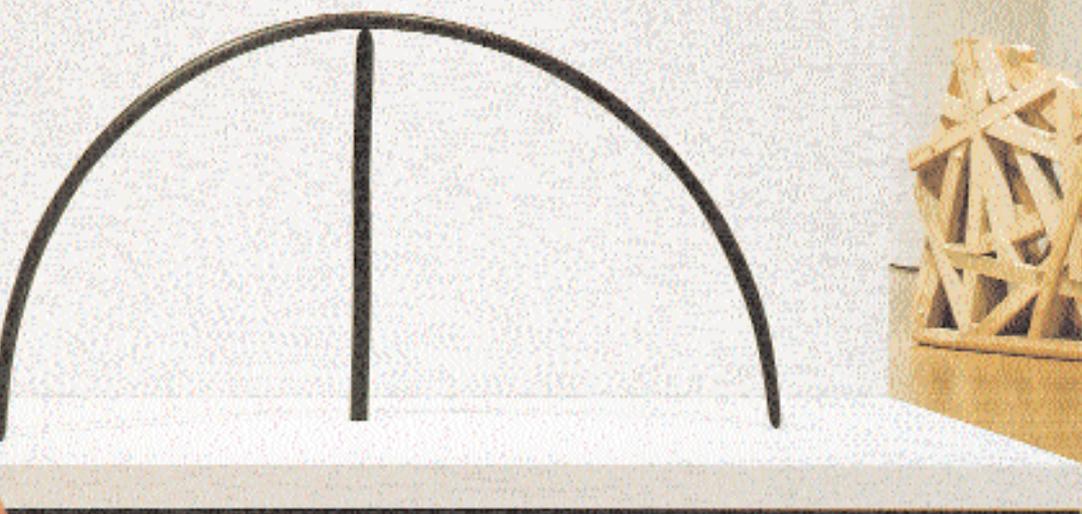


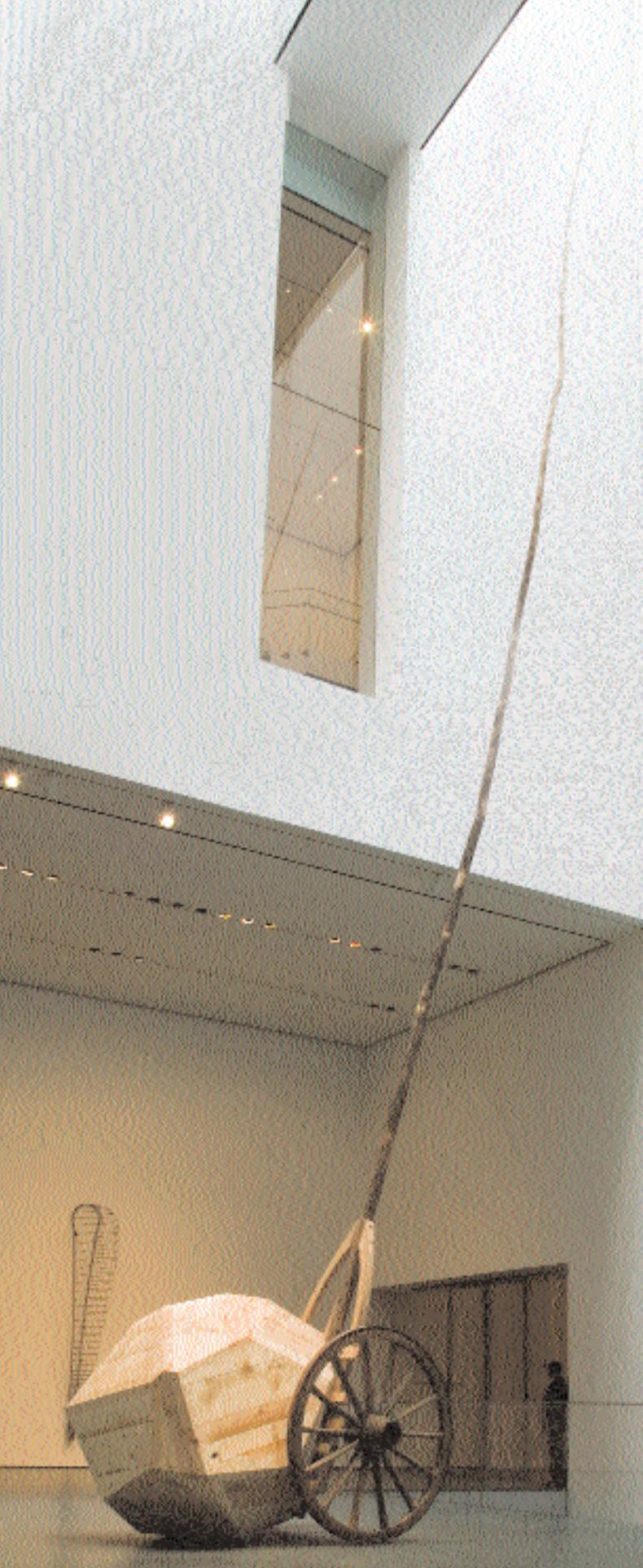


Installation view of "Martin Puryear" at MoMA, with (foreground) *For Beckwourth*, 1980.

Martin Puryear



Spirit, Personhood,
and History



BY JAN GARDEN CASTRO

Martin Puryear's work muses on spirit, personhood, and history as a sort of antidote to the nation's present identity crisis. His retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, traveling until 2009 to the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, takes viewers in new directions while drawing connections to some of America's historical roots. One uncomfortable fact: Puryear is only the fifth African American artist to receive a solo exhibition in painting or sculpture since MoMA's founding in 1929.

Puryear has followed his own muses and traditions, yet his work carries forward attributes of Rembrandt and Velázquez—being conscious of himself as maker and giving each work its own, sometimes multiple identity. Each Puryear sculpture makes many fine distinctions, somehow pointing to and moving beyond his antecedents and beyond concerns with mass and volume, solids and space, and linear and elliptical forms. Beyond formal concerns, his work points to a deep questioning of America's founding principles and the role of the individual within society.

These core concepts are visible in his newest work, *Ad Astra* (2007), and in *Ladder for Booker T. Washington* (1996). Both take advantage of MoMA's five-story-high Marron Atrium to address notions of perspective. *Ladder's* genesis, as Puryear told *Art 21*, a PBS series, was his desire to create a form that