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YE SEN



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Highlights From The Aboriginal and Torres
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Ye Sen, **Unfolding**, 2015, elm wood, 400 x 30 x 75 cm. Edition: 1/4. All images: Courtesy of the Artist and Art Experience Gallery, Hong Kong.

The Secret Narratives Of Wood

Wood as both a sculptural and functional medium speaks across time and cultures in ways that other materials do not. Ye Sen's various series are informed as much by cultural history, craftsmanship, and traditional philosophies as they are by contemporary imaginings and social tensions, and cultural and political changes. The rich combination of these makes interpreting his art challenging.

By Ian Findlay



Choosing one's artistic medium is a crucial, personal decision. It is one that may be decided upon right at the outset of one's career or it may take years of trial and error before one decides. Is it oil or acrylic or ink for the painter? Is it marble or bronze or wood for the sculptor? For the Chinese sculptor Ye Sen his decisions to use wood and to become a sculptor were always part of his artistic identity. His career and *oeuvre* have always been deeply rooted in his Chinese heritage. Even as he lives in the new-media-art environment of contemporary Beijing, Ye is unmoved: wood and

sculpture are his artistic core. His forms, all without pretension, speak confidently with a modern, conceptual voice to wood art that still informs China's culture.

"Making wood sculpture," says Ye Sen, "is actually looking back to the history of wood craftsmanship." He sees the changes in traditional artistic language and expression as helping him "to organize my thoughts and my working routine." At the same time, he says that historical woodcraft has inspired him to develop an interest in folk art that in turn has helped him to discover "the mind of the artisans and their values" and to "inculcate these values into my work."¹

The physical act of making sculpture is, says Ye Sen, much more demanding and engaging than painting. The rewards are many and are found "in the attitude of making something unique" and "in having something to say. Finding how to express myself in an appropriate way can only be achieved, I believe, in being devoted to making things by hand, which has always delighted me."

And he says that the sheer physical aspect of making a sculpture reflects his mind as an artist, emotionally and intellectually. But in his art making, even the most seemingly spontaneous piece is the result of research. He says it is "pleasing



Ye Sen, **Unfolding**, 2015, elm wood, 400 x 30 x 75 cm.

and satisfying” for him “to keep learning and gaining knowledge. In the process of making my wood sculptures, I also experience something of the inner life of an artisan. It is a journey of discovery. My interest in wood has grown along with my understanding of wood craftsmanship. China is a country of wood culture.”

Ye’s art is without figures or faces to celebrate humanity. His salute to humanity moves from enigmatic forms to raw and smooth-textured carvings and is through abstraction, often formal in its construction as in works such as the emotional *Sitting and Being Well-Versed in the East and the West* (2011), the gritty *Deconstructive Analysis 01-C* (2014), and the puzzling *Dimensions Container* (2016). Looking at such works one comes to realize that his art did not find its root in modern and contemporary ideas but in many wood traditions that survived the destruction of revolution.

Ye’s sculptures have not emerged from one three-dimensional perspective but are informed by many clas-

sical Chinese philosophical ideas and art practices as well as woodcarving methods handed down over centuries: not for Ye Sen the narrow socialist vision of evolution of sculptural art, one that has always moved between an exclusive, *literati* aesthetic and a purely functional one, in essence one that has defined one of the most enduring cultures in the world. Ye touches on this in his selection of woods, both Chinese and African.

“The choices are always two-way,” he says. “When I come across the materials and decide what I want to make, then I choose the wood according to the form. Or I might discover a kind of wood first and see the potential to develop it into a sculpture. My research is based on the concept on such notions as ‘Deconstruction: Apart’ and ‘Release: Vitality.’ Even though I now work with wood only, I would not reject exploring steel and stone, both of which have very different characteristics and sculptural potential. To change would really depend on what I have to say with a sculpture.”



Ye Sen, Deconstructive Analysis 01-C, 2014, Wenge wood (Africa), steel, 167 x 101 x 34 cm, steel stand: 133 cm. Edition 3/4.



Ye Sen, Sitting and Being Well-Versed in the East and the West, 2011, Wenge wood (Mozambique), Ming dynasty-style round-back armchair: 60 x 70 x 98 cm; Victorian period Palace-style chair: 44 x 55 x 107 cm; interconnecting chains: 270 cm; wood blocks (2 pcs.): 44 x 36 x 30 cm. Edition: 1/4.

The ancient sculptors and wood traditions that Ye Sen acknowledges as influences on his art include “the *Records of Three Kingdoms*, which document the making of the wooden ox and gliding horse invented by Zhuge Liang (181–234 AD).² The wooden ox and gliding horse are machines invented in war to transport supplies in the rough mountainous regions. Many craftsmen and artists have tried to recreate these from the text. This has had an influence on my art as has Leonardo da Vinci’s sketches illustrating his scientific studies.”

Each sculptural influence and historical reference throws up very different aesthetic and material challenges. But as Ye says, “The spirit of an artisan is in the coordination of the heart, hand, and eye. My aim is to concentrate at work and empty my mind of all distractions. I want to get away from the idea of visual tricks and get back to the inner world of an artisan in which there is a state of peace and tranquility. But this is very difficult to achieve.”

