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The Traveller cannot see North but knows the Needle can

A response to the barn at Messums Wiltshire

Exhibition: 13 July - 1 September 2019

MESSUMS WILTSHIRE

Christopher Kurtz

An Essay by Glenn Adamson

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.

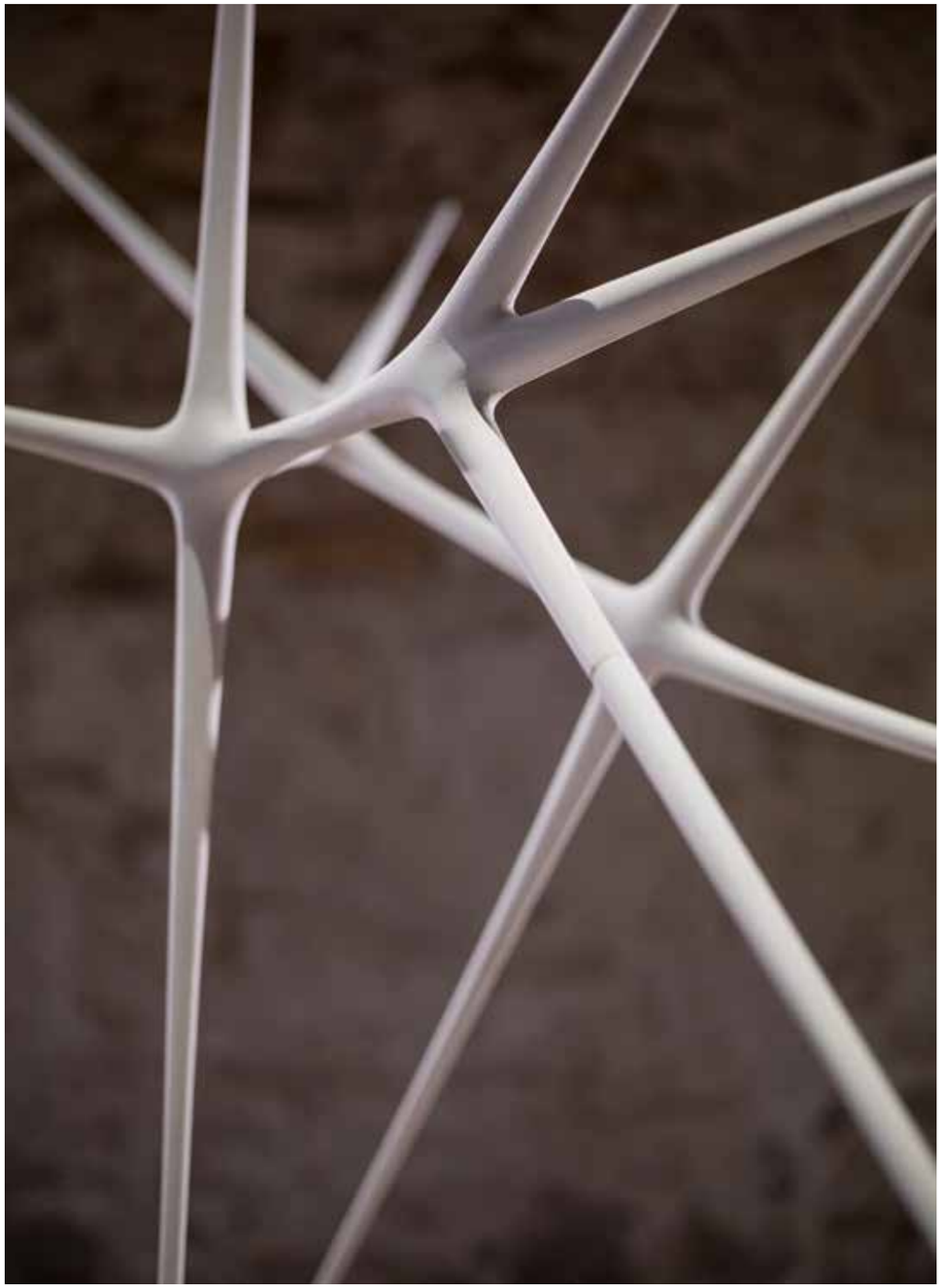
Yet another resonance, still more fundamental, is that with the human body. Encountering an array of Kurtz's sculptures, one is immediately struck by their varied postures. They are like so many dancers on stage, or fencers with rapiers drawn, en garde. Each has its own unique and characterful stance: 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 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.

