

Martin Puryear

a biography



Martin Puryear, photo by Paul Merideth/Click/Chicago *New York Times*, November 1, 1987 “Maverick Sculptor Makes Good: Martin Puryear—a major artist, stubbornly going his own way”

of modern art, from classical to nonrepresentational art. This influence held, as now Puryear works nearly exclusively with abstracted, generalized forms.

Puryear continued to identify as a painter until his experience with the Peace Corps in Sierra Leone, West Africa, where he taught English, French, and biology in the remote village of Segbwema. There he was introduced to traditional African craft and was particularly taken with the methods of carpentry. He says that Sierra Leone is the first place he ever saw people do woodwork with any real skill, and they did so without ego. He was impressed and inspired by the way they could do so much with so little—creating smooth, stable, and beautiful furniture without any electric tools. “We learned from each other,” he explains. “I taught them to make guitars and kayaks and they, in turn, showed me how to do old world joinery.” As Puryear learned these techniques, he recorded his experience with many drawings and prints.

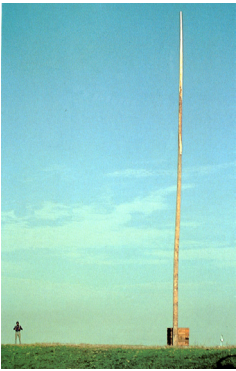
After his time in Africa, Puryear moved to Stockholm to study printmaking at the Royal Swedish Academy of Arts. While there he studied David Pye, a British craftsman, architect, and industrial designer,

who discussed the role of craft in the twentieth century in his writings. He also worked as an assistant for James Krenov, a renowned cabinet maker who emphasized process and sensitivity towards material, values that Puryear would adopt into his own practice. He traveled to the Swedish and Norwegian Lapland where he became acquainted with Arctic landscape and was particularly interested in the ritual and mysticism of the Sami culture.

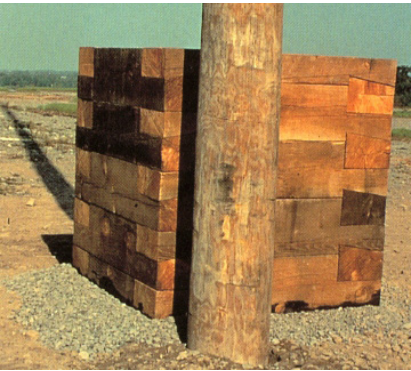
Upon his return to the United States, Puryear enrolled in the sculpture program at Yale University where Richard Serra and Robert Morris served as visiting professors. Minimalism in graduate school, like abstraction during college, would pose another artistic challenge for Puryear. Although ultimately rejecting Minimalism, Puryear’s work owes much to the movement. He recalls, “At that point Minimalism became a strong clue for me about how powerful primary forms could be.”

Following graduation, Puryear went on to work as an Assistant Professor of Art at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, then at the University of Maryland in 1973, when he also established a studio in Brooklyn, New York. In 1977 he completed his first major outdoor sculpture commission, *Box and Pole*, at Artpark in Lewiston, New York. Unfortunately this same year his Brooklyn studio burned down, and Puryear decided to move to Chicago where he served as Professor of Art at the University of Illinois.

Broadening his world view yet again, Puryear traveled to Japan in 1983 on a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship to study Japanese domestic architecture and gardens. He was taken by the simplicity of form and the harmonious meditative quality. Rather than simply borrowing from non-Western cultures, Puryear continued to seamlessly interweave multicultural elements together, combining them with his distinct formalist sensibility. He has completed residencies in such places as Rome and Saché, France, and has won countless awards, garnering international recognition for his unique, beautiful, and highly complex work. Now a resident of upstate New York, Puryear lives and works in a home and studio he designed.



Martin Puryear, *Box and Pole*, 1977, Canadian hemlock and southern yellow pine. Box: 137 x 137 x 137 cm. Pole: 3048 cm. Artpark, Lewiston, New York. (Temporary installation). © Martin Puryear



Martin Puryear

American, born 1941

Self

1978

polychromed red cedar & mahogany, 69 x 48 x 25 in.,
Museum purchase in memory of Elinor Ashton
Joslyn Art Museum 1980.63
Photo courtesy Russel B. Phillips Photography

Self is a monolithic sculpture that epitomizes Martin Puryear’s style. It raises craft to a new level of formal elegance, and it encourages metaphor and personal narrative without inciting one specific response. It appears dense and heavy, as though it were made of stone, but in fact the wooden sculpture is completely hollow. The hollowness and dark stain draws the focus inward, while the silhouette and the sheen accentuate the sculptures exterior. *Self* is full of dichotomy and contradiction, yet is meditative and peaceful all at the same time. It is at once heavy and delicate, familiar and strange, beautiful and unsettling, personal and universal, organic and contrived, simple and complex. In all of Puryear’s work he loves to explore the formal and intellectual interval between these dualities, making it impossible for viewers to settle on one single interpretation. He says, “I value the referential quality of art, the fact that a work can allude to things or states of being without in any way representing them. The ideas that give rise to a work can be quite diffuse, so I would describe my usual working process as a kind of distillation—trying to make coherence out of things that can seem contradictory. But coherence is not the same as resolution. The most interesting art for me retains a flickering quality, where opposed ideas can be held in tense coexistence.”

