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Raoul Hague

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Hague's Tree-Trunk Anatomies

In massive wooden sculptures achieved by direct carving, Raoul Hague worked to reveal the individuality of the trees from which they were cut. A recent gallery exhibition by this curiously neglected American artist showed him at the top of his form.

BY ROBERT TAPLIN

Raoul Hague was friends with Arshile Gorky (they were both Armenian) and Phillip Guston. He lived and worked for most of his life in the artist's colony in Woodstock, N.Y., and died in 1993 at the age of 88. Other than David Smith and George Sugarman, he was probably the most important American sculptor of his generation, yet today he is still relatively unknown. Incredibly, no American museum has ever bothered to mount a retrospective of his work. The recent exhibition at Lennon, Weinberg was an opportunity to see five of his classic wood carvings from the late '60s and the '70s, when he was at the top of his game, along with some terrific photographs of his studio and his sculpture by the likes of Rudy Burckhardt and Robert Frank.

Hague's mature work was almost exclusively carved from large, solid pieces of walnut, typically between 5 and 6 feet tall. There were occasional pieces in a horizontal format or in other woods, like elm and sycamore. He moved his sculptures around on heavy wooden dollies that came to seem like the only appropriate bases for the works. The gallery had new dollies built for this show, and they looked just right. Hague's work is the premier instance in this country of the modern tradition of direct carving—i.e., working on the final material of the sculpture without making a preparatory model or using a maquette to "point up" key locations in the full-scale work. Nor did Hague make preparatory drawings; he just stared at the wood until he was ready, and then started in. Seeing these five bulky giants on their new wheels made it seem as if the sculptor had just put down his tools and cleaned up the studio for your visit.

The key to understanding Hague's work is to remember that a tree is a living body. Like ourselves, it has a pattern of growth that is fixed by genetic inheritance, but the individual positions of its limbs or the shape of its trunk has been arrived at by virtue of living interaction with a particular environment. It is an individual—its coded shape has been formed or deformed by its life over time. From a human point of view, we who hope to repair or enhance our failing capabilities with prosthetic or technological aids can only envy the tree's ability to absorb both insults and foreign bodies in a seemingly inexorable growth pattern. Trees are hard to kill, but their populations can be decimated by the same types of parasitic or bacterial plagues that can destroy human populations. Also like us, they are vascular—"full of sap"—and have long but comprehensible life spans. They reproduce sexually. All these causes for human identification with the tree figure heavily in the method and outcome of Hague's way of working.



Above, Raoul Hague: Buttermilk Falls, 1969, 63 by 45 by 40 inches. All works this article carved walnut.

Opposite, Echo Lake, 1978, 60 by 45 by 31 inches. Photos this article, unless otherwise noted, courtesy Lennon, Weinberg Gallery, New York.



Above and below, two views of *Dennemora*, 1976, 69 by 46 by 30 inches.



All the many reasons for human identification with the living tree figure heavily in the method and outcome of Hague's way of working.

Hague didn't work from a uniform block. He loved to start with a big crotch, a place right where the trunk was ending and the main limbs were branching out. (I wonder if initially he got these sections because they were so useless to the lumber mills and therefore cheap or even throwaways.) *Echo Lake* (1978) is exemplary in this regard. The work is a massive bouquet of concave and convex shapes that form radically dissimilar silhouettes as you walk around it. There are no punctures, and the piece meets the ground in a solid trunklike way, but you can still feel the branching form of the original block like a phantom envelope around the sculpture. At one point you find yourself staring into a deep bowl-like cavity in whose center lie the concentric rings of an enormous branch that would be coming right at you had Hague not cut it away. This was the site of deep surgery into the tree's heart, with the sculptor working down against the end grain of the limb and following it into the trunk. Meanwhile, right nearby, a rising squared-off knob also ends in a perfectly centered set of rings indicating an opposite procedure—a limb rounded off into a new shape. There's a line down the front that includes a beautiful sensuous curve following the grain of the wood perfectly. This portion was clearly close to the outer skin of the original trunk, but nearby a channel has been excavated, working into and against the form of the tree. So as you walk around the sculpture, feeling its sturdy, forceful shapes pull and push at the space enveloping it, you can sense the work in exquisite dialogue with the living shape of the tree itself. For me, this dialogue directly mirrors the play of presence and absence found in any representational sculpture of a human body—only, in this case, the absent individual who is the “subject” of the representation is the former shape of the tree itself.

Indeed, a piece like *Boonville* (1975) comes fairly close to working as a depiction of a human body, without ever losing its fundamental identity as an abstract sculpture. While the sculpture certainly has no “face,” it definitely has two sides, a front and a back. One side is a simple convex sweep from the ground up to a swelling bulb. The other side has a wonderful kink in it that throws the whole sculpture into motion. So while one side appears to stretch, the other bends out and a bit forward. The front and back have concave channels that run vertically between larger bowls and knobs at the top and bottom. The work feels like a Degas bather stretching or getting out of the bath—full of volume and motion and a sense of the flesh responding to an action. Again this gesture was clearly in the tree, but Hague has responded to it in the most marvelous way, so that everything surges and flows, popping back and forth between being one big gesture and a concatenation of smaller ones.

There's also a sexual dimension, both to the forms as they exist now and to our sense of the sculptor's interventions on the body of the tree. Since none of the forms hangs very far out into space, the crotches between limb and trunk, as well as the way the sculptor articulates them, become highly sensual. One volume seems to meet another in ways that suggest an armpit or the back of a knee, the inside of an elbow or the crack of the buttocks. You can project your own body sense into these sculptures and feel the movement of part against part. You can also imagine the original



Above, Hague's sculptures in his Woodstock studio as documented in Lee Friedlander's photo Untitled (Storage Shed), 1975. Photo courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco. Right, Boonville, 1975, 66 by 37 by 29 inches.

vascular flow deep out of sight and the mysterious means by which a tree "knows" to send roots down and branches up, regardless of how its seed was oriented.

James Surls and Gillian Jagger are the only contemporary American sculptors that come to mind as working in a vein related to Hague's. Perhaps direct carving of this sort is a thing of the past, but I tend to doubt it. Hague's work makes a good deal of contemporary sculpture that concerns itself with matters of the body look overly theoretical and visually boring. At the very least, his work deserves to be more widely known. In one of the photographs exhibited, *Untitled (Storage Shed)*, 1975, by Lee Friedlander, a whole row of Hague's sculptures are seen waiting quietly in a cramped space reminiscent of a chicken coop, looking like Japanese temple guardians or a group of one-man armored vehicles ready to go. I hope they do. □

"Raoul Hague" appeared at Lennon, Weinberg Gallery, New York [June 3-Aug. 4].

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