

sculpture

March | 2017



Octogenarian Harry Leigh has made a long career of constructing Minimalist sculptures that are highly evocative in their Shaker-like simplicity. Educated at SUNY, Buffalo, and at Teacher's College Columbia University -- supplemented by stints of private study with Peter Voulkos and Richard Pousette-Dart, and numerous stays at Yaddo and MacDowell Colony residencies -- Leigh is clearly well-trained and historically versed in late-modern and contemporary art. He lives upstate in Suffern, New York, and his work, almost entirely constructed from wood, not only accommodates the Minimalist penchant for absolute directness and austere elegant form, but also evinces the natural world. It has been a long time since Minimalism reigned in the mid-'60s and early '70s and it is interesting to see Leigh, an under-recognized artist, present work that harkens back to that period. Leigh, who supported himself as an art teacher, is clearly a skilled craftsman. His eminent virtue is that of structural clarity; the works are sometimes startlingly plain but always evocative and poetic.

Nature underlies much of Leigh's work. In *Untitled (Cascade)* (1992-96), long sticks of wood drop from a horizontal bar, ending in a triangular point. It is a wooden version of a waterfall, something culturally constructed but in close reference to the original. One senses an ongoing relationship between nature and culture in Leigh's imagination, a tie that in some ways connects him philosophically, if not formally, to the British romantic sculptors of the 1970s, Andy Goldsworthy and Richard Long among them. The point is not to be belabored, however, for Leigh is clearly an American artist whose clean lines closely join him to the Minimalists. But unlike Judd, Serra and Andre, he has lived outside New York City, closer to nature, and this choice may well of influenced his aesthetic. Actually, Minimalism is so reductive a program that it bars any easy culture recognition of its models: one simply sees wood and space. The effect is hardly archaic; instead, its impact turns on the distillation of Modernist simplicity. Yet Leigh is something of a dissenter -- the effect of his work is as much pastoral as it is urban.

Untitled (The Shape of Sound) (2002), another stand-out piece in Leigh's recent show, consists of a long horizontal wooden frame, with what must be called an explosion of wood strips on the far right. They create a hollow circle, through which the wall can be seen -- this work, like *Cascade*, is wall mounted. One might worry about an abstract work's ability to evoke sound, a tangible but invisible entity, but *Untitled* succeeds. The construction visibly echoes an eruption of noise in a graceful manner. Leigh makes his mark through startlingly poetic revelation, rather than heavy explosion of industry. Lyricism is nearly quaint among today's young practitioners of sculpture, but for an artist like Leigh, whose apprenticeship with Volkos must have tough him expressiveness as an example of the poetic mind, the sensitivity with which he which he builds his pieces links him to a time when art was admirable elevated, even as it was starting to become more popular. It is to our advantage to find this quality consistently in Leigh's work, which transforms categories of feeling.