

For Immediate Release

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**SFMOMA PRESENTS A RETROSPECTIVE ON SCULPTOR
MARTIN PURYEAR
First Major Survey in 15 Years**

From November 8, 2008, to January 25, 2009, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) presents *Martin Puryear*, a major exhibition of sculpture by the acclaimed American artist. The retrospective features 47 sculptures that chart the development of Puryear's career over the last 30 years, from his first solo show in 1977 to the present day. The exhibition was organized by John Elderfield, the Marie-Josée and Henry Kravis Chief Curator of Painting and Sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, and the San Francisco presentation is coordinated by Alison Gass, assistant curator of painting and sculpture at SFMOMA.

Puryear began his career in the late 1960s alongside other members of the postminimalist generation. He explored a variety of media—including painting, drawing, and printmaking—before devoting himself to sculpture. As a sculptor he has maintained an unwavering commitment to traditional building methods, working primarily in wood, but also utilizing an array of other materials, including wire mesh, tar, stone, stainless steel, and bronze. Puryear's work is further characterized by the artist's reliance on his own hand to create his sculptures, and by his insistence on mastering his materials—often through preparatory drawings and maquettes—and dexterously translating this understanding to individual works.

Throughout Puryear's 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 cultures of many societies around the globe, as well as the skills and trades employed there, and to make connections among disparate cultural traditions. As a result, Puryear's work is quiet but deliberately



Martin Puryear, *Sharp and Flat*, 1987; Collection Harry W. and Mary Margaret Anderson; © 2007 Martin Puryear; Image courtesy McKee Gallery, New York

associative, encompassing his wide-reaching cultural and intellectual experiences and drawing on a varied reserve of images, ideas, and information.

Martin Puryear is organized in a loosely chronological fashion, beginning with a selection of early pieces that reveal the emergence of elements most often associated with his mature works, such as arc and cone shapes. Examples include the 1976 sculpture *Bask*, a pine structure that resembles a boat hull, and *Circumbent*, an arc-shaped sculpture made of ash wood. Composed of arcs, straight lines, and flat planes, *Bask* is the most severely geometric of Puryear's sculptures, and it provides the clearest evidence of Minimalism's brief influence on the artist's work. *Circumbent* similarly reflects Puryear's interest in geometry; its shape is a semicircular arc bent 20 degrees out of plane, resting on a prop to form a kind of tripod.

Some Lines for Jim Beckwourth (1978), a tribute to the early 19th-century American adventurer, is made of dried, twisted lengths of rawhide with tufts of red, white, and black cow hair, symbolizing Beckwourth's mixed ancestry and the various cultural environments in which he lived. For another work dated 1978, *Self*, Puryear covered an armature with a half-inch-thick wooden sheath and then removed the armature, leaving only the wooden "skin." A solid-looking shell with a hollow interior, *Self* addresses the ideas of interiority and exteriority that pervade much of Puryear's work, and suggests that the self is a secret entity, a hidden place.

From 1978 to 1985 Puryear created a series of wall-mounted ring forms. Most of these works were constructed from strips of wood that were bent, glued, and shaved into shape. The artist has described these pieces as occupying the same space as paintings but lacking a center, existing only on the periphery. Examples of the *Ring* series in this exhibition are *Cerulean* (1982), *Dream of Pairing* (1981), *Big and Little Same* (1981), and his earliest prototype for this series, an untitled, garrote-shaped sculpture from 1978. The latter work is an example of a small number of ring sculptures that Puryear produced by forcing natural saplings into a circular form while they were still green.

Progressing into the later 1980s, *Old Mole* (1985) demonstrates Puryear's more metaphorical explorations. The approximately 5-by-5-foot woven wooden form invites free association, suggesting the mummified head of a bird, among other objects. Puryear's work of this period plays with the puzzle of identity and contains many animal-vegetable associations. In *Sharp and Flat* (1987), the pine planks on the surface of the sculpture are left raw, strengthening the wood's associations with the natural environment. The form's birdlike abstraction—its long neck rising from a great base—alludes to the waterfowl decoys used by hunters.

Many of Puryear's works explore the translucency of sculptural surfaces in materials other than wood. *Maroon* (1987), one of the artist's first pieces that incorporates tar over wire mesh, has a bulbous shape, circular wooden cap, and myriad materials and textures. *Maroon* reflects Puryear's interest in paradoxes within singular forms: he contrasts organic and geometric shapes; carefully handcrafted elements and raw wood; and a mysterious, unknowable interior space and a tactile exterior, all in the same work.

During the 1990s Puryear continued to explore common themes through forms that were increasingly complex, in both their composition and their symbolism. While Puryear's earlier sculptures had often featured solid wooden surfaces, the surface of *Brunhilde* (1998–2000) is open latticework that resembles a woven

basket; in fact, it is made from thin strips of laminated red cedar that were cut to precise lengths and then glued, stapled, and clamped together. Evidence of this painstaking process appears in the staple holes on the sculpture's surface. With this work, Puryear activates the interior space without concealing it. The piece seems inflated from within, its swollen shape suggesting an air-filled balloon or the inflated lungs of its namesake, the Valkyrie heroine of Wagner's operatic *Ring* cycle.

