

## "Branching Out" by Terry Holzgreen

As the earthly year of 2024 begins, it's worth reflecting on the state of our "civilization" and how we arrived at such a destructive place. For artist Terry Holzgreen the answers to what ails our collective wound lay in the subject he has spent nearly 40 years in deep conversation with - WOOD.

After a 30-year career as a cabinet maker and decades of collecting beach wood from the Pacific shores while rescuing fallen urban branches and wood furniture on the streets of Los Angeles, Holzgreen has concluded that wood is very much alive. No matter how long ago it was severed from the tree that birthed it, wood has a mind of its own and maintains a distinct autonomy. In other words, it keeps breathing.

Holzgreen describes wood "as a strange animal" that exhibits high sensitivity to its environment and is not a forgiving material. It took a long time for Holzgreen to find a way to be creative with such a capricious material dabbling with ceramics and photography to fill his artistic yearnings. Yet, the more he observed the inner life of wood, the more he pondered the role of trees as building blocks of civilization.

'Branching Out' is the title of Holzgreen's recent sight-specific installation at the Museum of Art and History in Lancaster, CA as part of their 'Frameworks' group exhibition featuring wood artists. The towering 32-foot-high wall installation, inspired by a large local eucalyptus tree, is composed of hundreds of wood scraps scavenged, recycled, and milled from fallen urban trees meticulously assembled to form "a tree" created with human hands and high craftsmanship.

Holzgreen spent 14 months deliberating how best to place hundreds of wood fragments - from cedar to sycamore, to white oak - stored in his studio for decades along with remnants of ash wood he collected on Malibu beaches after the El Nino storms of 1997 ravaged California. He layed out sections on his studio floor and driveway, trying to solve a rather strange puzzle - how DO you reconstruct a tree?

At the very bottom of 'Branching Out,' you will find an antique dresser Holzgreen found on the streets of Venice, CA. While this abandoned dresser likely has many stories to tell, in this artwork it serves as a symbol of Holzgreen's transformation from cabinet maker to wood artist. The dresser as "tree trunk" roots the 32 feet tall wall

installation which incorporates a live branch at the top. 'Branching Out' announces the tenor of the artist's newfound voice, an evolution of his creativity while honoring the patina of his life's work. It's a synthesis of personal and philosophical journeys catalyzed by the legacy of trees.

During his 30 years of cabinet making, Holzgreen needed to erase the imperfections in wood, now he relished studying every unique detail. Creating a 32-foot wall collage where every wood fragment lives in harmony with the next one required the artist to meticulously compare and contrast wood pieces until a sort of oneness appeared. I say "sort of oneness" because, like many artists before him, Holzgreen was confronted by the central question of all artmaking - "Can I create something greater than nature has?"

And here we come back to the beginning. The starting point for our Western "civilization" is a belief that the resources provided by Mother Earth are here for the taking, with little thought to repaying the favor. This extractive relationship with nature is visceral to Holzgreen who explores whether it's possible to reconstruct a tree in this wall installation. He cites the meditative poem "Unchopping a Tree" by W.S. Merwin as a companion to his towering wall collage. The elegant Buddhist-like poem captures the hubris of humans and their destructive relationship to nature. It pleads for a more generative and thoughtful way to approach both nature and life. After all, chopping is the easy part. However, the process of reconstructing a tree may require some magic (or at least some imagination).

Weaving philosophical questions into his work, Holzgreen completes his transition from a maker of functional pieces to an artist. Art isn't meant to compete with nature, its role is to deepen and widen our contemplation of life's numerous mysteries. Artists see life differently, that's their essential nature. With trees as his muse, Holzgreen has plenty of material to explore further.

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January, 2024