

BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

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First Coring, 1995, courtesy David Nolan Gallery

MEL KENDRICK with Ben La Rocco
by Ben La Rocco

On the occasion of Mel Kendrick's upcoming exhibitions *Jacks* (March 25 – April 30, 2011) at Mary Boone Gallery and *Works from 1995 to Now* at David Nolan Gallery (March 17 – April 30, 2011), Brooklyn Rail Art Editor Ben La Rocco visited the artist in his Lower East Side studio to discuss his life and work.

Ben La Rocco (Rail): There's a rumor going around about you and your work, that you started as a painter. Is that true?

Mel Kendrick: No, untrue. Photographer, yes. Never painting.

Rail: So it was sculpture from undergrad on?

Kendrick: More or less. Trinity College wasn't exactly an art school. There were some great teachers there. To me, making sculpture has always been learning how to do it while I do it. I wouldn't know what to do with a blank canvas, really. Usually when I did try it I would be putting on broken glass and plywood and whatever, I'd be doing it in a physical way, trying to kind of circumvent the tradition.

Rail: When did you get to New York?

Kendrick: I got to New York in the fall of 1971.

Rail: You went straight to Hunter?

Kendrick: Yeah. I was pretty focused. I was trying to figure out a way to get to New York, but at 23 I didn't really have the guts to come in and call myself an artist and just set up shop. I needed that structure and there were these guys teaching there who really interested me.

Rail: Tony Smith and Bob Morris had very different teaching styles, I understand. I was wondering what you got from each of them.

Kendrick: I don't know how much of it was the time, the early '70s. One thing they had in common was they never talked about what was in front of us. Everything spun off into another subject. Morris was much more interested in performance, subversive interventions in public spaces. In a way, Tony couldn't have been less interested in the actual work of the students, but it didn't feel bad, kind of like if you're in a room with these things, and the ideas start moving, that's the way to go. There was a lot happening then. In the spring of 1973, I got the position as an assistant to Dorothea Rockburne and worked on her installations in Europe that summer, including Documenta. I had my first show at Artists Space in 1974 when I was 24. In 1976 I had a piece at P.S. 1, but it was quite a while before I showed at a commercial gallery. Back then, for younger artists, everything was alternative spaces.

Rail: There's an interesting exterior/interior relationship that I see in your work since the millennium. Did that evolve at that time? Certainly I see it in the "Core Samples," which you'll be showing at David Nolan.

Kendrick: The work you are referring to really began in the 1980s in my show in John Weber's Gallery on Greene Street after he moved from 420 West Broadway in 1983. Prior to that, I had been working on more linear sculptures in wood that had a clear relationship to architecture. In 1983, I showed much smaller work on steel bases. It was totally antithetical to what was going on at the time, but I had become interested in these smaller spaces and more intricate relationships that you could project yourself into as opposed to dealing with the whole space and its architecture. And, back to your question, they did involve cutting and shifting parts in various blocks of wood that could be considered a precursor to the "Core Samples." It was much more obscured then because I was doing many more things. But there was always a notion of a skin, cutting through the skin and pulling parts out. It's just that I didn't clarify what I was doing to the degree that I do now. I didn't see one thing coming from something else.

Rail: You were working with geometry then, as well.

Kendrick: Geometry comes from tools, really. Zigzags, curves, and loops are ways of drawing in wood. I couldn't work that way without there being some feeling of geometry, or maybe simply addition and subtraction, that is to say removing parts and putting them somewhere else. Actually I'm finding more freedom with the materials I'm using now. But wood was great. I used a whole range of wood, but you can never really put it back together again. Once you cut it, it's cut. The grain shifted. That's just part of the process. It's very different than with metal, where you can actually weld it, hide it, seal it.

Rail: You talked about that before, the tools dictating scale in work. Now you're talking about the tools dictating the mark, like a kind of utilitarian philosophy at work.

Kendrick: I like very much the idea of using what you have at hand with its inherent limitations. It's not like I have to run out and get something new. There's a way of finding it in myself. I use paint as another material, as a signifier. It was kind of like a skin that I put on, like the bark in the later pieces, something that's there that indicates the inside and outside and how it's been pulled apart.