The exhibition concludes with a series of allegorical works made since 2000. *Le Prix* (2005) incorporates a wooden chain, painted gray, whose links are carved as a unit rather than looping loosely through one another, creating the illusion that a typically flexible object is rising improbably and stiffly into the air. The French title is ambiguous, meaning both "the prize" and "the price." *C.F.A.O.* (2006–7) makes reference to African tribal art. The work is constructed from an old wheelbarrow that Puryear found in 1993 while he was an artist-in-residence at Alexander Calder's studio in Saché, France. He attached to it an oversized impression of a 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 title references the Compagnie Française de L'Afrique Occidentale, a 19th-century trading company that sailed between Marseille and West Africa with ports in Sierra Leone, where Puryear lived during his tour with the Peace Corps (1964–66). The combination of the workman's wheelbarrow and the mask form suggests themes of colonization and early cultural exchange between vastly different societies.

Two works will be specially installed in SFMOMA's Evelyn and Walter Haas Jr. Atrium for the exhibition. The first, *Ladder for Booker T. Washington* (1996), is a 36-foot-tall split sapling that narrows and recedes as it ascends into space, exaggerating its length and distance from the viewer. Unlike earlier sculptures that call the viewer's attention to their tactile surfaces, this one invites the viewer to contemplate the sculpture's position—suspended in space by barely perceptible wires, suggesting ascension from the physical world. The second and newest sculpture in the exhibition, the 63-foot-tall *Ad Astra* (2007), incorporates an ash sapling that measures approximately 58 feet and is extended by an additional tapered limb that appears to reach "to the stars," as the title infers. The sculpture, rooted at its base by a pair of wagon wheels and a multifaceted wooden, crystalline form, is aspirational; its spire rises to the museum's fifth-floor bridge, suggesting a perpetual upward trajectory.

Puryear was born on May 23, 1941, in Washington, D.C., and now lives and works in upstate New York. As a high school and college student, he was interested in the natural sciences. He graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree from Catholic University of America in 1963, before studying printmaking at the Royal Academy of Sweden in Stockholm. He earned a Master of Fine Arts degree in sculpture from Yale University in 1971. In 1977, Puryear had his first solo museum show at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. Later that year he received an Individual Artist Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts and was awarded a studio at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center in Long Island City, New York, by the Institute for Art and Urban Resources.

Puryear's career also includes prolific work in the form of public sculpture installations and architectural designs in public gardens, in locations stretching from Boston to Seattle to Japan. A few of his most notable

projects include *Knoll for NOAA* (1983), a large-scale public art project on the shores of Seattle's Lake Washington; *Pavilion in the Trees* (1993), a bridge traversing the steep decline of a hill and connected to a gazebo-like structure in Fairmount Park, Philadelphia; and *North Cove Pylons* (1993), two tall, illuminated sculptures in New York City's Battery Park.

Martin Puryear is accompanied by a clothbound publication (192 pages, 130 color illustrations; \$60) featuring essays by Michael Auping, chief curator at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth; Elderfield; and Elizabeth Reede, assistant curator, Department of Painting and Sculpture, MoMA. The book also includes an interview with Puryear by Richard J. Powell, John Spencer Bassett Professor of Art and Art History at Duke University; a chronology by Jennifer Field, curatorial assistant, Department of Painting and Sculpture, MoMA; and illustrations of all works in the exhibition as well as comparative material. It is available at the SFMOMA MuseumStore or online at www.sfmoma.org.

Martin Puryear is organized by the Museum of Modern Art, New York. The San Francisco presentation is generously supported by Martha and John Gabbert and Room & Board.

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Museum hours: Open daily (except Wednesdays): 11 a.m. to 5:45 p.m.; open late Thursdays, until 8:45 p.m. Summer hours (Memorial Day to Labor Day): Open at 10 a.m. Closed Wednesdays and the following public holidays: New Year's Day, Fourth of July, Thanksgiving, Christmas. The museum is open the Wednesday between Christmas and New Year's Day.

Koret Visitor Education Center: Open daily (except Wednesdays): 11 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.; open late Thursdays, until 8:30 p.m. Summer hours: Open at 10 a.m.

Admission prices: Adults \$12.50; seniors \$8; students \$7. SFMOMA members and children 12 and under are admitted free. Thursday evenings after 6 p.m. admission is half-price. The first Tuesday of each month admission is free.

SFMOMA is easily accessible by Muni, BART, Golden Gate Transit, SamTrans, and Caltrain. Hourly, daily, and monthly parking is available at the SFMOMA Garage at 147 Minna Street. For parking information, call 415.348.0971.

Visit our website at www.sfmoma.org or call 415.357.4000 for more information.

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