



National Gallery of Art  
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# MARTIN PURYEAR



I value the referential quality of art, the fact that a work can allude to things or states of being without in any way representing them. The ideas that give rise to a work can be quite diffuse, so I would describe my usual working process as a kind of distillation—trying to make coherence out of things that can seem contradictory. But coherence is not the same as resolution. The most interesting art for me retains a flickering quality, where opposed ideas can be held in a tense coexistence.

MARTIN PURYEAR, 2007



Martin Puryear, born in Washington, DC, in 1941, began his career in the late 1960s alongside the post-minimalist generation. Throughout his life, a passion for diverse cultures and histories has led him to travel, study, and work in Africa, Asia, Europe, and the United States. These explorations have permitted him to observe the material culture of many societies around the globe and their skills and trades, and to make connections among disparate cultural traditions. Puryear's sculpture is marked by these experiences and by his reliance on his own hand to create his work and his insistence on mastering his materials.

Drawing from areas of personal interest as diverse as natural history, ornithology, architecture, and the history of technology, Puryear fuses his own visual ideas with distillations of a wide range of source materials. Linking references and concepts within a vast visual reservoir, his work does not progress predictably but evolves out of constant reconsideration of a personal vocabulary of materials and forms.

One of the earliest works in the exhibition, ***Some Lines for Jim Beckwourth***, signifies Puryear's interest in multiple meanings and identities contained within a single entity. Its subject, James Beckwourth, is a historical figure surrounded by myth. Born a slave in Virginia in 1798, the son of a white man and a black slave woman, Beckwourth traveled throughout the West as a horse trader and prospector, was made a chief of the Crow Indian nation, and eventually served as a guide and translator for United States troops during the Cheyenne-Arapaho War. The account Beckwourth left of his life was shrouded in doubt and controversy when it was published in 1856, ten years before his death. *Some Lines for Jim Beckwourth* is made of dried, twisted lengths of rawhide with tufts of red, white, and black cow hair, possibly symbolizing

LEFT **Untitled**, 1978, hickory and Alaskan yellow cedar, 5' x 6'6" x 1," Stuart and Sherry Christhilf. © 2008 Martin Puryear

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ABOVE ***Some Lines for Jim Beckwourth*** (detail), 1978, twisted rawhide, 22'8" long, height variable, Collection the artist.

© 2008 Martin Puryear. Image courtesy Donald Young Gallery, Chicago

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Beckwourth's mixed ancestry and the various cultural environments he negotiated throughout his life. Puryear has said that he created these "drawn-out scribblings" to stand as "a nonverbal testament to Beckwourth's extraordinary life." In addition, they fulfill Puryear's interest in making a work that presents very different information when viewed close up and from a distance.

Composed of arcs, straight lines, and flat planes, *Bask* is the most severely geometric of Puryear's works, and it represents the artist's first successful attempt to construct a sculpture that incorporates compound curves out of several pieces of wood. The work was made using flat planks of pine joined to tapered, angled

segments, bent and fitted to create the rounded, swelling form rising above the ground plane. The title reflects the artist's sense that despite its rigidly controlled geometry, this sculpture suggests a form imbued with life.

Between 1978 and 1985 Puryear created a series of wall-mounted sculptures in the form of rings. Most of the works in the Ring series were constructed from strips of wood bent, glued, and shaved into

BELOW *Bask*, 1976, stained pine, 1' x 12'2¾" x 1'10," Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Exxon Corporate Purchase Award. © 2008 Martin Puryear

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RIGHT *Brunhilde*, 1998–2000, cedar and rattan, 8' x 9'4¼" x 6'2," Collection the artist. © 2008 Martin Puryear. Photo Richard P. Goodbody

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shape. Many were painted, possibly a vestige from the artist's beginnings as a painter. Indeed, Puryear has described these works as occupying the same space as paintings, but without a center, existing only as peripheries. The artist's first Ring sculpture (inside cover) is one of a small number of ring forms that Puryear produced by forcing saplings into a circular shape while they were still green. Puryear continues to work with wood up to the present. The swollen form of **Brunhilde** resembles a basket weave, but is actually made from less flexible strips of cedar and rattan that are glued, stapled, and clamped

together. **Malediction**, completed in 2007, is made from thin sheets of red cedar, its knifelike edges protruding from the wall.