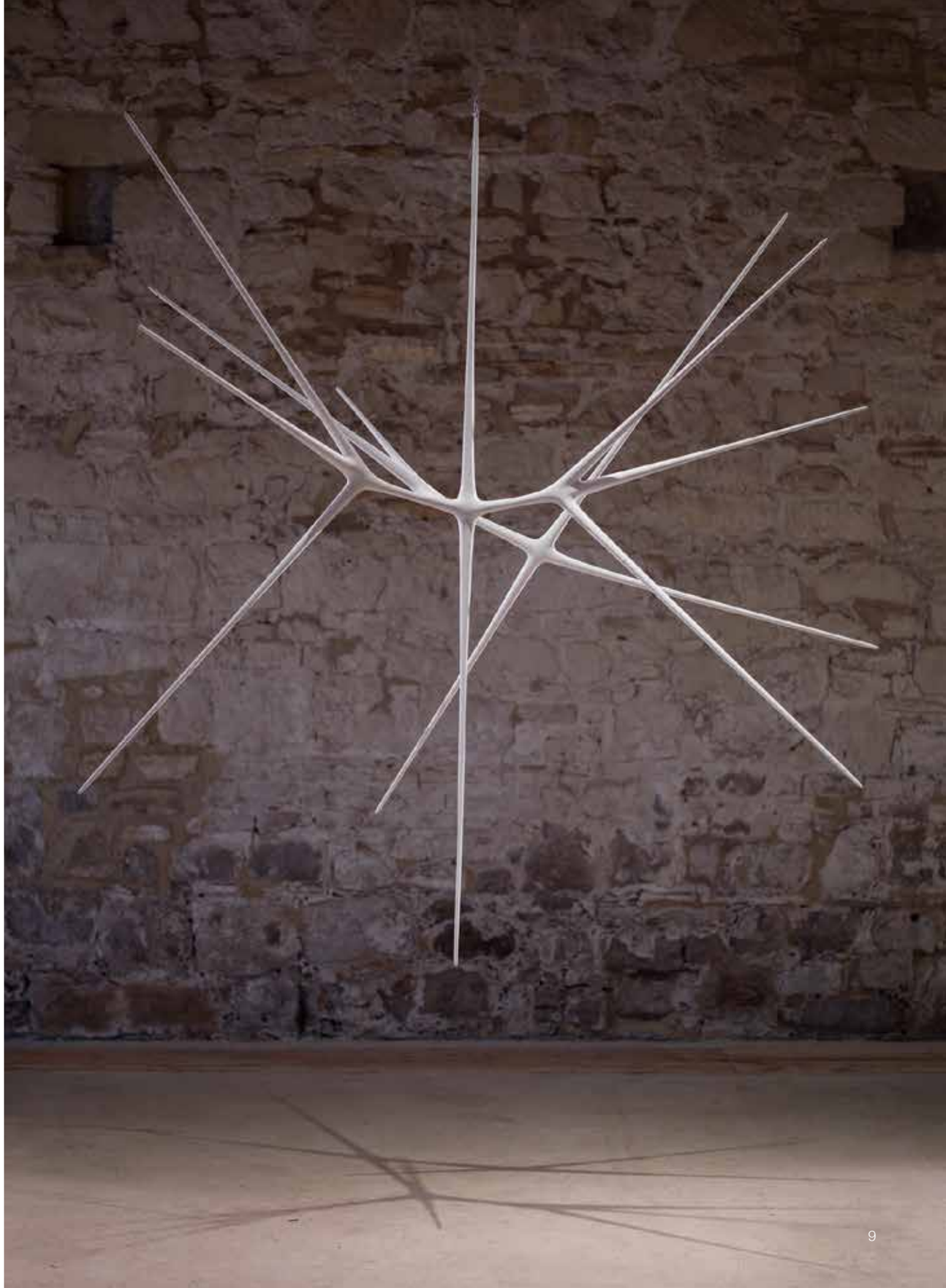
Like all effective sculpture, of course, the works can also be taken in metaphorical terms. At Kurtz's studio, I had the slightly crazy impression that each one diagrammed a particular political structure. This one, with everything leading to a single center, is monarchy. That one over there, with its 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

