

The Shallow Act of Seeing

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**John Michael
Kohler Arts Center**



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you realize in many cases they're actually poor facsimiles. They have to look just real enough that, in the context of the theater, you accept them." Gunn is not trying to trick people; rather, he is interested in where the line of realism is. What are the elements needed to push his sculptures as close as possible to the point of belief?

Bayne Peterson is also interested in ways of making wood appear soft. Using dyed plywood to form undulating and curvaceous structures, at first glance their material is also hard to identify. He rigorously sands the sculptures to create a surface that does not react to light or shadow. Their seemingly impossible curves suggest that they're pliable. Peterson spent time studying Inuit carving and was inspired by the subtle and organic renderings of animals and the smooth finishing. Striking and irregular color combinations add to the disorienting experience of viewing the work; like miniature topographies, the sculptures combine round curves and flat shapes. They dance with the eye.

For this exhibition, Rachel Beach produced a new body of work. In opposition to her typically solid totemic towers, she experimented with negative space and absence. Beginning with sketches of four kinds of classic vessels, she extended the lines out and then mirrored that expanded shape. She stretched this new form to a human scale, emphasizing the points of possible contact as a viewer stands in front of them. Each of the resultant latticed sculptures is a complex network of tangled lines that appear to rearrange itself as a viewer moves around the work.

These works call out for company. They want to be examined, studied, and reacted to. They are here to welcome you back.



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This exhibition is supported by the **Kohler Trust for Arts and Education**, the **Frederic Cornell Kohler Charitable Trust**, **Kohler Foundation, Inc.**, and the **Wisconsin Arts Board** with funds from the **State of Wisconsin** and the **National Endowment for the Arts**.

Wood is a familiar material, used to make hundreds of objects we come into contact with every day. Its ubiquity can make it invisible, collapsing its particularities and aesthetic qualities.

This exhibition of contemporary woodwork features artists who render wood strange. Their work challenges the assumptions we carry about wood: that it is hard, masculine, inflexible, useful, brown, impersonal, serious.

All three artists featured, Dan Gunn (IL), Bayne Peterson (RI), and Rachel Beach (NY), make work that pushes both the physical and the conceptual limits of wood. From a curatorial perspective, as the pandemic increasingly defined our world by where we could not go, the idea of foregrounding physical things made by people felt ever more important. It became apparent that the work these artists were making needed to be experienced in person to be complete. They reward spending time with them, sharing space with them. *The Shallow Act of Seeing* became a celebration of both the mutability of wood and the reopening of the Arts Center's galleries.

A former set builder, Dan Gunn took inspiration from several aspects of the theater for his lacquered plywood wall hangings. Drawn to the dramatic drapes of the stage curtains, Gunn echoes these forms. From afar, they appear to be fabric bunting, but, with inspection, are revealed to be wood. Intentionally imperfect, Gunn also likens the works to props. "When you're sitting in the audience, all the props on stage look real. But when you see them with the lights on and up close,

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Cover: Dan Gunn, *Pink Vanilla Scenery*, 2019, acrylic, stain, and polyurethane on maple and birch plywood with nylon rope; 38 x 45 in. Courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago.

1 Rachel Beach, *Husk*, 2014; oil, acrylic, chalk pastel, and plywood; 78 x 24 x 18 in. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Cary Whittier.

2 Bayne Peterson, *untitled*, 2020; dyed plywood; 11 x 15 1/2 x 5 1/2 in. Courtesy of the artist and Kristen Lorello, NY; Private Collection. Photo: Jeffrey Sturges.

3 Rachel Beach, *Buttress*, 2014; oil, acrylic, chalk pastel, and plywood; 78 x 24 x 18 in. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Cary Whittier.

4 Dan Gunn, *Ringer Scenery*, 2019; acrylic, stain, and furniture finish on maple plywood with nylon rope; 106 x 35 in. Courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago.