced by his verb list and the series of work he developed in response to the verb "to prop". In this series of sculptures, Serra utilizes weight and gravity to balance metal forms together in space. In my artistic practice, I often use concrete or steel in ways which are creating an action with regards to the wooden forms. The prop series has influenced how I use secondary materials to interact with wood in a given space. The steel cube within the composition of "*What Lies Ahead*" was a direct influence from Serra. His verb list has helped me to analyze the "action" which secondary materials are performing in the composition of my work with regards to the wooden forms. In "*Motionless*" and "*Compromised*", I am reminded of the verb "to restrict". To this extent, every sculpture in the exhibition possesses some verb which can describe its composition.

These three artists share a common thread in relationship to my art practice and thesis research. They have each influenced the aesthetic of my work and how I think about materials and process. The action occurring between materials has literally become a driving force behind my work. In creating the sculptures for *A man, stands alone...*, I have learned new ways to think about materials conceptually. Through their works in wood and metal, I look to these artists as

inspiration in the development of ideas. In studying their work processes and approaches to material, I have been able find a unique voice in my own artistic practice as a sculptor.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

My artistic practice has become a manifestation of my views on mortality and human condition. The body of work in *A man, stands alone ...* is an evolution of material interaction through processes of experimentation, self-understanding, and discovery. Every day I wander outside and encounter trees. Historically that is all they ever were to me, just trees. Through research and the periods of growth I have sustained as an artist, I see them as something much greater than that now. Trees are a larger than life version of myself, enduring similar stresses and challenges presented to all people. I look at them waiver in the wind and immediately notice the state of their condition, carefully observing any visual damage that has occurred.

In making physiological and metaphorical connections between people and trees, I am able to visually share my perspectives on mortality and human condition as it relates to both the life of people and trees. As I grow older and gain new experiences in life, my work will continue to be informed by challenges and hardships I have yet to encounter. For most of us, life becomes more difficult with age. We lose our parents or those around us who have taught us the most in life. We face the health consequences and limitations that come with growing old. New situations will arise which I must reconcile with in unfamiliar ways.

I wish for my work to help others gain perspective as they face hardship along their journey. I view it as an intersection of the mysterious natural realm of the earth with that of the unique experience of being human. To express these thoughts and concerns, the situations in which the wooden forms exist and the materials with which they interact with will continue to play a critical role in the sculptures I create. As my understanding of life evolves, the dialogue shared between materials in my work will evolve, leaving a more profound impact on the viewer.

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