

George Sugarman: Painted Wood

GARY SNYDER GALLERY MAY 8–JUNE 15, 2013

BY JESSICA HOLMES JUNE 3, 2013

Inside the Gary Snyder Gallery, a woman struck up a friendly exchange with another viewer about the current exhibition. They were strangers to each other but the connection seemed natural. Amid the sculptures on display in *George Sugarman: Painted Wood*, on view through June 15, one is inspired to chat precisely because the works themselves are also conversational. Sugarman, who died in 1999 at the age of 87, was one of the great underrated and idiosyncratic sculptors of the mid-20th century. Showcased here are five sculptures made between 1964–1969, the final decade the artist worked in human scale. Around 1970, he largely abandoned indoor works in favor of devoting his efforts to public sculpture.

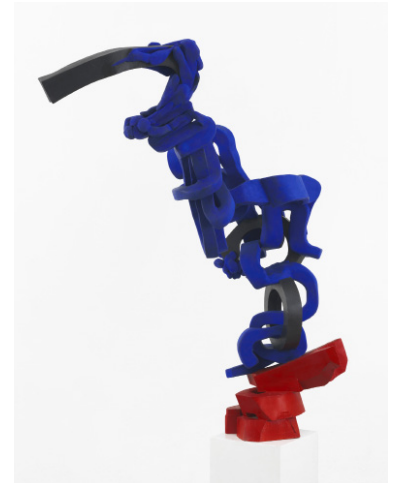
The intimate gallery space is energized by Sugarman's dynamic work. Surveying the sculpture, it's difficult to tell at first that everything is made from wood. The meticulous surfaces seem almost technically finished, and belie the painstaking carving and paint application that becomes clear upon close examination. The earliest, "The Shape of Change" (1964), is also the gnarliest of the group. Sugarman has manipulated wood into a sensuous ribbon that bends, folds, and winds around itself in thick curlicues, like oil paint squeezed madly from its tube. Step back, and it is a scribble of royal blue, hanging in space.

Vivid color predominates. A sculpture in three parts, aptly titled "Threesome" (1968–1969) stands at the center of the gallery. Here, a trio of structures—a sea-green, U-shaped curve centered in a three-sided frame; a diptych of ramps that resemble skateboard jumps, with surfaces of fluorescent yellow, and white underbellies; and a skinny, oblong zero in pylon-orange that seems as if it has been poured from mid-air—mingle in excited discourse. Sugarman's work is often compared to that of Al Held, with whom he was close friends, but these pieces bring to mind the works of John McCracken, the Californian artist of the Light and Space movement. McCracken, who worked at roughly the same time as Sugarman, produced technically flawless, candy-colored planks of plywood which disguised a labor-intensive process that involved resin-coating, sanding, and buffing, all by the artist's own hand. Both of these artists, though associated with Minimalism, never fully adhered to its tenets. Another parallel: both spent four years in the Navy—Sugarman from 1941–1945 and McCracken a decade later—and I can't help but think that the loving attention paid to the material of wood by both artists might stem, at least in part, from the appreciation of a finely-crafted sailing vessel.

This reverence for the humanism inherent to a well-made object resonates in Sugarman's work. Walking around the fresh, popping colors and assertive, vertical shapes of "Threesome," a viewer may have a direct, physical interaction with the sculpture, and can appreciate the skill and effort that must have gone into coaxing its supple forms from hunks of wood. That all but one of the sculptures sit on the floor, freed from pedestals, contributes to the intimate nature of the show (Sugarman was one of the first artists to dispense of the pedestal, though he's rarely credited with doing so).

His precision, as well as the confluence of color and material, is most evident in "Black and Red Spiral" (1968–1969). It is not the largest, nor the most audacious work on display, but it is an understated masterpiece. Standing on two legs with the proportions of a waist-high bench, the sculpture defies expectations. Sugarman has whittled an accordion-like form from this piece of wood that seems as delicate as a Japanese paper fan. The work is painted alternately in black and red, so the color appears to change according to the vantage point as the viewer walks around it. This tricky shift from black to red and back again also conveys a sense of motion. Though it's stationary, "Black and Red Spiral" achieves a whorling effect, not a simple feat with a dense medium like wood. From different perspectives, one can perceive a staircase, a seashell, a fish, or most oddly, the view deep into someone's inner ear.

Sugarman so fluently melded his keen grasp of color with precise forms that it is difficult to understand why his legacy has never been celebrated like those of contemporaries Al Held or Donald Judd. Communing with Sugarman's work is an intuitive experience—it's time his sculpture rejoined the conversation about 20th century art.



The Shape of Change, 1964, acrylic on wood, 89 x 60 1/2 x 35 1/2 inches