Histoires de bois : *Wormwood*
Allan Pringle

Objet fétiche
Numéro 6, hiver 1988

URI : id.erudit.org/iderudit/36344ac

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)
Revue d’art contemporain ETC

ISSN  0835-7641 (imprimé)
1923-3205 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer cet article
Histoires de bois : Wormwood

Not since the closing decades of the eighteenth century has wood—that “celestial goodness in its lowest corporeal plane” (Swedenborg) — received such widespread embrace as a sculptural medium in the province of Quebec. Two hundred years ago François Baillairgé et al deviated from Louis XVI and classical revival tendencies to emphasize the necessity of a return to the study of the indigenous (i.e. observation of Quebec’s unique natural and cultural environment) and to introduce more “countrified” (read: rustic) stylizations in wood-carving. At the time, Baillairgé and his Québécois contemporaries were both lauded and condemned — praised as “savants et naturels”; criticized for occupying the much disputed stylistic mid-ground between the ancients and the moderns. As if to lend a measure of credibility to that age-old credence that history repeats itself, the majority of 1988 participants in the “Studios d’été”, under the project title Histoires de bois (Saint-Jean-Port-Joli, June 15 — August 15, 1988) can, in the broadest sense, be located within an analogous historio-aesthetic construct. All seven artists took up residence along the banks of the St. Lawrence River to pass the dog-days summer in contemplation of (or at least in experience of) nature and to benefit from the expertise of regional carvers, who, over the course of the past half-century, have established Saint-Jean-Port-Joli as the provincial centre of wood-sculpting and the last-surviving locus of a diminishing “esprit de patrimoine”. In effect it might be reported that the seven participants became proponents of a so-called “arrière-avant-garde”, melding their import of contemporary aesthetic concerns with a localized “folk-art” tradition — at least this is the impression put forward by project initiators.

A number of Histoires de bois organizers’ and artists identified our “postmodern” moment as an appropriate juncture in time to (re)trace traditional (i.e. not of frequent “modern” employ) wood-working techniques — a convenient and perhaps facile vindication for an interaction with artisan-producers of carvings which are often but not always justly categorized as “kitsch”. Although it is true that a recouping of technical skills associated with neglected (i.e. bypassed by modernity’s implicit industrialized
biases) crafts and indeed a more tenable view of popular "culture" are among manifestations of our
current fine art milieu, they are but shoots tangled in the
thicket of a postmodern growth. To perceive the
"raison d'etre" of the Histoires de bois project in
largely recuperative (historicist) or parochial (stylistic)
terms would be to deny the necessity of complementary
diachronic and synchronic perspectives.

Assessed in consideration of many gloomy
philosophical reports on the state of our fin-de-
millenium culture, Histoires de bois might be inter-
preted less as a "Wood of Experience" (Blake) rooted
in the past, than as a "Wood of Error and Spiritual
Death" (Dante) ingrained by the present. The
apparently growing interest in the sculptural employ of
wood may well be associated with the notions of a
recovery of subjectivity, but also with a fascination for
the fate of the human body in recent aestheticizations.
As an organic substance, wood carries a record of its
growth in its physical make-up. Its harvesting marks
the instant of its death; its utilization by man signals the
beginning of an aftermath. This is a sequence fraught
with symbolic implication that cannot be subsumed by
the artist's narrative intent or formal concerns. The
expressive potential of the medium itself lingers as an
afterimage. The sculptor's subject matter becomes a
strange fruit (sometimes an appendage) born(e) on a
dead tree. The obvious analogy between the
physicality of a tree and humankind (heartwood —
spine, sapwood — vascular system, cambium —
flesh...) is also significant. References to contemporary
man as "a disappearing body", "a body in ruins", "a
body obsolete" are prevalent of late — signs and
symptoms of a cultural burnout. Wood becomes the
ideal metaphor-medium for the (human) body under
attack. Forests are in decline, susceptible as they are to
similar environmental threats (read: fire, drought,
flood, disease, pollution...) as mankind. In certain
societies it has been customary to hang the condemned
on a dead tree. Through symbolic necessity that tree
became vital to those cultures. In an analogous fashion,
Histoires de bois wood sculptors may also be
nourishing the dead (or dying) with death. If such
comparisons seem cursory or gratuitous, weigh the
subject matter and/or methodology of artists involved
— "selections" from the summer workshop exhibited
at Optica (October 29 — November 20).