While wood has remained Puryear's primary medium, he has regularly employed wire mesh and tar. Created in the late 1980s, **Maroon** is one of the artist's first works incorporating these materials. It introduced a means of realizing a massive, visually dense form that is almost veil-like in the delicate transparency of its skin. With its bulbous shape, circular wooden cap, and variety of materials and textures, **Maroon** contrasts organic and geometric



shapes, carefully handcrafted elements and raw wood, and a mysterious, unknowable interior space with a tactile exterior. The randomly superimposed patchwork of open-mesh metal fabric suggests a much-mended surface and also recalls the centuries-old convention of using crosshatched lines in drawings and engravings to build up density and shadow.

Puryear has frequently employed architectural and nautical building methods in his work. The surface of *Timber's Turn*, for instance, is similar to the planking of a boat or the sheathing on a building. Both this sculpture and *Sharp and Flat* (1987), also featured in the exhibition, are part of the series *Stereotypes and Decoys*, first shown in 1987. Characterized by a neck-like protrusion from a larger base, their proportions and inclines recall the animated gestures of swimming waterfowl.

While the works are thematically related and share an entirely faceted surface, they are distinguished from each other by variations in form and by the different wood-working techniques used in their construction. Created two years later, *Lever No. 3* continues Puryear's exploration of the same basic forms, but the hard-edged angles have been replaced by sinuous curves. An animal-like being emerges, but one that cannot be named. Such is the nature of much of Puryear's work: it is familiar, but cannot be identified; suggestive, but never explicit.

LEFT *Malediction*, 2006–2007, red cedar, pine, and various woods (black locust, ash, and rattan), 10'5 $\frac{3}{8}$ " x 4'9 $\frac{1}{4}$ " x 2'2," Collection the artist. © 2008 Martin Puryear. Photo Richard P. Goodbody  
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BELOW *Maroon*, 1987–1988, wire mesh, pine, yellow poplar, and tar, 6'4" x 10' x 6'6," Milwaukee Art Museum. Gift of the Contemporary Art Society. © 2008 Martin Puryear. Image courtesy Milwaukee Art Museum  
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BELOW **Lever No. 3**, 1989, carved and painted Ponderosa pine, 7'½" × 13'6" × 1'1," National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of the Collectors Committee. © 2008 Martin Puryear. Image courtesy Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles

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RIGHT **Timber's Turn**, 1987, Honduras mahogany, red cedar, and Douglas fir, 7'2½" × 3'10¾" × 2'10½," Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. Museum purchase.

© 2008 Martin Puryear. Photo Lee Stalworth

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Another wood sculpture, **Untitled** from 1997, is constructed of thin strips of painted cedar and pine planks. The work's opacity endows it with a sense of density and mass, yet it contains only a skeletal armature, extending Puryear's ongoing examination of the relationship between interior space, form, and volume. Its headlike shape is part of Puryear's fundamental artistic vocabulary. Manipulating it in various ways, Puryear has integrated this curved, delicately swollen contour line into other freestanding sculptures and into wall pieces and works on paper.

In **Confessional** (cover), the swelling form verges on the anthropomorphic. The planar front suggests a sealed portal, although

glimpses of the core may be seen through round and slitlike punctures. The patchwork mesh and tar similarly afford views inside. The play between interior and exterior worlds, however, is not only about physical space; the headlike form and title suggest psychological and spiritual realms.