The sculpture is polished to a sheen that at first glance erases the artist’s hand. It is built on a human scale, giving the piece an anthropomorphic presence and forcing the viewers to contend with it in his or her space. In this way Puryear’s work is marked by the clarity and monumentality characteristic of Minimalism. However, upon more careful consideration one realizes



Martin Puryear’s edge tools in his studio, 2007. © Martin Puryear

hogany. It was originally constructed over an armature with a half inch thick wooden sheath, and then Puryear removed the armature leaving only the wooden “skin,” which he then painted with several coats of stain. The process was extremely laborious and required a great amount of skill, asserting the presence of the artist’s hand. This process connects to history, which is something typical of Puryear’s work and sets it apart from Minimal art. Joinery is an ancient technique that has been used across cultures. As Puryear explains, “It’s a beautiful science, really. And it’s something I’ve enjoyed looking at, to see how different cultures deploy it. I mean, there are some givens that are the same for Egyptian beds and doors, through European fine furniture making, up to the present day...I really feel it as I work...I think it’s the thing that maybe gives me a feeling of a certain amount of legitimacy, given the fact that this is such a technological society that looks away from all that stuff. It’s like, how in the world can you justify this way of working today? And yet, the connection to the past, there’s value to it, for me.”

Aesthetically *Self* spans several cultures as well. The solid form resembles a mountain or stone looming over the arctic tundra. In fact prints from Stockholm show that Puryear was already working with this shape within close proximity of the Northern European landscape. The shape has a harmony reminiscent of Eastern culture, Puryear’s interest in duality stemming from his time in Japan. *Self* even resembles an African idol. In fact the intensive stain layering process involved in its construction has been compared to the African ritual of applying blood and organic powders to build up an abstract shape that embodies the abundance of nature.

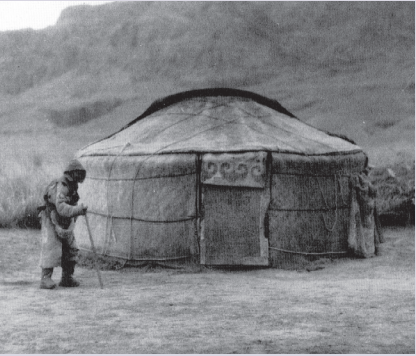
Although *Self* communicates with a multicultural, even universal language, it has highly personal significance as well. Puryear made *Self* shortly after his Brooklyn studio burned down, along with nearly all of his painstakingly crafted sculptures and tools. His livelihood was destroyed in the fire, but Puryear did not let this hold him back. After a period of grieving, he came back to the art world with full force, creating and exhibiting with more frequency than ever before. In the period after the fire, much of his work revolved around themes of strength, mobility, and flight. He took particular interest in the yurt, a collapsible, wooden dwelling used by semi-nomadic tribes in Central Asia. Many of his artworks from this period echo the form of the yurt, and he actually constructed one for his piece *Where the Heart Is* from 1981. After the fire forced him to move, this notion of a home that one could carry resonated with Puryear. It is possible that the yurt provided some inspiration for *Self*, another hollow, wooden shell that is seemingly immovable but in fact very light; a different sort of home residing within himself.

This is perhaps why it was important to Puryear to create *Self* through a process of gradual and deliberate growth. Just as a forest steadily regenerates after a fire, or as an individual slowly works towards self-actualization, Puryear meticulously built this structure up as he simultaneously worked to rebuild his life. The smooth geometric form seems to swell from the ground, as if the wood is still growing. The smooth rosewood tip accentuates this sense of upward, new growth.

The subtle differences in shape, the idiosyncrasies of the bulbous form, give the sculpture movement and a vital life-force. From every angle the viewer perceives the sculpture differently, yet the piece itself does not change. Similarly, one grows and changes over time, but the true self remains constant. *Self* exudes permanency, seeming eternal and timeless. Puryear describes the work saying, “It looks as though it might have been created by erosion, like a rock worn by sand and weather until the angles are all gone. *Self* is all curve except where it meets the floor at an abrupt angle. It’s meant to be a visual notion of the self, rather than any particular self—the self as a secret entity, as a secret hidden place.”