David Moore's largest summer composition
was a volume in disintegration precariously poised
between the static and the phrenetic. Viewed from the
portside it appeared as a "classically" solemn, rough-
hewn, cedar figure holding out two humanoid frag-
ments for examination. Circum-scrutinized, it came to
light that the upper righthand side of the body had been
cut away and a second smaller figure grafted in place.
It was the latter figure that, in fact, held the progres-
sively scale-reduced humanoid forms — an implant
that launched a sinistrorse dissolution of the body into
a semiurgy of floating body parts — the seed of the
body's own unmaking. It was in viewing this
sequential deconstruction that an accompanying
component came to attention. Cropped at the waist and
rising from (or sinking into) the ground plane, this
figure mimicked the floundering gesture of the
smallest held human-form and dispelled any illusion of
the existence of a terra firma.

Moore's colleagues furnished equally ominous
purports. In a bipartite sculpture Danielle Sauvé
apparently dealt with the concept of "bad seed" both in
terms of genetics and dissemination. Utilizing a steam
Serge Murphy, Sans titre (environment component), 1988. Mixed media; 110 x 40 x 30 cm. (sight). Photo: Roberto Pellegrinuzzi

Françoise Sullivan was, as well, initially preoccupied with waterfowl, painting studies of flight patterns over nearby islands. The workshop environment, however, lured the artist to a career-first — the execution of a sculptural series in wood. Following a modus operandi not antithetical to that of the celebrated “Cycle crétois”, Sullivan “collaged” sections of log into “patchworks” of anthromorphic creatures. Where some of Marcel Duchamp’s early works of analogous imbrication were referred to as “explosions in a shingle factory”, radiating the ideology of the avant-garde, Sullivan’s current (de)constructions must be considered as the inverse — a “postmodern” implosion back into a standard modernist strategy, that of displaying the dynamics of realization.

Finally with the oeuvre of Serge Murphy and Steven Curtin we realize the dark sign of the prophecy of “a disappearing body”. Murphy gathered riverbank debris (read: evolutionary detritus) and incorporated it into numerous, whimsical, small-scale assemblages — ironic reformulations of our “throw-away” society. Like bits of commemorative jetsam, tossing in the wake of ultramodern technomania, Murphy’s sculptures provided the solicitude of a post-scriptum.

Curtin’s architectonic works exemplified a much reported recent loss or abandon of reality. Three towers (in pine, cedar, and oak) existed as aberrant constructions of the house rendered physically and visually inaccessible. There were no entrances (no doors, no stairs); only peep-hole openings which permitted a glimpse into illusory interiors of multiplied and shifting dimension and perspective. The observer was left with a sense of directionless that effectively underlined the semantic instability of our present historical moment.

History is a continuum. *Histoires de bois* was an incomplete project. It nonetheless “made me drunken with (its) wormwood”, (Shakespeare)

Allan Pringle

NOTES
1. Witness the Musée d’art contemporain’s *Les Temps chauds* (June 1 — September 11, 1988). The widespread employ of wood is perhaps the single most evident aspect of the exhibition. David Moore, Michel Saulnier, and Christiane Gauthier continue as Quebec’s frontrunners in the utilization of the medium, particularly in a “purist” (i.e. truth to material) mode. Roland Poulin also uses wood exclusively but in a more incidental manner. Martha Townsend shows wooden sculptures for the first time. Dominique Blain, Andrew Dutkewych, Pierre Granche, Gilles Mihuc-Cun, and Danielle Sauvé all underline or reference the obdurate identity of wood in some key sculptural component. Even the Carresque landscape of Sylvie Bouchard depends upon the weathered wooden planks beneath a transparent watercolour wash to manufacture “effect”.

2. *Histoires de Bois* was organized jointly by Johanne Blanchette, Jean-Pierre Bourgault, Jacques Doyon, Roberto Pellegrinuzzi, and Michel Saulnier. Doyon functioned as guest-curator/essayist for the Galerie Optica exhibition.

...