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GALLERY CHRONICLE

by James Panero

Mel Kendrick is a sculptor of process, but his product was the big hit two years ago in Madison Square Park in Manhattan. In the center oval, the park conservancy temporarily installed five enormous new works, all of the same series called “Markers.” The forms were unmistakable Kendrick, shapes he had been working on in wood for several years.

A number of these, in much smaller scale, went on view at David Nolan’s former Soho gallery space in 2007. Each began with a cube of wood, which Kendrick cut and cored. Through this process, he extracted an internal section, a constructivist folly of interlocking cylinders. He left the outer cube intact enough to stay square. Kendrick then placed the core on top of the cube, a weighty figure held up on a hollow base of its former self. The pieces had strict internal logic, but I found them a little smug. They were more process than product, slightly too satisfied in their own art smarts. For the park, Kendrick enlarged these shapes to over ten feet tall. The cube base became human-sized, like a sliced and diced version of Tony Smith’s six-foot Die. Kendrick also enlivened his surface by creating the work out of alternating layers of black and white poured concrete, like a modernist fantasy of thirteenth-century Siena. With this surface treatment, the works took on a new sense of play. But the real play came after installation. Throughout the run, kids were all over them. They crawled through the carved-up bases and peeked through the holes. They moved through the work the same ways our adult eyes looked it over—usually from a little more distance.

Now at David Nolan’s Chelsea space, a survey of earlier works reveals how Kendrick arrived at his monumental park accomplishment.[2] Much like the excellent arte povera artist Giuseppe Penone, Kendrick has a feel for the logic of wood. In *Plug and Shell* (2000), he carved up a section of tree trunk, here following the wood grain of the limbs and preserving the vestigial stumps. Rather than stacking the results, he positioned the

two parts side by side, the denuded wood on the left and its knobbly bark to the right. He also placed them on alternating bases, one built of stacked cinder-blocks, the other of four metal poles—one solid, the other hollow.

Other pieces have a similar binary relationship, with Kendrick working through different finishes and the question of how precisely to connect the two parts. The two sides of *Plug* (2000) are both stained black, with the shape of the core now less connected to the wood grain of its shell. In *BDF* (1995), the two parts are identical forms of assembled sticks, one a rubber cast of the other.

I found the towering *Black Trunk* (1995), the largest work in the show, to be the most compelling. Here Kendrick took a nearly ten-foot section of large tree, sliced it in smaller pieces, and carved out the center. He then restacked the now hollow tree and carved out a series of dovetail joints. Left open, the joints afforded keyhole glimpses of the interior. They also hinted at a sense of instability, as if someone last minute forgot a very important structural component and a bump could send it toppling over. Yet despite the theater of its display, the dominant feeling was one of arboreal mystery. The sculpture felt like an old-growth giant somewhere deep in the woods. I liked its expressiveness. A large rubbing of the trunk that Kendrick made on paper, displayed on the gallery wall beside it, maintained the binary logic of the show. It also spoke to the more poetic desire to preserve a record of the tree, something to take back out of the forest.