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ART

Refreshingly Rough Wooden Sculptures, Carved with a Traditional Japanese Hatchet

Hirosuke Yabe's wooden sculptures jive with the jagged, accentuate accidents, and roll with the rough.



Daniel Larkin March 7, 2018

At the start of her cover of “Proud Mary,” Tina Turner announces: “We never ever do nothing nice and easy ... we like to do it *nice and rough*.” Too much sculpture today bores us with nice and easy. Hirosuke Yabe stands apart, and fascinates us with nice and rough.

Yabe's first show in New York, *Hirosuke Yabe: Faithful DogMan*, presents a series of small wood figurines, carved from Japanese elm and a few other found wood objects. Each work exudes that rough, gritty, texture that only emerges on beat-up wood. The jagged lines, the uneven gashes, and distorted shapes are like the blues in 3D, helping add dimension and depth.

Yabe got interested in uneven textures by studying Enkū (1632-1695), an Edo period monk, whose claim to fame is carving 120,000 wooden statues. Yabe told Hyperallergic about his early encounters with Enkū. “At that time I did not like the rough expression of Enkū so much, but after that, I started to like it.”

“I visited a lot of temples in Japan for seeing and studying his sculptures,” Yabe went on. “Japanese wooden sculpture tends to finish the surface smoothly — very carefully. For examples, Buddha

sculptures and so on. But I had a lot of resistance to that idea. The rough one with more antitheses fascinated me. I think beauty is in rough surfaces and rough expressions.”

The array of statuettes on view at the Cindy Rucker Gallery is dazzling. It’s a joy to poke around, to get up close to each unique figurine, to explore all the different ways Yabe works with what typically isn’t easy on the eyes, and embraces disfigurement.

Yabe carved them with a nata — a special Japanese hatchet that, in English, has no Wikipedia entry. It is designed for cutting branches and chopping wood.

“I began to use a nata about 3 years ago,” Yabe explained. “At first I tried to practice the natabori style, a kind of style for carving wood ... actually it was very heavy and hard to make sculpture ... But I do not want to take the easy way ... I believe that new possibilities are born out there by accident because things do not always go as intended.”

Perceptions of the figurines shift when one starts to ponder how they could be carved with a such a heavy, thick and unwieldy knife. One payoff is the harsh, imprecise textures: a smaller knife would be more exacting and smooth. A second payoff is the inevitable accidents. They lend an undertone of entropy to each work, which intrigues, because such chaotic forms disrupt the familiar effects of more calculated carving.



Francisco de Goya, “Saturn Devouring His Sun” (c. 1819–1823, image via Wikimedia)

Imagine Yabe whittling out each tiny detail here, in a depiction of Saturn devouring his child. Goya must be laughing in his grave at this unusual homage. All those rough, jagged lines, and that unevenly-shaped silhouette, give a rawness and immediacy to Saturn's brutality and fear. (Saturn eats his baby in vain. The Olympian gods eventually escape his belly, fight back, and bring down their tyrannical father.)

Scared men doing crazy shit to cling to power are as old as Greek myth, and as recent as today's news headlines. But one thing that makes it all a little more bearable is the audacity of Yabe's sculpture to galvanize the gashes, jive with the jagged, accentuate accidents, and roll with the rough. We are all trying to find that elusive middle ground between normalizing the roughness of our world, and wallowing in it. Yabe's figurines own their scars — an inspiration as 2018 inflicts fresh wounds and leaves us wondering what do with our disfigurements.



Hirosuke Yabe, "Faithful Dog Men" (2018)

Hirosuke Yabe: Faithful Dog Man *continues at the Cindy Rucker Gallery (141 Attorney Street, SoHo, Manhattan) until March 18.*