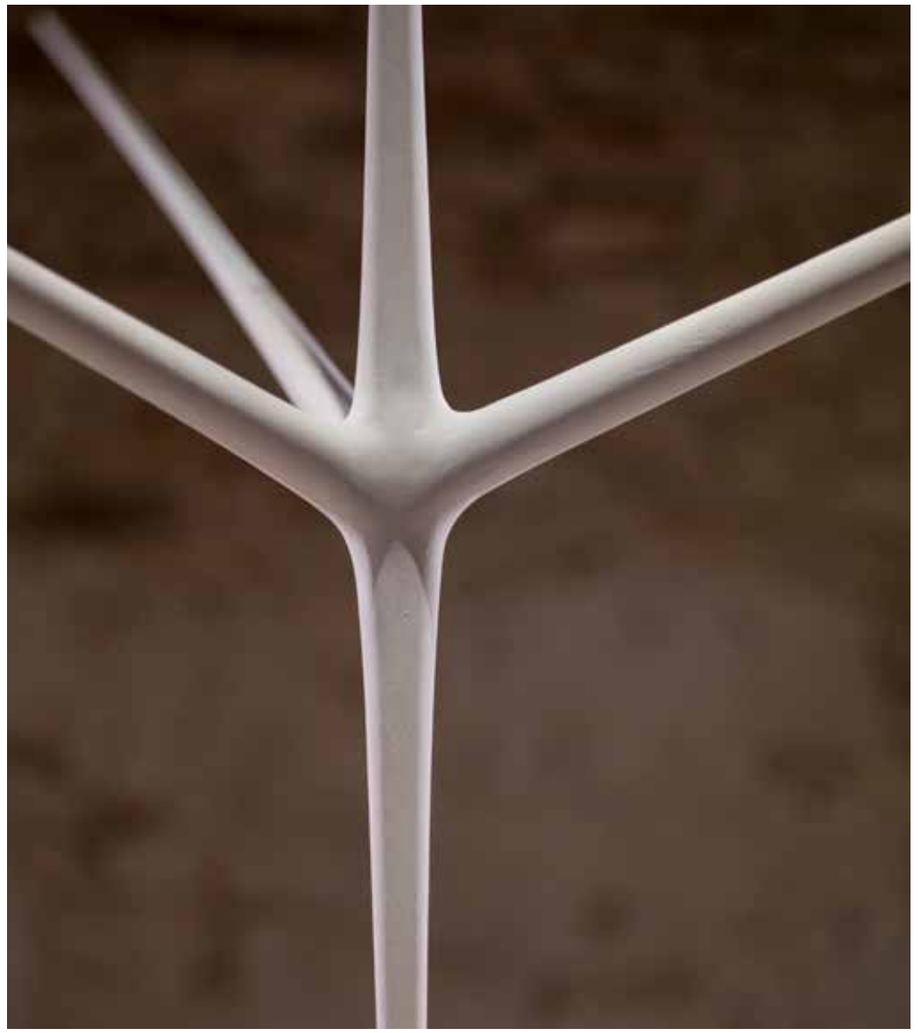


Wiltshire Meridian CK 40119, 7x 7y 6z
Linden wood with milk paint



Black Hole Bench CK 60119, 1.4x 1.6y 1.8z
MDF with burnished graphite, linden wood
with milk paint, ebonised oak