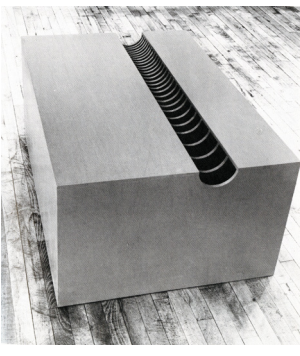


Martin Puryear, *Rune Stone*, 1966. Aquatint, engraving, and etching on white wove paper, 23 1/2 x 18 1/4 in. Collection of the Artist © Martin Puryear



DETAIL. Inner Mongolia, Yurt, 1923-24, Peabody Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA

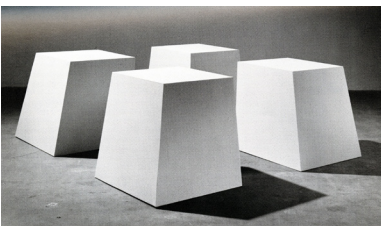
Minimalism vs. Post-Minimalism



that true modernist art should be self-fulfilling and not contingent on the viewer’s presence. However, this very activation of the viewer would prove to become exceedingly important in Postwar and Postmodern art.

I never did Minimalist art, I never did, but I got real close...I looked at it, I tasted it, and I spat it back out. I said, this I not for me. I’m a worker. I’m not somebody who’s happy to let my work be made for me and I’ll pass on it, yes or no, after it’s done. I could never do that.

— Martin Puryear, 1987



IMAGES [LEFT TO RIGHT]: Donald Judd, *Untitled*, 1963. Painted wood, 19 1/2 x 45 x 30 1/2 in., photo courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, photo by Rudolph Burchardt, © Donald Judd; Robert Morris, *Battered Cubes*, 1965/88, painted steel, each unit 36 x 36 x 36 in., Margo Leaving Gallery, Los Angeles, photo by Douglas M. Parker Studio, © Robert Morris; Martin Puryear, *Bower*, 1980, Sitka cedar and pine, 64 x 94 3/4 x 26 5/8, © Martin Puryear; Richard Serra, *Casting* (destroyed), 1969, lead, 25 x 15 ft., photo courtesy Leo Castelli Gallery, New York © Richard Serra

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Timeline

1940

1941 Martin Puryear is born on May 23 in Washington, D.C.

1945



Martin Puryear in his studio, Chicago, 1987 © Martin Puryear

1950

1955

1954 Brown v. Board of Education establishes separate public schools for black and white students unconstitutional

1960

1963 Graduates from Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., with a BA in art

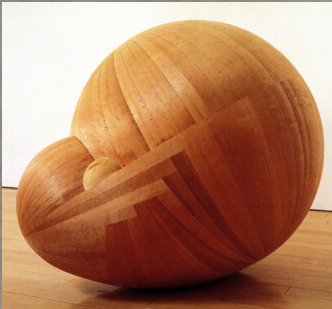
1965

1964 Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlaws major forms of discrimination

1964–1966 Joins the Peace Corps & travels to Sierra Leone, West Africa

1970

1966–1968 Studies at the Royal Swedish Academy of Arts & meets James Krenov



Martin Puryear, *Allen Huddle*, 1993-95, red cedar and pine, 53 x 64 x 53 in. © Martin Puryear

1975

1971 Graduates from Yale University with MFA in sculpture

1973 Establishes studio in Brooklyn, NY

1977 Completes first major outdoor sculpture commission for Artpark; fire destroys his Brooklyn studio

1980

1980 Exhibits at Joslyn Art Museum

1985

1983 Travels to Japan on a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship to study Japanese domestic architecture and gardens

1986 Completes first artist residency at the American Academy in Rome

1990

1989 Receives Grand Prize at the 20th São Paulo Biennial, Brazil; receives the John D. & Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Fellowship Award

1990 Moves to New York State

1995

1997 Completes second artist residency at the American Academy in Rome

2000

2002–2003 Travels to China & Japan to complete *Guardian Stone* at the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo

2005

2007 Receives Gold Medal for Sculpture from American Academy of Arts & Letters, New York

2010

2011 Receives the National Medal of Arts & Humanities



2011 National Medal of Arts recipient & contemporary sculptor Martin Puryear receives his medal from President Barack Obama. Photo by Anthony Brown, Imagination Photography

BACKGROUND IMAGE: Martin Puryear, *Ladder for Booker T. Washington*, 1996, Ash and maple, 36 x 22 3/4 x 3”; width narrows to 1 1/4” at the top. Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Gift of Ruth Carter Stevenson, by exchange © 2007 Martin Puryear. Photo by David Wharton

Discussion Questions

When you look at *Self*, what do you see?



Do you see part of yourself in *Self*? Why or why not?



What different cultures and types of art inspired Puryear for *Self*?



What is the difference between Minimalism and Post-Minimalism styles?



What did Puryear take from Minimalism and what did he reject?



MARTIN PURYEAR
AMERICAN, BORN 1941

SELF
1978, POLYCHROMED RED CEDAR & MAHOGANY

JOSLYN ART MUSEUM © OMAHA, NEBRASKA
Museum purchase in memory
of Elinor Ashton, 1980.63