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Native Washingtonian Martin Puryear's Career to be Showcased at National Gallery of Art, Washington, June 22–September 28, 2008



Martin Puryear, American (born 1941)
C.F.A.O., 2006-2007
painted and unpainted pine and found wheelbarrow
Courtesy the artist and Donald Young Gallery, Chicago
© 2008 Martin Puryear. Photo Richard P. Goodbody

Washington, DC— Forty-six powerful works by internationally acclaimed sculptor Martin Puryear (b. 1941) will be on view at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, in the artist's first retrospective in the United States in more than a decade. **Martin Puryear** includes sculptures dating from 1976 to the present, including one monumental work created especially for the exhibition tour. On view June 22 through September 28, 2008, the exhibition is the first in the Gallery's history to be installed in both the West

and East Buildings.

"It is a particular joy to present an exhibition celebrating Martin Puryear's extraordinary oeuvre here in his hometown. The elegance of the National Gallery's two buildings, offering both classical and modern architectural settings, highlights the impressive scale of many of the sculptures while allowing our visitors to focus their attention on the handmade aspects of Puryear's art," said Earl A. Powell III, director, National Gallery of Art.

Tour

Organized by The Museum of Modern Art, New York, where it premiered from November 4 through January 14, 2008, ***Martin Puryear*** was on view at the Museum of Modern Art of Fort Worth, February 24 through May 18, 2008. Following its Washington showing, the exhibition will be seen at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, November 8, 2008 through January 25, 2009.

Overview

Puryear's art is grounded in sculpture, architecture, and craft traditions from around the world. It draws on forms inspired by the artist's wide range of interests—including ornithology, falconry, archery, and objects of shelter—and incorporates not only traditional sculpture techniques but processes associated with furniture making, boat building, and basketry such as joinery and weaving. He has used a variety of woods throughout his career, but also has employed tar and wire mesh, rawhide, and found objects, all of which are represented in the works on view.

"Minimalism became a strong clue for me about how powerful primary forms could be," Puryear has said. Nevertheless, his carefully handwrought organic forms depart from the impersonal, machine aesthetic associated with minimalism.

Partners and Support

The exhibition is sponsored by The Exhibition Circle of the National Gallery of Art. Generous support is also provided by Glenstone. Additional support is provided by Lannan Foundation.

The Artist

Martin Puryear was born in Washington, DC, in May 1941, and was educated in the city's segregated public schools and the desegregated Archbishop Carroll High School, a Catholic day school. He was encouraged by his family and mentors to pursue his interest in natural sciences, and he was enrolled in a children's art program at an early age. Puryear studied science in the District of Columbia Teachers College for two years, but transferred to Catholic University, from which he graduated in 1963 with a BA degree in art. His interest at the time was in painting, although he had a history of making useful objects during his youth, including bows and arrows, furniture, and classical guitars.

Puryear joined the Peace Corps and was assigned to Sierra Leone, West Africa, where from 1964 to 1966 he taught English, French, and biology, and organized the equivalent of an art club. He observed practitioners of the region's indigenous carving, weaving, and pottery techniques. Puryear then spent two years in Sweden, studying printmaking at the Royal Academy of Art in Stockholm and observing the processes of modern Scandinavian furniture making. By this time his interest had shifted from painting to sculpture. Upon his return to the United States, Puryear earned an MFA in sculpture from Yale University in 1971.

Puryear had his first solo museum exhibition at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in 1977, the same year he received an Individual Artist Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. International recognition of his art includes commissions for monumental public works in Europe, Asia, and the United States, a Guggenheim Foundation grant to study landscape and domestic architecture in Japan in 1983, a MacArthur Foundation Award (1989), the Grand Prize at the São Paulo Bienal (1989), participation in Documenta IX in Kassel, Germany (1992), and two residencies at the American Academy in Rome (1986, 1997). His last retrospective in the United States was organized by The Art Institute of Chicago in 1991, the year he created stage designs for *Griot New York*, a three-way collaboration with choreographer Garth Fagan and musician Wynton Marsalis. In 1997 Puryear had his first European retrospective, at Fundación "la Caixa" in Madrid. In July 2001, *Time* magazine critic Robert Hughes declared Puryear "America's Best Artist."

Exhibition Layout and Object Highlights

The classical geometry of the **West Building**, where 40 of the works are on view, provides a striking contrast to the artist's organic anthropomorphic forms; as do the modern triangulated forms of the East Building where six works are exhibited.

At the center of the **West Building, in the Rotunda** visitors will encounter Puryear's 36-foot-tall *Ladder for Booker T. Washington* (1996). Other works are installed in twelve contiguous galleries, organized in related groupings that highlight ideas, forms, and structural procedures that play a recurring role in Puryear's work. Visitors may begin their visit at either of two exhibition entrances on the main floor, one off the **East Garden Court**, the other at the far east end of the building.

Six works from Puryear's important, wall-mounted Ring series are installed together in one room to highlight the distinctive nature of each object in the group. They include *Cerulean* (1982), crafted in blue polychrome pine, and *Big and Little Same* (1981), in which two elliptical ends, nearly identical except in size, meet and seem to contemplate one another across a small divide.