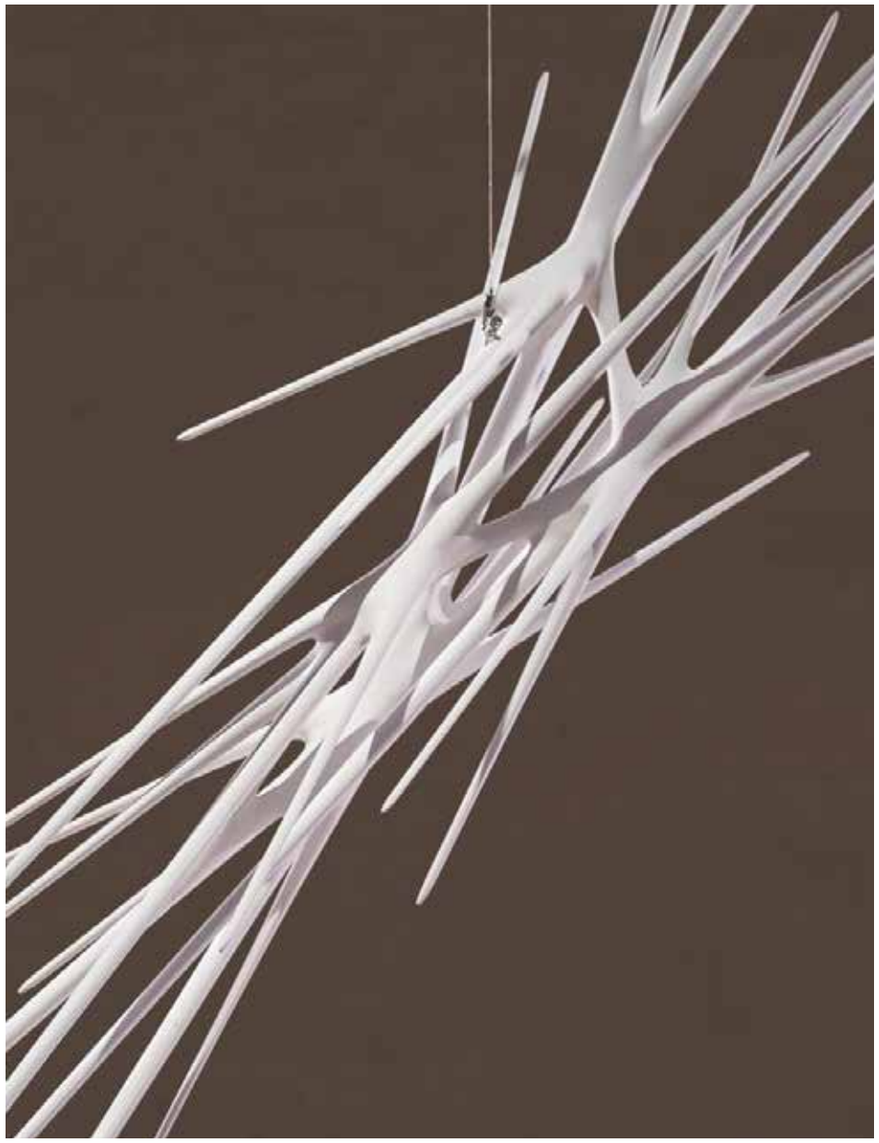
Wiltshire Meridian CK 40219, 4x 1y 10z
Linden wood with milk paint



Wiltshire Meridian CK 40519, 6x 6y 6z
Linden wood with milk paint

Black Hole Bench CK 60319, 1.9x 3.2y 1.6z
MDF with burnished graphite, linden wood
with milk paint, ebonised oak