appears "to recede in space faster than it actually does." From a woodworking perspective, the challenge was to split the 36-foot-long ash sapling. The title adds a historical aspect, alluding to Washington's plan for progress, which was to "rise up the ladder" of life by hard work. However, Puryear's ladder dangles in space and is too small at the top to hold a person. *Ladder* is a magnificently crafted optical and psychological riddle relevant to more than black history. John Elderfield, the exhibition organizer and MoMA's chief curator of painting and sculpture, sees *Ladder* as "clearly relate[d] to the *Untitled* bent ladder form (2000), which turns around and there's a tree that grows out of it."¹ In this work, the ladder forms an elliptical treadmill whose ends meet in a point connected to a diagonally curving branch. The composition seems to comment on loopholes and the metaphorical nature of "ladders" to the top; it also suggests a hockey stick, a golf club, or other tools that serve as vehicles for ascending.

Ad Astra complicates this theme. It first impressed me as a paradoxical treatment of true ambition and false ambition—a many-sided form representing the ego, a war chest, or a weight counterbalances a slender tree soaring over 63 feet high. The faceted box is "the motor" or front end of an antique two-wheeled chariot-like form. Built into the axle is an easel/tripod/frame; this, in turn, supports the tree trunk, which tapers dramatically, appearing to vanish into infinity like the ladder. *Ad Astra* is

Ad Astra, 2006–07. Ash, Sitka spruce, hickory, and pine and found wagon wheels, 756 x 74 x 104 in.