Rail: There was a particular kind of paint that you used for the “Red Blocks” series you showed at David Nolan in 2007.

Kendrick: Japan Color. That’s pretty straightforward.

Rail: So the “Core Samples” came just prior to that work?

Kendrick: Yes. In about ’95 I moved into this studio on 9th Street and had a great open space with a large freight elevator and I started hauling in these logs and hollow trees that I had found in a tree dump in New Jersey. It was sort of a reclamation project. They would have been turned into mulch. I worked with the hollow trees, repairing them, opening up the insides so you could see what was going on. Mending plates and threaded steel rods held them together. This was a very different way of working. It led to the “Core Samples” and a piece I did in the Sitelines: Art on Main show Adam Weinberg put together at the Addison. They gave me access to a crate-making factory in Lawrence that was going out of business. I took a large tree trunk I found at their tree dump and sliced it like a loaf of bread. Then reconstructed a second tree, more or less, from the centers I cut out of each slice. The hollow trunk was also rebuilt.

Rail: You have used the word “analytical” to describe your working process. You’re always trying to get to the root of what a substance does, the nature of things.

Kendrick: Yeah, something that also makes something else, like the shadow, the echo, the doppelganger. It’s very easy to talk about what I’m doing in terms of process and analysis, yet if there isn’t some gut connection, analysis alone is not very interesting. And this is not science.

Rail: Yeah, that’s something that always struck me about your work. It does have very distinct formal qualities, but there’s always the sense that you’re certainly not a formalist, that you’re not interested in design for its own sake.

Kendrick: I would agree with that. I’m doing something else. I think I’ve disappointed people by not talking about ecology and the landscape. There was the irony of working with big trees in a New York studio. There’s something about the rectilinear spaces of the city that made it much more interesting to me. The pieces I am showing at David Nolan date from that period in the ’90s. There is also a lot about standing, propping, correcting. They feel like they’ve been through something.

Rail: That work, certainly the “Core Samples,” seems most to allude to the body. Other work does in terms of scale, and you could interpret some of that as having a representational dimension. But that just seems to come from the natural form you’re working with. In other words, it’s not something you ever seem to have put there. It seems to be there already.

Kendrick: It’s not something I’m putting there. I want to stay in the realm of ambiguity.

Rail: The poet Richard Hell once said that he felt whatever room he was in, he always wanted to walk out of it. What you’re saying reminds me of that.

Kendrick: I get that. You don’t want to define everything by what it’s not.

Rail: Well maybe we can get into the additional layer of meaning in your work by talking about the concrete sculpture. You are preparing for your exhibition at Mary Boone in March. You call them “Jacks.” You have spoken about materials being the size and scale they should be. Are you saying that concrete wants to be a certain scale?

Kendrick: [Laughs.] No, I want it to be a certain scale. It is not a delicate material. I feel that there’s a crudity, even though I’m sort of working against it, to the concrete that demands an industrial scale. The weight, the molds, the material doesn’t make sense with small intimate objects. But then the pieces are 11 feet tall, not that large in terms of buildings or even public sculpture. The height feels right to me. The bases are rectangular blocks 63 inches high, around eye level. They create almost a water level in the gallery, a plane separating what’s above from what’s below. When I started this process I was thinking about the construct of sculpture. The

blocks are rectilinear bases. Unlike the pieces in Madison Square Park, the top is loose and could be placed in different ways. The block comes from its base, but also its generation chamber. When I made the first block, I was a little disappointed. It didn't seem so large. The addition of the second part changed all that because it is above eye level and you have to look up. And it is the top parts together that feel massive.

Rail: How does architecture figure into your thinking?

Kendrick: I was strongly influenced by the black-and-white marble in Italian Gothic churches like the (Duomo) of Siena. The stripes work with the architecture or almost obliviously to it. I like the concept of *horror vacui*, the need for all-over decoration. It's incredibly satisfying though often considered unrefined. There is something geological to this type of layering, like sedimentation. The layers are extremely heavy.

Rail: You mentioned the Madison Square Park series, called "Markers." Was that your first public work in concrete?