Comprising six horizontal wood segments of varying length and width, *Some Tales* (1975–1978) is a wall-mounted piece with formal associations to tools and musical instruments. Other early works in the show include the artist's iconic *Self* (1978), which Puryear constructed by covering an armature with a half-inch thick sheath of red cedar and mahogany, and then removing the armature, leaving only the wooden "skin." *For Beckwourth* (1980), constructed of oak, turf, and pitch pine, is one of two sculptures on view whose titles refer to the 19th-century African American explorer James Beckwourth.

Old Mole (1985) is one of several works that suggest animal forms. Constructed of woven strips of red cedar, the sculpture alludes to a burrowing animal, as well as a claw, a beak, or someone blind or bandaged. *Sharp and Flat* (1987) is a squat, bird like polyhedron. The pine planks that form the sculpture's surface are left raw, strengthening the wood's associations with the natural environment from which it was harvested. Other works are painted, including the Gallery's graceful *Lever No. 3* (1989),

made of carved and painted Ponderosa pine.

Among the several pieces that reveal Puryear's concern with forms of shelter and the interplay between interior and exterior form are *Bower* (1980), an open hull-like construction made of Sitka spruce and pine, and *Confessional* (1996–2000), a tar and wire-mesh construction.

Desire (1981) is the largest work on view in the West Building. Composed of a gigantic wooden wheel made motionless by a 32-foot-long, gently shaped beam attached to a tall, inverted basket woven from wooden slats, it stretches across an entire room.

On the **Mezzanine and Ground Levels of the East Building**, visitors will encounter six works, including two that were completed in 2007 and employ found objects: *Ad Astra* and *C.F.A.O.* The latter is constructed from an old wheelbarrow found by Puryear in 1993 while he was an artist-in-residence at Alexander Calder's studio in Saché, France; an oversized impression echoing a mask by the Fang people of Gabon, West Africa; and wood slats that suggest a ritual headdress. The initials in the title allude to the Compagnie Française de l'Afrique Occidentale, a French trading company that sailed between Marseilles and West Africa. During his Peace Corps years in Sierra Leone, Puryear discovered an abandoned warehouse bearing those initials. In the 63-foot-tall *Ad Astra* (2007), a sapling reaching to the stars is supported by a 6-foot-wide polyhedron mounted on wagon wheels that Puryear also brought home from France.

Curators and Catalogue

John Elderfield, the Marie-Josée and Henry Kravis chief curator of painting and sculpture at The Museum of Modern Art, selected the exhibition along with the artist. Ruth Fine, curator of special projects in modern art at the National Gallery of Art, is coordinating the exhibition in Washington.

Catalogue

The exhibition is accompanied by the fully illustrated catalogue *Martin Puryear*—the most in-depth publication on Puryear's work to date. Published by The Museum of Modern Art, New York, it includes essays by Elderfield; Michael Auping, chief curator of

the Museum of Modern Art of Fort Worth; Elizabeth Reede, assistant curator in the department of painting and sculpture at The Museum of Modern Art; a conversation between Martin Puryear and Richard J. Powell, the John Spencer Bassett Professor of Art and Art History at Duke University; and a chronology by Jennifer Field, curatorial assistant in the department of painting and sculpture at The Museum of Modern Art. The 216-page catalogue includes 165 illustrations and is currently available from the Gallery Shops for \$60 (hardcover) and \$35 (softcover). To order, call (800) 697-9350 or (202) 842-6002; fax (202) 789-3047; or e-mail mailorder@nga.gov.

Related Programs

Ruth Fine will present the opening day lecture, "Sculpture that Tries to Describe Itself to the World," on Sunday, June 22, at 2:00 p.m. in the East Building Auditorium. The lecture is free and open to the public. For more information, call (202) 737-4215 or visit the Web site at <http://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/puryearinfo.shtm> (<http://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/puryearinfo.shtm>).

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General Information

The National Gallery of Art and its Sculpture Garden are at all times free to the public. They are located on the National Mall between 3rd and 9th Streets along Constitution Avenue NW and are open Monday through Saturday from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and Sunday from 11:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. The Gallery is closed on December 25 and January 1. With the exception of the atrium and library, the galleries in the East Building will be closing gradually beginning in July 2013 and will remain closed for approximately three years for Master Facilities Plan and renovations. For specific updates on gallery closings, visit www.nga.gov/renovation (<http://www.nga.gov/renovation>) .

For information call (202) 737-4215 or the Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD) at (202) 842-6176, or visit the Gallery's website at www.nga.gov. Follow the Gallery on [Facebook](http://www.facebook.com/NationalGalleryofArt) at www.facebook.com/NationalGalleryofArt and on [Twitter](http://twitter.com/ngadc) at twitter.com/ngadc.

Visitors will be asked to present all carried items for inspection upon entering. Checkrooms are free of charge and located at each entrance. Luggage and other oversized bags must be presented at the 4th Street entrances to the East or West Building to permit x-ray screening and must be deposited in the checkrooms at those entrances. For the safety of visitors and the works of art, nothing may be carried into the Gallery on a visitor's back. Any bag or other items that cannot be carried reasonably and safely in some other manner must be left in the checkrooms. Items larger than 17 by 26 inches cannot be accepted by the Gallery or its checkrooms.

For additional press information please call or send inquiries to:

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