Latin for “toward the stars,” suggesting Brancusi’s *Endless Column* and its theme of spiritual elevation. The combination of human-scale and very tall forms refers back to *Box and Pole* (1977), an outdoor work that contrasts volume and perspective through “Euclidian shapes that allude directly to Minimalist forms,” according to Elizabeth Reede’s catalogue essay. It suggests, too, that human aspirations are infinite yet sometimes exceed one’s reach. The viewer doesn’t know that *Ad Astra*’s box is filled with lead. The pine humorously suggests a woodworker’s notion of a fancy coffin. For Elderfield, “The crystalline shape is a bit reminiscent of an early Giacometti piece; only in this case, it looks like a mineral shape but is all wood. The box provides ballast to keep the whole thing upright.” Philosophically, the box could symbolize ambition, false appearances, burdens, and even death.

The chariot form, in my view, explicitly quotes Giacometti’s *The Chariot* (1950), a bronze in MoMA’s collection. *The Chariot*’s two tall wheels rest on two wooden stands; a slender female figure balances on a dais supported by the axle between the wheels. Before the chariot became part of the Greco-Roman legacy, its Asiatic and Egyptian origins inspired many parables. For example, in the *Katha Upanishad*, Yama, the god of death, compares the chariot to the body, the charioteer to the intellect, and the horse to the senses—only their cooperative functioning leads to wisdom. Puryear is interested in these kinds of correspondences and genealogies, and his box, according to this reading, is the race-car motor replacing the horse.

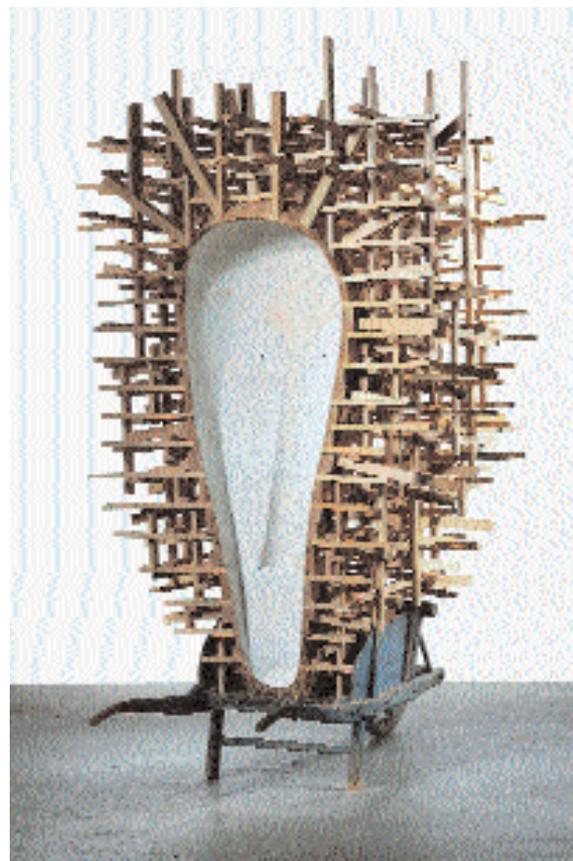
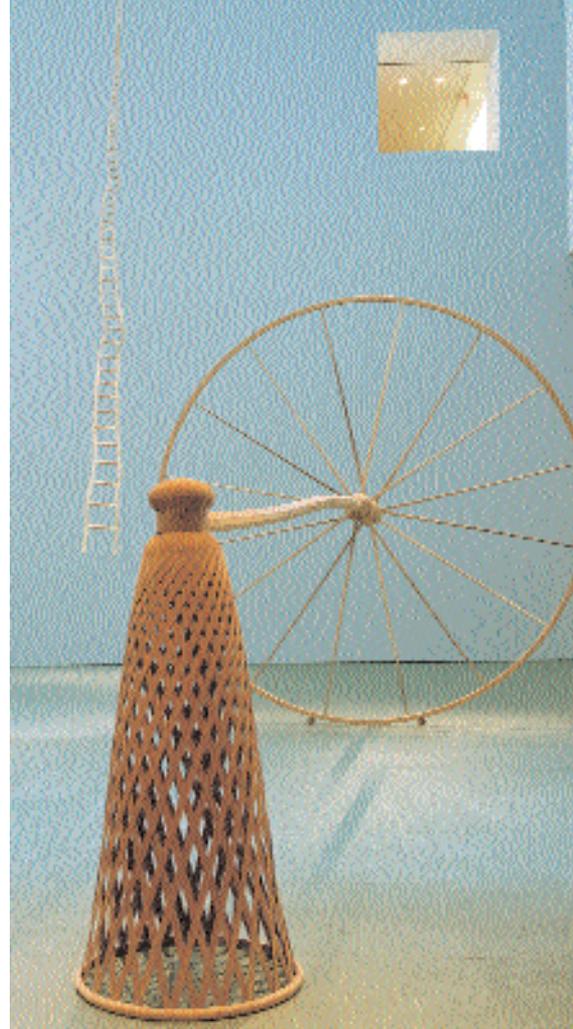
Rising from the axle in *Ad Astra* is not an incredibly lean maiden but an incredibly lean tree. This detail might allude not only to *The Chariot*, but also to the myth of Daphne and Apollo. Of course, a great many composers and graphic artists have been inspired by this myth, and Bernini’s marble in Rome is a realistic rendering. The soaring tree is a perfect anthropomorphic rendering of a maiden. The only sad note is that the tree is shorn of all signs of life; its tip is a “false” extension. Whatever its significance, the tree is “stripped bare”—by her bachelors, even? As the cat-

alogue notes, Puryear’s *Shrine* shares correspondences with Duchamp’s *Chocolate Grinder (No. 2)* (1914). *Ad Astra* also exemplifies Puryear’s interest in the history of hand-craft and in mating different types of wood. His studio is almost a museum of rare, old, and new tools and materials. As he told *Art 21*, “By working incrementally, there’s a built-in story in the making of things which I think can be interesting.”

Finally, the tree is attached to the “chariot” form by a triangular tripod/easel/frame, signifying the artist’s hand in composing the sculpture. This element, in fact, directly reminds viewers that Velázquez put himself and his own frame and easel in the controlling middle ground of *Las Meninas*. Altogether, *Ad Astra* is a Modernist gem with many more facets. Elderfield believes that “the compelling quality of Puryear’s work” lies in his “making of big ideas. Out of this come the surprises and the illuminations and out of that kind of working comes this way of tapping into imagination that allows him to draw on the art of many cultures without being specific to any one of them. It doesn’t look like anything we’ve seen but reminds us of a lot that we’ve seen. It engages our imagination to think of other things that we know. It does what earlier sculpture did and what quite a lot of recent sculpture doesn’t do.”

The 47 works in this retrospective cannot be easily categorized. They offer a range of spare shapes evoking universals, realized in Puryear’s elemental materials. *C.F.A.O.* (2006–07) is an enlarged, white-painted impression of the reverse of a Fang mask. This carved-out, reverse relief, bristling with pine “hair” or spirit-rays, perches on an antique wheelbarrow. The mask’s front is obliterated by scaffolding whose dense grid seems to comment on Modernism’s appropriation of African culture. The title’s initials stand for *Compagnie Française de l’Afrique Occidentale*, a late 19th-century trading company that brutalized West African peoples by forcing them into heavy

Top: Installation view with (background) *Ladder for Booker T. Washington*, 1996, and *Desire*, 1981. **Bottom:** *C.F.A.O.*, 2006–07. Painted and unpainted pine and found wheelbarrow, 100.75 x 77.5 x 61 in.