Wiltshire Meridian CK 40619, 7x 7y 8z
Linden wood with milk paint



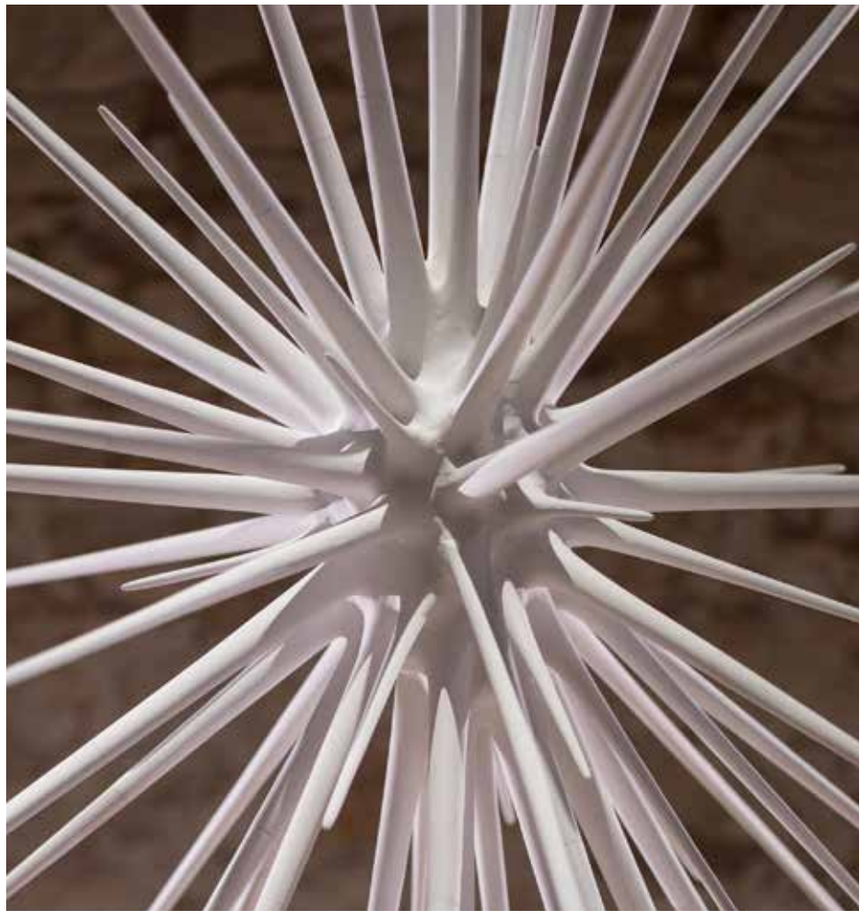
Wiltshire Meridian CK 40919, 11x 3y 3z
Linden wood with milk paint

Wiltshire Meridian CK 40419, 3x 3y 9z
Linden wood with milk paint

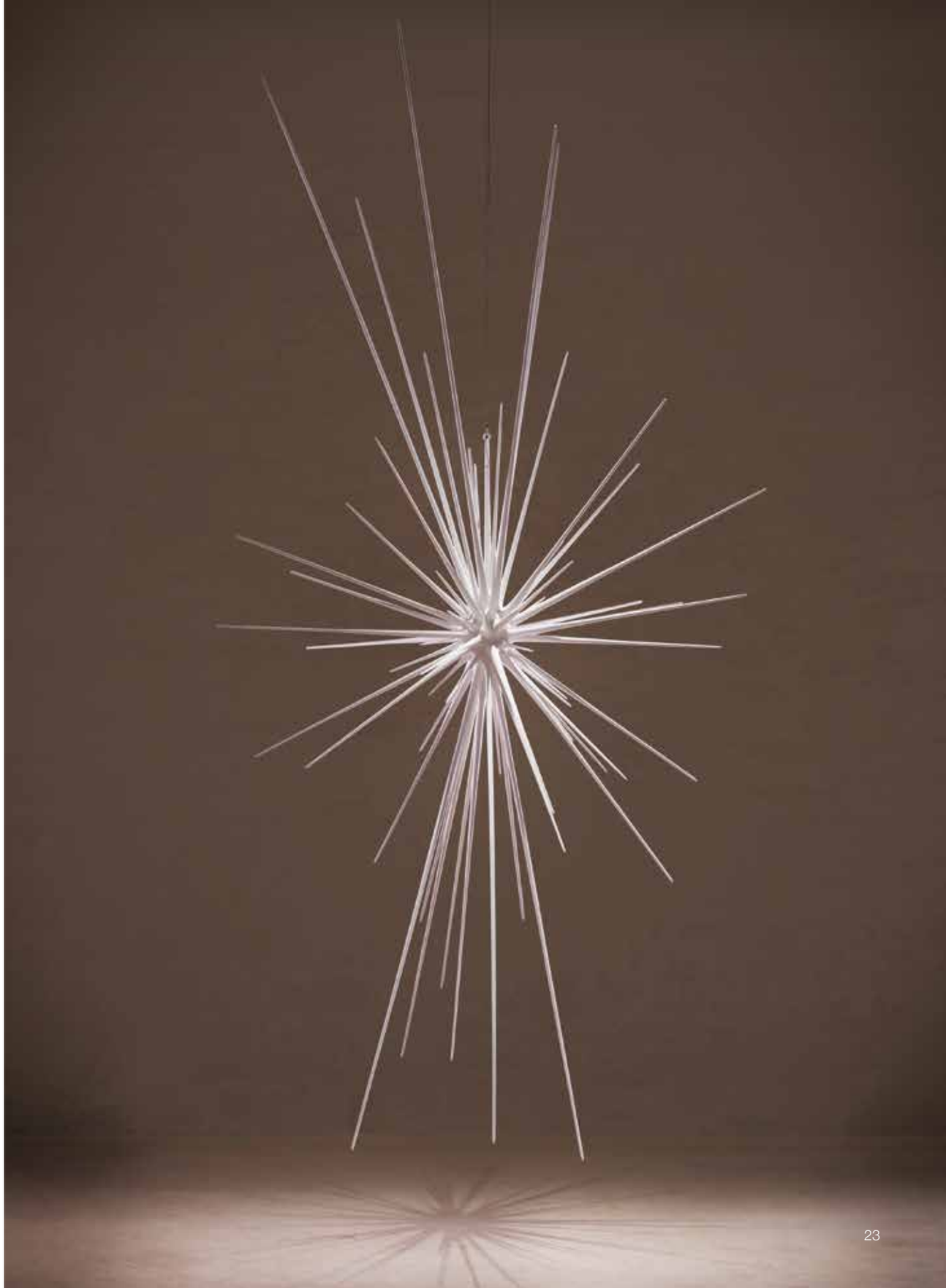
Black Hole Bench CK 60219, 1.8x 2.7y 2z
MDF with burnished graphite, linden wood with milk paint, ebonised oak

Wiltshire Meridian CK 40719, 4x 4y 10z
Linden wood with milk paint

Wiltshire Meridian CK 40819, 6x 4y 7z
Linden wood with milk paint



Wiltshire Meridian CK 40319, 7x 7y 11z
Linden wood with milk paint



Questions & Answers

Catherine Milner - What inspired you to make the forms for this sculptural installation?

Christopher Kurtz - The forms in this installation are part of a way of working that I have been developing for more than a decade. I have always dreamed of an opportunity and an exhibition space that would allow me to bring this language to a more highly evolved level of maturity. I've been dreaming of having a gorgeous space to walk among and within these mobiles at large scale - like being on the stage in a frozen ballet where the dancers are held perfectly still, where one could study the postures suspended in time - or being able to walk through outer space and pass by stars like stationary land marks… I wanted to create a space that has that sort of theatrical experience and understand it at micro and macro scales - like you could bear witness to something improbable in this world. The architecture, history and geography of the barn supported this idea 100%.

CM - Do you consider yourself an artist, designer or craftsman or all? Do these distinctions matter to you?

CK - These distinctions really don't matter to me. I have been equally embraced and rejected by all of these communities at different times. Much of the "art world" considers my work craft, or design. "Designers" don't see this work as being practical on a production or functional level at all (and is not, which is also fine with me). The "craft" community often bristles at how ambivalent I actually am towards wood and technique. I unapologetically use particle board, auto body filler, screws, fiberglass, putty and paint (sacrilegious among "craft" hardliners). I really only use wood because it facilitates the shortest distance between my idea and the object. I don't care about the brand at all, I just employ whatever tool or device necessary to unearth some emotion or form in three dimensions.

CM - What is the biggest challenge of using the medium?

CK - Wood is terribly limiting in what it can do. There are a tonne of rules you have to follow, and each species of wood has different strengths and weaknesses. This is the biggest challenge; but this is also the main thesis of my work: I constantly produce work that is on that edge of the capacity of the material - which is what makes it interesting and frustrating. It's like a magic trick, where something surprises your expectations. Sometimes it succeeds and sometimes it fails.

