

CATALOGUE ESSAY by Glenn Adamson

'The Traveller cannot see North but knows the Needle can'
Christopher Kurtz, Messums, July 2019

I once knew a woman who taught English to young kids in Tokyo. They were perhaps ten years old. On one occasion, the students were bundled into a big bus and taken out to the countryside, for an overnight trip. As darkness fell, she noticed that several of them were standing stock still, eyes, wide, staring directly upwards. She asked them what they were looking at. "Stars," they answered. "We've never seen them before."

For all its undoubted benefits, modern industrial life has also entailed many losses – and for city folk, that includes the night sky. It was once a primary means by which people navigated their lives – not just geographically, as on a ship voyage, but also in time, with the annual passage of constellations, up from the horizon and back down again. Today, even those who do see the stars at night have plenty of other ways to know what day it is, and which direction they are going. But is it possible we're getting lost anyhow? Consider those kids from Tokyo, for whom the universe itself had become hidden. Consider, too, the many other ways that we have become distanced from our environment. While our relationships to natural resources have never been more complex, or more problematic, most people lack even a basic understanding of how materials themselves are shaped, or the cultural histories that they carry within them.

It's against this admittedly enormous backdrop that I would like to set the new works of Christopher Kurtz – for it requires vast scale to properly take their measure. Physically, they are slight, composed of slim elements of linden wood (the same medium, incidentally, that the eighteenth-century Grinling Gibbons wrought so miraculously). Each of these components is individually tapered with a drawknife and then joined together into converging vertexes. Kurtz then eases the transitions with epoxy and covers the whole construction with white milk paint, achieving a seamless surface.

Having read this brief technical description, you know all there is to know about how they are built – but that has little to do with their magic. To understand that, we need to delve deeper – beginning with Kurtz's own biography. Raised in a part of Missouri where the stars are still plenty visible, he went on to study both sculpture and landscape architecture, and then served as a studio assistant to the great Martin Puryear. As one might expect, this was a profound experience. He played a large part in fashioning Puryear's sculptures, which are unparalleled in their formal invention and material intelligence. He learned a great deal in these years. Eventually though, it was time to set up shop on his own, which he did in Saugerties, a town in upstate New

York. Perhaps unexpectedly, he took a turn into furniture-making, conducting himself through a self-guided apprenticeship in the craft. He'd always been fascinated by its forms – both traditional, such as the Windsor chair, and modernist, such as the seating forms of Gerrit Rietveld, or Scandinavian designers like Hans Wegner.

Kurtz's current sculptures reflect all these influences. While in no way derivative of Puryear's work, they follow his lead in their gently suggestive abstraction, which edges right up to the threshold of a recognisable image without tipping into obviousness. Their taut, whippy lines recall the slender spindles of a Windsor chair back. And the construction takes inspiration from both Rietveld's designs – in which rays and planes seem to emanate from the infinite, colliding as if by chance into the form of a chair – and Wegner's, which have similar softening curves at every joint.

Yet another resonance, still more fundamental, is that with the human body. Encountering an array of Kurtz's sculptures, one is immediately struck by their varied postures. They are like so many dancers on stage, or fencers with rapiers drawn, *en garde*. Each has its own unique and characterful stance: a radiating burst; a slow spiral; a drastic asymmetry; a single intersection, source code for all the others. Some of the compositions are systematic, with modules that repeat. Others more individuated in their parts. All, however, are worked out intuitively at the bench, each angle a matter of improvisation. Even the overall orientation, determined by the axis of suspension, is open to question until the works are completed. And even then, they spin with the slightest current of air, rotating like the celestial bodies they so strongly evoke.

The association with astronomy is indeed irresistible, particularly when the sculptures are hung aloft, as they are at Messums Wiltshire – a medieval barn with a glorious trussed roof, only sixteen miles distant from the ancient observatory that we know as Stonehenge. Here we return to the issue of scale. Kurtz's works meet us more or less on level terms – their dimensional range is about the same as that of people (children included). But they have no 'natural scale', as architects say. There is nothing about them that anchors firmly to an external reference point. Hence they can be taken variously as purely conceptual forms, with galactic implication; as practical prototypes for much larger sculptures (one of which Kurtz has already achieved, in bronze, no less); or as mimetic depictions of minute physical events, the cracks within ice or glass, or still smaller, of cellular structures.

Like all effective sculpture, of course, the works can also be taken in metaphorical terms. At Kurtz's studio, I had the slightly crazy impression that each one diagrammed a particular political structure. This one, with everything leading to a single centre, is monarchy. That one over there, with its evenly distributed and diverse formations, is democracy. Maybe the one still on the workbench will turn out to be anarchy? I decided this reading did not hold up under scrutiny, but that it occurred to me at all points to a subtle ethical current in the work.

It's common enough to see craftsmanship held up as emblematising the 'good life', and for good reason: it is both guarantor and the model of socially aware self-reliance. Kurtz personally embodies these values, and so too, in some obscure but utterly convincing way, do his sculptures. Built from innumerable connections, they are more resilient than they look. You'll have to take my word for this, but if you pull on them gently, they flex open like a spring, then bounce back into a state of equilibrium. I imagine that most people, if allowed to design their life according to similar principles, would gladly take the chance. And yet – and at last – it would not be right to see Kurtz's work only in this light, as simple symbols of a social network. The telescopic scale of the works, and their sublime grandeur of conception, position them outside of human interest. The mental space they open up is bigger than that – as big, in fact, as space itself.

Glenn Adamson
May 2019