Left: *Maroon*, 1987–88. Wire mesh, pine, yellow poplar, and tar, 76 x 120 x 76 in. Below: *Le Prix*, 2005. Painted yellow pine and Alaskan yellow cedar, 122 x 90 x 13 in.



Maroon (1987–88) has been shown in two versions. In the first, a bulbous tar and wire cage was attached to a long mesh nose cone. In the version at MoMA, the bulbous cage has a round wooden lid with a small square hole facing up. Puryear said that “maroon” may mean to desert or leave someone behind. He also acknowledged that he may be referring to Maroons, a subset of African resisters to slavery who escaped their captors and lived in North, Central, and South America. *Maroon* and many other sculptures—including semi-transparent tar and wire works, hollow but solid works, and open-weave see-through works—point to distinctions between the inner and outer lives of an individual and a culture as a whole. In *Le Prix* (2005), French for both “the prize” and “the cost,” a snail-like form attaches to a wooden chain leading to a large ring. Suggesting the games behind awards, fame, and money in today’s art world, it underscores the humor and metaphor in the exhibition.

labor and destroying their cultures. Clearly, *C.F.A.O.’s* presence at MoMA is not just about different cultures meeting, as the wall text would have it; the work is a re-telling of the story of the Fang and their role in African art and culture.

Puryear’s early love of craft; his years outside the U.S. in Sierra Leone among the Mende people; long periods spent working in Sweden, France, and Japan; his studies at Yale; and his relationships with master craftsmen over the years have given him a deep respect for working in human scale, so he was extremely careful when he began

creating art on a larger scale. His public art commissions, including those from the General Services Administration (GSA) and the Getty Center, are large, symbolic heads that offer vital messages.

Dale Lanzone, GSA’s director of cultural and environmental affairs when it commissioned *Bearing Witness* (1994–98) for Federal Triangle in Washington, DC, related: “He designed the form in such a way that there was an interior structure upon which the surface is then attached and riveted together. You see the rivets and the thousands of strike marks—the forces involved in making this piece. He also considered issues of scale—the way it works against the large neoclassical and postmodern building elements that come into play in Federal Plaza. *Bearing Witness* is an extraordinary work of art in an incredibly suitable location. What I love is its commanding otherness. It comes out of different frames of reference from the other spaces yet is visually a full participant and sculpturally rich.”²

Bearing Witness was inspired, in part, by *Self* and Puryear’s other head-like forms made of wood, wire mesh, tar, and other materials. As David Levi-Strauss points out, further inspirations were an African mask and the head of his daughter Sasha, who was born in 1992.³ A beautiful curve at the back of a baby’s head is a particular shape, but it is also a universal. Somehow the work, facing the powers that circulate in the nation’s capital, contains both masculine and feminine elements and stands for innocence and watchfulness.

Puryear told Richard J. Powell, “Interior space is often the secret space of sculpture, certainly in traditional sculpture, which is monolithic...I think of interior space as a world with enormous conceptual potential, an important aspect of sculpture.”⁴ This applies to works with solid outer coverings like *Self* and *Bearing Witness*, whose insides are unknown to viewers, as well as to works with openings like *Maroon* and *That Profile*, (1997–99), a softly curving,

Installation view with (left to right) *Untitled*, 1997, *Untitled*, 2000, *Old Mole*, 1985, *Malediction*, 2006–07, *In Sheep's Clothing*, 1996–98, and *Dowager*, 1990.

giant form interwoven like a very loose basket—perhaps the baby's head again. The viewer's 360-degree view of the form on the Getty Center grounds somehow mirrors a baby's openness, and need for, the world around her/him. Puryear's use of varied degrees of open, transparent, opaque, and solid materials infuses his work with many conceptual nuances.

In addition to the formal elements in Puryear's oeuvre, there are many gendered references. He usually doesn't point things out, but he has titled one series "Boy's Toys." Two sculptures are titled *She* and another one *Her*, and this distinction between the subject pronoun "she" and the object pronoun "her" points to the two roles played by women in language and in life. In addition, many of Puryear's largest works, including *Bearing Witness* and *Ad Astra*, contain both male and female elements. In the same way, Puryear has incorporated ideas from various races and heritages throughout his long career.

The exhibition catalogue is mostly silent regarding whether or not Puryear's art is "great" or brilliant. Only MoMA director Glenn D. Lowry, in a brief foreword, says that Puryear's sculpture is "among the most important and inventive of our time..." Two colleagues have voiced additional views. Sculptor Ursula von Rydingsvard noted, "In looking at Martin's work, I can taste his love toward crafting the object and tailoring that craft exquisitely to the idea that it supports." Artist Jake Berthot told me, "When I look at Martin's work, I feel more than Martin the maker, the maker who in the act of making is not just an artist but also an archaeologist of the spirit—the spirit of other makers, be they an African woman who weaves baskets; an Eskimo who constructed—within the limits and demands of his elements, utensils, tools—a dwelling; an American Indian who formed and shaped a bow and carefully weighed and balanced his arrows; or a New England boat builder. Martin, in the magic of his art, honors the skill and dignity of



other makers who know and feel with their hands and hearts what lies in the soul—their soul and the material-at-hand's soul—Martin, in his work, is a kind of shaman, a shaman who, with dignity, elegance, and humbleness, reaches far beyond the art of making sculpture."⁵

Puryear uses craft to speak for American values that not even the founding fathers fully realized: how art can never dictate but only remind us of and inspire us toward higher rather than lower values; how male and female signs and symbols may intertwine; how many native and mixed heritages have enriched this country and the world; and how the field of sculpture is variously nourished by a cross-pollination of arts, crafts, and cultures.

Elderfield titled his catalogue essay "Martin Puryear: Ideas of Otherness," quoting the artist himself. The designations "other" and "otherness" recall the semiotic terminology used by Poststructuralist and post-colonial theorists to discuss issues of minorities, women, homosexuals, and the

trans-gendered. In the 1990s, in France, "other" became a sociopolitical term, as racial and social unrest led to the creation, in 2000, of a commission to study racial justice. In American art theory, "otherness" generally refers to race, gender divisions, and perspectives not derived from classical traditions and white European men.

"Other" may also be a way to separate one part from another—if, for example, a person or work has two racial or cultural heritages. In this sense, we may all be "others" to ourselves or someone else.

In 2007, it is time to re-think the language of otherness. America is already a giant gumbo or *caldo* of mixed and varied races and cultures. It's curious that many MoMA viewers told me that they see Puryear's work as familiar, not "other": layers of craft, humor, history, personhood, and spirit are transformed and united. They are same and other.

Jan Garden Castro is a writer based in New York.

Notes

¹ All quotations are from a phone interview with John Elderfield on October 15, 2007. Many thanks to Elderfield and to Meg Blackburn, MoMA Senior Publicist, for providing materials for this essay.

² Interview with Dale Lanzone, currently director of the Marlborough Gallery, Chelsea, on October 8, 2007. As director of Cultural and Environmental Affairs, he headed GSA's Art and Architecture Program.

³ See David Levi Strauss, "From Hand to Head and Back Again: Some Lines

for Martin Puryear," in *Nunzio Martin Puryear Forma Ligneata* (Rome and Milan: American Academy in Rome and Electa, 1997), p. 72. See also Jan Garden Castro, "Martin Puryear: The Call of History," *Sculpture*, December 1998.

⁴ *Martin Puryear*, exhibition catalogue, (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2007), p. 108.

⁵ Thanks to Ursula von Rydingsvard and Jake Berthot for their comments and to R. Rhyne and J. Rosen for comments that contributed to this essay.