



AN ALBERTA

art

CHRONICLE

adventures in recent & contemporary art



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May's ability to employ both the abstract and the figurative in his art dates back to his wood sculptures of the 1970s, which are resolutely abstract and minimally spare in appearance but have a manner that defies much of the formal seriousness of the time. In his choice of materials, for instance, he prefers to find substandard industrial materials like wood beams, boards and veneer that are warped: "[Warped pieces of] wood seems to be in transition, back to being alive, back to being a tree. The idea that it has been manufactured and people have spent a great deal of money to make it functional and, then, all on its own, it manages to thwart that human interference [suggests] that it's not just a substance. . . . It's a substance with character."⁵⁰

May will exploit this expressive trait to create his body of vertical works

in the 80s. As Nancy Tousley describes this transition, “the lovable wonkiness of his earlier sculpture is turned into a kind of figurative gesture. . . . [These] spirited sculptures dance the eye around.”⁵¹ With titles like *Drummer*, *Guard* and *Lookout*, May’s newer sculptures reveal his interest in primitive art, specifically Cree Manitokan figures.⁵² Distinctively lanky and linear, warped and bent, stained and painted, the artworks appear like drawings in space rather than as sculptures with substantial mass and weight. Over succeeding years, he broadens the scope of these figures. By including such materials as copper pipe, roots, conduit, re-bar, lava rock, nylon rope and galvanized sheet metal, May adds a further dimension to their elegant yet eccentric forms. In many sculptures, the melding of the industrial with the natural is deliberate, suggesting multiple levels of meaning. In the opinion of reviewer Manon Blanchette, “The wood evokes natural energy; the machined metal reminds us of humanity’s power over things and their functions.”⁵³ Blanchette also found May’s sculptures “unpretentious,” an attribute echoed later in Eleanor Bond’s observation: “Part of the magic of his work is that he can imbue such non-monumental and potentially unassuming pieces with so much power and presence.”⁵⁴

In 1989, May’s oeuvre undergoes another substantial change. Instead of assembling pieces that are a hybrid of drawing and three-dimensional art, he turns to what he called “restoration” – the modification of abandoned objects found locally. For instance, he replaces a cauldron’s missing handle with a bronze one to create the piece *Empty*, and for the piece *Full*, he reinterprets a desiccated tree trunk by plugging its knots with old wooden handles and filling the cracks with aluminium and wax. First presented at Calgary’s Paul Kuhn Fine Arts, a review in *Artichoke* magazine opines: “May’s new work is closer to traditional notions of sculpture being a volume in space. . . . Several of the new works, like the mighty cast-iron cauldron *Empty* and the thick-waisted tree trunk *Full*, occupy space rather than play with it.”⁵⁵

In another example of what May calls restoration, an old steel ball and a steel brick have a simple metal handle attached to their surface and are displayed on a set of small, sandstone shelves (*Wisdom and Folly*). More subdued and contemplative, many of the new works refer to a “certain kind of history . . . rooted in the ‘pioneer’ era when certain articles and materials like sandstone facing, cast iron objects, and hand-turned tools were part of the vernacular.”⁵⁶ But rather than treating his found items as artifacts, where the expectation is that they are a representation of history, May transforms

the results of his scavenging into subjective objects, trimming them of their nostalgic value and altering their meaning.

May's restorations continue into the next decade, beginning with a room-size installation titled *Low Table, High Chairs* (1989–1990). Displayed at Calgary's Triangle Gallery, Mercer Union (Toronto) and the Edmonton Art Gallery, the eccentric multi-piece work resonates with the spirit of Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades, its low steel table and forty metal stools all modified to display a found metal object, placed either on the top of each stool or beneath the table. Calling the installation "a work in progress," Edmonton Art Gallery curator Elizabeth Kidd writes, "[May] also examines the different ways that sculpture can be looked at and understood: as real objects in a real space or as concepts in a transcendental space, as autonomous and self-referential space or dependent on their context for meaning. This exhibition marks the culmination of a number of directions that May has been pursuing for the past fifteen years, during which he explored different sculptural traditions that developed in Europe in the early part of this century."⁵⁷

According to the artist: "There are [on the stools] vessels without handles in some cases, there are thick vessels made of heavy steel. It's difficult to imagine what might have been poured out of these. I'm not sure if these particular things should be called jugs. Are they called cans? Pitchers? Pitchers with spouts? In terms of trying to define or even understand these things you may be more tempted to look for other meanings that are perhaps more symbolic or metaphorical or whatever."⁵⁸ Thus, the mind is intended to be teased by what May presents and although his methods will continue to evolve and change, this engagement continues right to end of century and beyond.