CM - Which artists most inspire you and why?

CK - In general, the most inspirational artists have been my mentors, people I have worked next to. The knowledge passed on from working side by side with someone is invaluable. My parents (both artists) were my first mentors, then my professors were hugely influential and I can't over emphasise how inspirational Martin Puryear has been in my life. I will always use him as a benchmark of artistic and personal integrity. My colleagues in the industry: other artists, architects, gallerists, dealers, curators, writers and critics all inspire and challenge me much more than the cannon of art historical figures. This is a very difficult career path - so the people who are in the arena with me, and doing the hard work, are always the most inspirational.

CM - What element of making sculptures from wood gives you the most satisfaction?

CK - I live for that moment when the raw material transforms into something entirely different and comes to life. Again it's like that magic trick, or like alchemy. Most of my pieces don't look like anything until the last 5% of hand work - then it suddenly transforms into something that didn't exist just moments before. So much of the work is a bit mundane and often times tedious, but that last bit of transformation is the most addictive part. I don't know if satisfying is the right word - it is more of a compulsion that motivates me to keep working.

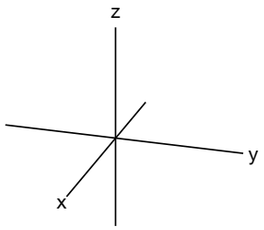
CM - What is the future of wood sculpture?

CK - I don't really think about this question so much as I'm preoccupied with my own incremental progression, however it does seems like there is a huge volume of wood entering the market today. Right now, at least judging from Instagram, there are more woodworkers than ever before. Instagram is awash with spoon carvers, cutting boards, "live edge" slab tables and CNC carved things that look really impressive on the surface.
I think the millennial generation and younger (who grew up with screen time) is fascinated that they can find something "authentic" with wood. This appetite for the authentic, for better or worse has flooded the landscape with "craft" materials, but so much of it has yet to endure the 10,000 hours of investment that would begin to display some level of fluency, so it will be interesting to see what emerges from this era. The digitally designed pieces in wood still seem to be marveling at the technology, or the tool - and the artistic merit often falls short of the technology.

Wood to me is a vehicle to say something. The material, or the techniques used to work it will only be as good as the intention and message within the work itself. If I had a crystal ball and would venture to predict the future of wood sculpture, it would probably look a lot like the past. The pieces that survive will not be smitten by trends, technology or technique - but will have a deeply personal treatment.

Catherine Milner in conversation with Christopher Kurtz, June 2019

Pricelist



Wiltshire Meridian
CK 40119, 7x 7y 6z
Linden wood with
milk paint
£22,000

Wiltshire Meridian
CK 40919, 11x 3y 3z
Linden wood with
milk paint
£22,000

Black Hole Bench
CK 60119, 1.4x 1.6y 1.8z
MDF with burnished
graphite, linden wood with
milk paint, ebonised oak
£8,000

Wiltshire Meridian
CK 40419, 3x 3y 9z
Linden wood with
milk paint
£22,000

Wiltshire Meridian
CK 40219, 4x 1y 10z
Linden wood with
milk paint
£14,850

Black Hole Bench
CK 60219, 1.8x 2.7y 2z
MDF with burnished
graphite, linden wood with
milk paint, ebonised oak
£9,850

Wiltshire Meridian
CK 40519, 6x 6y 6z
Linden wood with
milk paint
£15,000

Wiltshire Meridian
CK 40719, 4x 4y 10z
Linden wood with
milk paint
£20,000

Black Hole Bench
CK 60319, 1.9x 3.2y 1.6z
MDF with burnished
graphite, linden wood with
milk paint, ebonised oak
£9,850

Wiltshire Meridian
CK 40819, 6x 4y 7z
Linden wood with
milk paint
£22,000

Wiltshire Meridian
CK 40619, 7x 7y 8z
Linden wood with
milk paint
£22,000

Wiltshire Meridian
CK 40319, 7x 7y 11z
Linden wood with
milk paint
£36,000

All prices are inclusive of VAT.

Dimensions are in feet and inches.