Many sculptors of marble



Ye Sen, *Circular Sole 1*, 2015, Wenge wood (Mozambique), 70 (diameter) x 150 cm. Edition: 1/4.

believe that within every piece of marble their subject resides. It may be a voluptuous or muscular figure or a pure abstract form but they know that only through judicious carving will it be released from its stone prison to the world. And so it is with Ye Sen and his wood. One is aware of this in Ye’s exquisitely realized conceptual works entitled *Circular Sole 1, Unfolding* (2015), and *Snake on a Tree* (2015), each made from a single log or tree.

Each of these works is informed by a unique conceptual aesthetic sensibility quite uncommon among wood sculptors. These are intricate and intimate creations that harmonize and synthesize the simple and the complex, art and craft, the traditional and the modern as in the beautifully carved and thoughtful *Unfolding*. The wood for this work came from a house and was carved as one entity. It folds and unfolds and speaks to craft, life, the past as historical fact—part of a home—and the sculptural present, one function has taken on a fresh aesthetic and is no longer a part of a building but is a unique and dynamic sculpture. Such drama and power



Ye Sen, *Circular Sole 1*, 2015, Wenge wood (Mozambique), 70 (diameter) x 150 cm. Edition: 1/4.



Ye Sen, **Snake on a Tree**, 2015, Pagoda tree and pine wood (snake), tree: 340 cm (h), snake: 400 cm (l). Edition: 1/4.

in Ye's art reminds me of that in the art of German expressionist figurative sculptor Ernest Barlach (1870–1938). Although very different artists, their visions speak across time and cultures. Powerful, singular sculptural voices of all ages are now a collective chorus singing the praises of sculpture as a defining art form for history's successes and failures.

Circular Sole 1, with its continuous circular form, has been cut from a single log. It reminds one of the lyrical conceptual metal forms by the French sculptor Bernar Venet (b. 1941). Ye carefully hollowed out the log by hand over a number of weeks. The end result is a thoroughly engaging work that puzzles the imagination and demands to be touched, as does the rather sinister *Snake on a Tree*. Here is the serpent slithering away from the protection of the tree—the Garden of Eden after the fall of Adam and Eve?—in search of others to seduce with its wiles. The pine wood tree has been sectioned and then the sections have been pinned through the trunk. The resultant forms of the trunk and the branches suggest a curiously balletic movement, a bending tree being caressed by the wind.

The sinister quality of *Snake on a Tree*, and to some extent *Unfolding*, is present in a number of recent works in which chains are central to each work's sense of menace. One appreciates the power and reasoning behind Ye's sculptural voice as he articulates something of the social tensions of the early 21st century world, not only China's. Striking works in which the sinister and the menacing are central to the visual and emotional dynamic of the sculpture include *Dimensions Container* (2016), *Deconstructive Analysis 01-C*, *Circular Sole 2* (2015), and *Hollow 3* (2015).

Chains link and bind, and throughout history tyrants have used them to imprison and to torture. Ye's skill in making his chains like metal that seem to grow out of the wood is a pleasure to see. But looking at the pole and the curved "leg iron" of *Circular Sole 2* one cannot avoid thinking of imprisonment and torture. The same is true of *Hollow 3*. But the exception here is *Dimensions Container*. Made from a single block of wood Ye carved two balls, one on top of the other, that seem to be squeezing against one another to escape.



Ye Sen, *Circular Sole 2*, 2015, Wenge wood (Mozambique), 50 x 15 (diameter) cm. Edition: 2/4.

They are trapped in the claustrophobic cage. This is a disturbing work and, as with the others, there is a feeling that Ye is making a critical comment on society.

But he says, "In searching for reason one develops one's attitude and it is an attitude of human beings toward nature. We shouldn't focus only on human beings, but we need to find a balance between humanity and nature. It might seem to be easy to understand, but it is difficult to express through art."

There is always tension within Ye Sen's art, which makes it pleasurable to engage with it. The sculpture/installation *Sitting and Being Well-Versed in the East and the West* (2011) [see the Cover] suggests a peaceful search for unity and understanding. It is a process that for Ye is painstakingly laid out.

"I believe people's values are more or less the same when dealing with everyday life. This applies to Western and Eastern cultures. Therefore, from this point of view, the intention of artistic expression should be similar. To achieve the best for my art even the best ideas begin with a blueprint, and be further polished on a piece of paper. Sometimes, a mock-up will be made to confirm all the details if necessary. The making of a wood sculpture is a clear execution without hesitation."



Ye Sen, *Hollow 3*, 2015, Wenge wood (Mozambique), 44.5 x 29 x 26.5 cm, Edition: 1/4.