Kendrick: Yeah, in 2009. They varied slightly in height. Those were the first five large pieces I did. In each one I attempted to do something quite different internally. When I look at them now, I see them as being unique pieces, but when I put them in a line, they became unified by the black-and-white striations. It was a sort of attention-grabbing camouflage.

Rail: Which came first, the concept of markers, or the stripes themselves?

Kendrick: "Markers" was a name that came after I was seeing the physical effect of these pieces. My notion about monuments or towers or a way of putting things in nature that wasn't necessarily "sculpture."

Rail: It seems like a kind of visual puzzle. I feel these two parts fit together. I don't know how.

Kendrick: Yeah, the idea of puzzles is a funny one. It's kind of interesting how many people never see the relationship of the top and bottom. You may find that hard to believe. They feel the relationship but there's no notion that the top came from the bottom.

Rail: What sort of responses did you find?

Kendrick: Well I found that gratifying. I liked that. I've got my own systems at work, my own reasons for doing things, and if somebody responds to it and doesn't understand all those reasons, that's fine. There's a simultaneity at work in how you perceive information, how one thing informs the other. I think I like the possibility that any art or sculpture is not a temporal reading, it's something you can be around, see out the corner of your eye, respond to on all these different levels. Not like something you can describe in a sentence. If you can describe what's going on in a sculpture in a sentence, then there's practically no visual component to it. There's a concept that's always interested me and I'll just run it by you: It's the reading of analog versus digital. What interests me about analog, is that it's basically mechanical. You can take something apart and understand the logical physical relationships of the parts—

Rail: —analog was the recording method we used before we had digital.

Kendrick: Yeah, analog just translated the vibrations directly into magnetic tape, which could then be read by other magnets and turned back into vibrations. Digital is a code that must be interpreted because everything has been broken down into on/off switches, millions of them. There is no physical relationship between cause and effect. I was thinking about something much more basic, though. The main analog object in our lives is the clock, or, more specifically, the clock dial. If you are giving a lecture and there is a clock in the back of the room—if it's a digital clock, you have to stop speaking to read it before you can go on. The numbers on the digital clock are linear and must be read like a sentence. If you're saying a sentence, you're using the same part of the brain you use to speak. If it's an analog clock, you don't have to stop talking. You register the time not by the numbers but by the relationship of the hands on the dial, independent

from the flow of words. The analog clock is something you read with a different part of your brain. I don't know where this gets me, but I like that idea, that you can be seeing and understanding two things at the same time, it's a simultaneous experience, a simultaneous perception.

Rail: Do you think that's analogous to the way art should be experienced?

Kendrick: That would be like understanding a painting without reading the paragraph on the wall [laughs], but specifically I was just thinking about how I always have two parallel things going on at the same time in my work. I want to identify for myself, anyway, that there are different ways of perceiving information, and that there is potentially a specific kind of language in objects.

Rail: The filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky talks about the reason artists make art; he says artists make art firstly to understand something for themselves.

Kendrick: Without a doubt. And I think that's the challenge when you get out of the modernist concept, that each movement is going to break the other and turn it upside down, this great progression of art from Cubism on. So yeah, I think it is about learning something for yourself, or at least entertaining yourself, which are not mutually exclusive ideas.

Rail: This seems like a particular dilemma for abstraction because abstraction was so co-opted by those ideas of progress you're talking about. I think it's often interpreted through that lens. You're saying that you're trying to create more space, another perspective.

Kendrick: For a long time, we've been talking about the things themselves. The minimalists introduced the concept of "concrete art," real things, real materials, real relationships; it doesn't relate to anything else except what you're looking at. Yet if I meet someone on the train, it's always easier to say "I make abstract art," but I always hate it and that's also why we try to get away from "sculpture" and say, "I make objects, I make interesting things." It's funny that painting hasn't had that issue. But identifying sculpture, or any art, as abstract is somehow limiting.

Rail: It's interesting because lately I've been thinking about sculpture as having this potential that painting doesn't really have, to reclaim objects in the world, reconsider them.

