

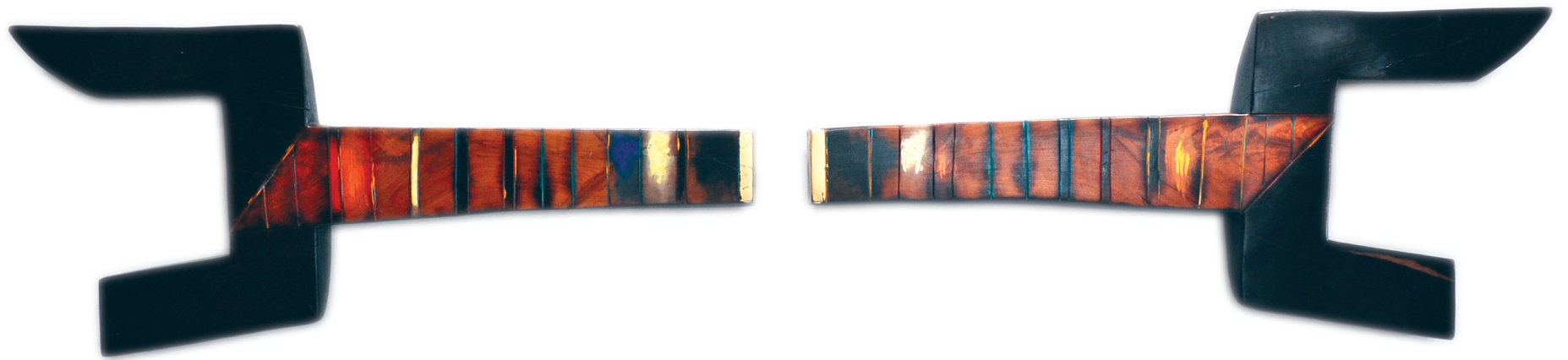
JOHN GELDERSMA: *BLACK WINGS*

JOHN GELDERSMA'S SCULPTURES at Chiaroscuro Gallery are imbued with both the bayou exuberance of his Louisiana background and the minimalist rigor of his East Coast artistic training and early milieu. His work shows a loving give and take with his materials. The dialogue includes scraping, sanding, drilling, burning, painting, and varnishing, but also seems to embody a kind of deep listening to the wood itself. Several pieces in the show are called "cairns," stacked piles of wood blocks, some on wood bases, others on steel plate bases. Traditionally, a cairn is a pile of stones stacked as a kind of barrier, signal, or boundary to indicate that a place

The verticality of these pieces is in continuity with the poles Geldersma had been making for some time. A number of such poles are included in this exhibit. Asymmetrical, made from found trees or branches, Geldersma's poles are like totems that a very precocious child might come up with. More than six feet high, painted and incised, some of these arched spires can be rotated on their axes; doing so feels a bit like dancing with a tree. The wing motif, from which the exhibit derives its name, marks a shift in Geldersma's work during the past five years toward horizontal works. In several pieces of the *Black Wings*

rigorously minimal and highly charged with associative meanings supplied by the viewer in collaboration with the object. The three horizontal burned and painted aspen components of *Resting Spirits*, from 2006, have knobby, tool-like, and rocket-cone-shaped finial ends that again momentarily raise the issue of function only to transcend it, the way African fetish objects do by their mysterious, even magisterial presence. There is a gravitas to all of Geldersma's work that has much to do with the artist's deep engagement with wood's essential qualities. Even when burned, varnished or painted, the warps and textures

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John Geldersma, *Y Wings*, painted Ponderosa pine, 19" x 47" x 4", 2011

is considered sacred, or is significant in some way. Built since prehistoric times throughout the world, they were frequently associated with the human figure in cultures as diverse as Inuit and Alpine. Cairns are still in use today, for example, to mark trails in U.S. national parks, and in some Buddhist cultures they symbolize the Buddha. I particularly liked the group of three called *Hanging Cairn A, B, and C*. Suspended from a stout rope attached to a viga, each is composed of blocks of pine wood resembling children's blocks, but of different sizes and assembled so that they rotate independently, giving each piece a multitude of faces and orientations that can be manipulated by the viewer. This is touchable art and has much to do with the loving touch of its maker. In *Square Cairn A* and *Square Cairn B*, although their components do not rotate, this dynamic quality is also at work, arising from varied shapes and sizes, as well as complex, subtle colors in interplay with the innate qualities of the wood.

series, a technique of subtraction of wood from the outer edges creates a wave-like form suggesting movement and tension at the center. Geldersma's working method seems a very modern version of that archetypal trope of artistic practice we might associate with, say, Michelangelo hewing away the extraneous marble to free the perfect human figure waiting inside. *Black Wings #5* consists of three deconstructed aspen logs mounted horizontally one above the other on a wall. Portions of each log are sliced neatly away, as timber might be cut for particular construction purposes. It is just sliced wood with a varnish or burnish on one face and no imaginable function. Yet the viewer is launched into a poetic realm by the very purposelessness of the thing itself. This is the territory of Wallace Stevens' 1915 poem "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," or literary critic William Empson's 1930 book *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. In other words, a state of perception is induced that's both

of the wood speak clearly of their origin as a cherry, pine, aspen, or maple tree.

Growing up in Louisiana, Geldersma was influenced by indigenous and imported Caribbean cultural elements, such as local traditions of Voodoo, Roman Catholicism, and that carnivalesque expression of mixed heritage, ritual, decoration, and display known as the Mardi Gras festival. He now lives and works in New Mexico, and the elemental aspect of all his work fits with and reflects the southwest aesthetic. A series of *Crossroads* pieces evokes both the landscape and the Christian cross while acknowledging the underlying older quadrant symbolism of indigenous cultures where the vertical and horizontal axes cross at midpoint, with neither the sky nor the earth, neither the physical nor the spiritual, being privileged. Rather, the two are engaged in vibrant equilibrium.

—MARINA LA PALMA