**In Sheep's Clothing** — the title refers to the deceptive nature of appearances — continues Puryear's interest in the spaces hidden inside enclosed forms. What looks like a single massive block is actually wood assembled in layers. A hole at the top of the sculpture promises a view of the interior, although its height and angle hinder thorough inspection. The possibility of deception plays a role in other works by

THIS PAGE **Untitled**, 1997, painted cedar and pine, 5'8" x 4'9" x 4'3," The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Promised Gift of Agnes Gund and Daniel Shapiro. © 2008 Martin Puryear. Image The Museum of Modern Art. Photo John Wronn  
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RIGHT **In Sheep's Clothing**, 1996, pine, 4'5½" x 5'2¾" x 1'1½," Des Moines Art Center. Purchased with funds from the Nathan Emory Coffin Collection of the Des Moines Art Center. © 2008 Martin Puryear. Image courtesy McKee Gallery, New York  
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FAR RIGHT **A Distant Place**, 2005, basswood, yellow cedar, white pine, and maple burl, 15'¾" x 2'11¼" x 2'11¼," Collection the artist. © 2008 Martin Puryear. Image courtesy Donald Young Gallery, Chicago  
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Puryear. Although the spire of *A Distant Place* is reminiscent of a narwhal's tusk, it is in fact a carefully developed helical molding that ascends around an attenuated cone. In this sense it is more an artifact of architecture than of nature. The links of the chain in *Le Prix* are similarly deceptive. Carved as a unit, they permit the illusion that a flexible object is rising improbably and stiffly into the air. The title is ambiguous, meaning, in French, both "the prize" and "the price." In title and form, the work evokes multiple associations and meanings.

One of the most recent works on view in the exhibition is *C.F.A.O.* Its title stands for *Compagnie Française de l'Afrique Occidentale* (The French Company of West Africa), the name of a French trading company founded in the late nineteenth century that sailed between Marseille and West Africa, including ports in Sierra Leone, where Puryear lived during a 1964–1966 tour with the Peace Corps. The sculpture incorporates an old wheelbarrow that Puryear found while he was an artist in residence at Alexander





LEFT *Le Prix*, 2005, painted yellow pine and Alaskan yellow cedar, 10'2" × 7'6" × 1'1," Gretchen and John Berggruen, San Francisco. © 2008 Martin Puryear. Image courtesy Donald Young Gallery, Chicago EAST BUILDING

Calder's studio in Saché, France, in 1993. He surmounted it with an oversized and inverted mask based on a ceremonial mask made by the Fang people of Gabon, West Africa, which is in turn supported by and enmeshed in a dense thicket of interlocking pine scaffolding. The combination of the workman's wheelbarrow with the mask suggests themes of colonization and early contact as well as cultural exchange between vastly different societies.

The works in the exhibition highlight the vast array of techniques and materials that

Puryear has adeptly mastered over the past thirty years. Its loose chronological organization leaves room for the thematic currents and processes that run throughout his work. While Puryear's sculpture often alludes to recognizable forms and subjects, he has always intended it to remain independent of specific interpretations. "I think there are a number of levels at which my work can be dealt with and appreciated," he said in 1978. "It gives me great pleasure to feel there's a level that doesn't require knowledge of, or immersion in, the aesthetic of a specific time and place."

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ON THE WEB

[www.nga.gov/puryear](http://www.nga.gov/puryear)

GENERAL INFORMATION

Hours: Monday–Saturday,  
10:00 am–5:00 pm; Sunday,  
11:00 am–6:00 pm

Gallery Web site: [www.nga.gov](http://www.nga.gov)

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Admission to the National Gallery of Art and all of its programs is free of charge, except as noted.

CATALOGUE

The exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated 214-page catalogue, *Martin Puryear*, with essays by John Elderfield, Michael Auping, Elizabeth Reede, Richard J. Powell, and Jennifer Field. Published by The Museum of Modern Art, New York. 165 illustrations. Softcover \$35; hardcover \$60.

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***Martin Puryear***  
**begins in the Main  
Floor galleries of the  
West Building and  
continues in the  
Rotunda and in the  
East Building. The  
location of illustrated  
works is indicated in  
the captions.**

LEFT *C.F.A.O.*,  
2006–2007, painted and  
unpainted pine and found  
wheelbarrow, 8'3¼" ×  
6'5½" × 5'1," Courtesy the  
artist and Donald Young  
Gallery, Chicago. © 2008  
Martin Puryear. Photo  
Richard P. Goodbody  
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COVER *Confessional*,  
1996–2000, wire mesh,  
tar, and various woods,  
6'5⅞" × 8'1¼" × 3'9,"  
The Cartin Collection,  
Hartford, Connecticut.  
© 2008 Martin Puryear.  
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