Kendrick: Reconsider is a very good word. It's what we're talking about: trying to get around the idea that you know something. But do you really know it? Is there another way of knowing it? We are in the physical world, and it gets more interesting to me, as things get more digital, to deal with this physicality. The concrete is not just solid but it also has rebar and the attachments you need for heavy machinery to make this thing work to move it. In that way, it's situated in the real world. Someone asked me about moving these pieces: How do you get these things somewhere? Well, that's easy, you just get a flat-bed truck, they're all over the place, and take it wherever you want. Concrete is heavy material, far easier to get 15,000 pounds of concrete somewhere than a painting. Ways of handling it exist. And it's not like the bubble-wrapped world of climate-controlled art shipping.

Rail: Along those lines, you've talked about the experience of going into a foundry to work with the craftsmen there to gradually get your vision to play itself out in the concrete. People working in a process that normally has little to do with art would then help you deal with problems in the creative process. This strikes me as another kind of moving outward into this world that's beyond classical sculpture or art, finding out how the two can mesh.

Kendrick: That's what I find really exciting, the people that I'm working with. There's a tremendous learning curve and these are all unique pieces. You can get almost to the end and someone screws up and you have to start from scratch, but that's the nature of it. The "Jacks" have four layers to the top and four to the bottom. I started out with the idea of stacking the separate layers after they were formed and cast. But instead, we cast each layer directly on top of the previous layer. This is a system we developed together. When I cut apart the block of foam, I am making the mold for the top section, and what is removed becomes the mold for the bottom section. This is an added step from working directly with wood. It's hard to keep track of what's

going on because you really are working backwards. The concrete itself is incredible: way harder than what we are used to in sidewalks and buildings. But still, taking anything with that mass to a fine point is risky, and in some cases I just have to accept what the material does.

Rail: What's crazy about the process of this work is that there is really no way to describe it!
[Laughs.]

Kendrick: No. I think we tried to describe it in the "Markers" catalogue. And I think people's eyes just glazed over. There is no way.

Rail: What did David Kucera, the concrete fabricator, say to you? You take the simplest part of the process of casting and make it as hard as it possibly can be?

Kendrick: Yeah, I think he said that. The backwards way, the obsessive way. Basically, you never wind up doing what you think you're going to do. You know so much in the beginning and you know so little later on. Terry Winters once said that when you talk about your old work, all you really wind up talking about is the logical inevitability of what you're doing now. There's still hopefully some magic in the contradiction of messing with expectations, seeing something that you wouldn't expect to see. Understanding something you didn't understand. Tony Smith was good for that. Talking to him expanded the whole prospect of art-making. Maybe it was the associations he made, whether it was James Joyce or Tennessee Williams, it brought everything into a bigger world that I'd really like art to inhabit on a day-to-day basis.

Rail: That's the answer to my question about your early days, in New York in the '70s: you're interested in the future and in the current state of art.

Kendrick: Absolutely. We've had like three or four art worlds since then.

Rail: You've been here in the city for all of them!

Kendrick: Yeah, and some were really good for me, some I just worked on the sidelines and wasn't involved. But that's fine. That's part of the difficulty for everybody coming out of art school recently, and showing right away. If you're going to do it, you have to keep on doing it without all that. Basically, any attention in art is a mini-Renaissance. Support breeds work. If artists can make work, and sell it, that's fantastic. The motivators are always different. You can spend your life never finishing work. But then when you show, it's easy to focus. Working without that, you have to really decide what's important.

Rail: A lot of people stop.

Kendrick: Yeah, I don't know why I'm still doing this. [Laughs.] If I think too much about that, it makes no sense whatsoever.

Rail: That's actually one of things I like most about art.

Kendrick: That it makes no sense? You know what I would say? The world doesn't make sense and art makes more sense now than ever. I grew up in a conservative background. All the professions, the things that you were maybe meant to do, meant to be, whether it was working for a corporation or, whatever, the business world—all those things are shot full of holes. And the actual fact of making something in this culture in this time is incredibly valuable. I never expected that. There was always that feeling that you were kind of skipping out on things, being an artist, but now I'm surrounded by people who skim money from corporate deals and they're not providing anything, anywhere. Now, making things makes a lot of sense. I don't know if I explained that right but it is an interesting shift.

Rail: What you're saying makes total sense to me, but I'm not sure I'm the best judge! [Laughter.]

Kendrick: Yeah, well you know. Somehow it gets clearer and clearer.