Here the Eastern and Western chairs and two blocks of wood that could be traveling trunks are linked by long chains that have been teased from the wood itself and are not separately made and then affixed. These are the “umbilical cords that connect tradition and the present, and shows us that life continues.” With this in mind there is a feeling of hope at the heart of this work, a feeling that negotiations are preferable to conflict. This sprawling work is as enigmatic in its spirit as both *Snake on a Tree* and *Circular Sole 1*, both of which are works of bold line and powerful construction. When talking about the development of these works Ye says: “Appearance grows from one’s inner self. In this case, the appearance of *Circular Sole 1* grew from my observing a chef cutting vegetables in the kitchen. I was inspired by his cutting technique on cucumbers and radish.”

Ye, who was born in 1971 in Liaoning, is a thoughtful artist deeply engaged with both traditional and contemporary cultures and their relative influences on his art. The importance of traditional heritage cannot be underestimated in his art. As he says, “We are all living in our tradition and culture and no way can we be separated from that. If one tries to walk away from it, it will lead to nowhere. The collective wisdom of previous generations is teaching us along the way,

showing us the past and the future, so why should we not pay attention to it?”

Ye’s voice in wood is unique. He takes a long time to consider each piece he makes. “The development of each piece of work is logical. I spend a lot of time wandering in the mind of my creations.” But many in this ephemeral Internet age, where anonymity and speed are of the essence, might find it passé. But Ye, like the craftsmen of tradition, demands a sense of permanence. He listens carefully to his voice and respects the vision that emerges from it.

“A craftsman’s mind,” he says, “is emptied when he concentrates at work. It is the ideal state for a normal human being at ease. It reflects the person’s mind when dealing with materials, and it is a rather precious thing to a craftsman. It is what I have been pursuing through my art. The message of my work is about releasing one’s inner soul. A piece of wood is being freed from its restrained state, it is about the positive.”

Ye Sen has always been an experimenter, an artist willing to challenge and to question. Through this he has always been keenly aware of the subtle embrace of time and how it moves imperceptibly to alter one’s perspectives in life and in art and how the past reaches into the present to remind us that one cannot escape history. Being wholly rooted in his art Ye knows well “the concept of transforming materials was one which had roots

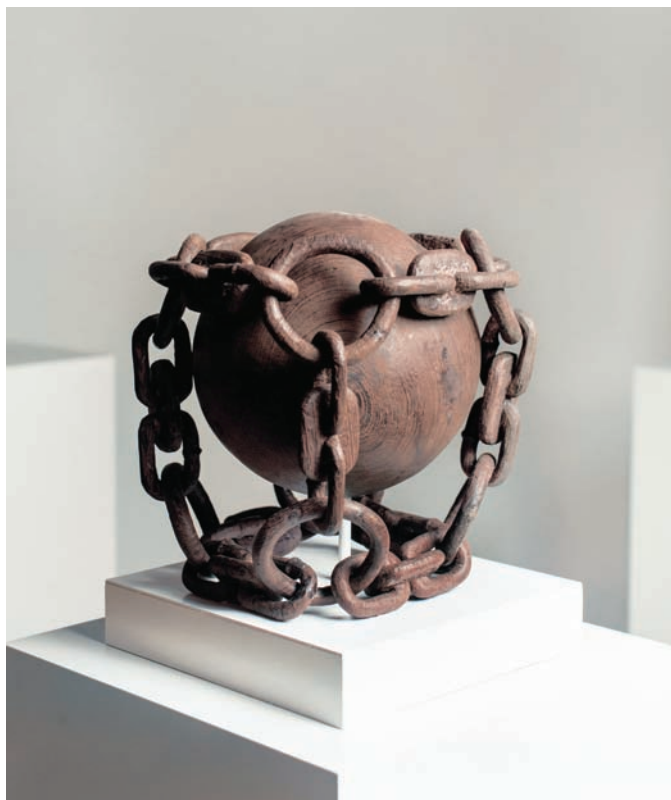
in ancient Chinese wisdom, which considered each material object to possess a voice. So, when I fix my gaze on each piece of timber in preparation to create, I am thinking both in terms of traditional techniques of carpentry and carving, and traditional Chinese concepts. I look beyond the purely aesthetic discipline of connoisseurship, and consider the opportunities presented to me by the capacity of the material.”³ These words and ideas still drive Ye Sen forward: for this we should be grateful. Δ

Notes:

1. Unless otherwise stated all quotations are from interviews with the artist, by e-mail and in person on February 24, and March 12, 2016.
2. Zhuge Liang (181–234 AD), known as Kongming, was a chancellor of the State of Shu Han during the Three Kingdoms period (220–280 AD). *Records of the Three Kingdoms (Sanguozhi)*, is a Chinese historical text that covers the history of the late Eastern Han Dynasty (184–220 AD) and the Era of Three Kingdoms (220–280 AD).
3. From Ye Sen’s artist statement for his exhibition entitled *Crafting the Inner Life of Timber* at The Opposite House, Beijing, from July 6 to September 30, 2014. This was an exhibition initiated by Brian Wallace and Red Gate Gallery, Beijing.



Ye Sen, **Dimensions Container**, 2016, Wenge wood, 35 x 20 x 20 cm. Edition: 1/4.



Ye Sen, **Disclosure 4**, 2016, Wenge wood (Asia), 30 x 30 x 30 cm. Edition: 1/4.