

**MoMA PRESENTS A RETROSPECTIVE OF THE SCULPTOR MARTIN PURYEAR,
EXPLORING THREE DECADES OF HIS WORK**

**Puryear's First Major Survey in 15 Years Comprises 47 Large-Scale Sculptures,
Including a New Piece On View for the First Time in the Museum's Marron Atrium**

Martin Puryear

November 4, 2007–January 14, 2008

The Joan and Preston Robert Tisch Gallery, sixth floor

The Donald B. and Catherine C. Marron Atrium, second floor

NEW YORK, October 30, 2007—*Martin Puryear* features 47 works of sculpture charting the development of Puryear's (American, b. 1941) oeuvre over the last 30 years. Beginning his career in the late 1960s alongside the Post-Minimalist generation, Puryear explored many mediums, including painting, drawing, and printmaking, but soon committed himself to sculpture. Working primarily in wood, but also utilizing a variety of other materials including wire mesh and tar, stone, stainless steel, and bronze, Puryear has maintained a commitment to modernist abstraction, constructing his works by hand using methods often derived from traditional trades and skills.

The exhibition is organized by John Elderfield, The Marie-Josée and Henry Kravis Chief Curator of Painting and Sculpture, The Museum of Modern Art, and is on view from November 4, 2007, through January 14, 2008, in The Joan and Preston Robert Tisch Gallery, sixth floor, and in The Donald B. and Catherine C. Marron Atrium, second floor. After its showing at MoMA, it will travel to three additional venues: Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Texas (February 24–May 18, 2008); National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC (June 22–September 28, 2008); and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, California (November 8, 2008–January 25, 2009).

The exhibition is installed on two floors of the Museum. On the second floor, in the Marron Atrium, a new sculpture by Puryear joins four other works from various periods of the artist's career, making this the first time that the Marron Atrium will be devoted to the exhibition of a single artist. An additional 42 sculptures are installed on the sixth floor.

Says Mr. Elderfield, "For 30 years, Martin Puryear's sculpture has enriched modern abstract art with a widely inventive range of pre-modern forms and techniques. His art continues to impress by its inventiveness and to surprise us by experiences that are at once wonderful and strange."

Puryear's work is quiet but deliberately associative, encompassing his wide-reaching cultural and intellectual experiences and drawing on a varied reserve of images, ideas, and information. Throughout his life, a passion for diverse cultures and histories has led him to travel, study, and work in Africa, Asia, Europe, and the United States. These explorations have permitted

him to observe the material cultures of many societies around the globe, as well as the skills and trades employed there, and to make connections among disparate cultural traditions. Puryear's work is further characterized by the artist's reliance on his own hand to create his sculptures, as well as by his insistence on mastering his materials, often through preparatory drawings and maquettes, and dexterously translating this understanding to individual works.

The Donald B. and Catherine C. Marron Atrium

Five sculptures in the Marron Atrium span Puryear's career from 1975 to 2007. The newest sculpture, the 63-foot-tall *Ad Astra* (2007), incorporates an ash sapling that measures approximately 58 feet and is extended by an additional tapered limb that appears to reach "to the stars," as the title infers. The sculpture, rooted at its base by a pair of wagon wheels and a wooden, multifaceted, crystalline form, is aspirational, its spire rising to the Museum's top-floor balcony and suggesting a perpetual upward trajectory.

Ladder for Booker T. Washington (1996) is a 36-foot-tall split sapling that narrows and recedes as it ascends into space, exaggerating its length and the distance from the viewer. Unlike earlier sculptures that call the viewer's attention to their tactile surfaces, this one invites the viewer to contemplate the sculpture's position, suspended in space by barely perceptible wires, suggesting ascension from the physical world.

Also on view in the Marron Atrium are *Greed's Trophy* (1984), a 12-foot wire net or trap that examines the dynamic between interior and exterior space; *Desire* (1981), a gigantic wooden wheel made motionless by a long, gently shaped beam attached to a tall pylon basket- woven from wooden slats; and *Some Tales* (1975–78), a wall-mounted piece consisting of a central beam with saw-like teeth and five light, pliable elements made of split saplings, all of which hang horizontally on the wall, echoing each other's elongated forms.

The Joan and Preston Robert Tisch Gallery

The 42 sculptures installed on the sixth floor examine the chronological evolution of Puryear's work and show how the artist consistently refers back to his early ideas, reinterpreting familiar themes in his works. Among these sculptures are examples from Puryear's Ring series of the late 1970s, his Stereotypes and Decoys sculptures of the 1980s, his vessel-like forms of the 1990s, and the more allegorical work of recent years.

The exhibition is organized in a loosely chronological fashion, beginning with a selection of early works in which traits of his mature works, such as arc and cone shapes, can be seen. Examples include the 1976 sculpture *Bask*, a pine structure that resembles a boat hull, and *Circumbent*, an arc-shaped sculpture made of ash wood. These are displayed on raised platforms in the first gallery, along with other smaller-scale works from 1980. Composed of arcs, straight lines, and flat planes, *Bask* is the most severely geometric of Puryear's sculptures, and it provides the clearest evidence of Minimalism's brief influence on the artist's mature work. *Circumbent*

similarly reflects Puryear's interest in geometry. Its shape is a semicircular arc bent 20 degrees out of plane and resting on a prop, forming a kind of tripod.

The subsequent galleries proceed with larger work. Puryear's 1978 *Some Lines for Jim Beckwourth*, a tribute to the early nineteenth-century American adventurer, is made of dried, twisted lengths of rawhide with tufts of red, white, and black cow hair, symbolizing Beckwourth's mixed ancestry and the various cultural environments in which he lived. For another work dated 1978, *Self*, Puryear covered an armature with a half-inch-thick wooden sheath, and then removed the armature, leaving only the wooden "skin." A solid-looking shell with a hollow interior, *Self* addresses the ideas of interiority and exteriority that pervade much of Puryear's work, and suggests that the self is a secret entity or a hidden place.

From 1978 to 1985, Puryear created a series of wall-mounted ring forms. Most of these works were constructed from strips of wood bent, glued, and shaved into shape. Many were painted, possibly a vestige from the artist's beginnings as a painter. Indeed, Puryear has described these works as occupying the same space as paintings but lacking a center, existing only on the periphery. Examples of the Ring series in this exhibition are *Cerulean* (1982), *Dream of Pairing* (1981), *Big and Little Same* (1981), two untitled works from 1981 and 1982, and his earliest prototype for this series—an untitled, garrote-shaped sculpture from 1978. This particular work is an example of a small number of Ring sculptures that Puryear produced by forcing natural saplings into a circular form while they were still green.

Progressing into the later 1980s, *Old Mole* (1985) demonstrates Puryear's more metaphorical work. The approximately five-by-five-foot woven wooden form invites free association; it resembles a mummified avian head or rodent, among other things. Puryear's work of this period plays with the puzzle of identity and contains many animal-vegetable associations. In *Sharp and Flat* (1987), the pine planks on the surface of the sculpture are left raw, strengthening the wood's associations with the natural environment from which it was harvested. The form's birdlike abstraction, its long neck rising from a great base, alludes to the waterfowl decoys used by hunters.

Midway through the sixth-floor galleries are sculptures that explore the translucency of sculptures' surfaces in a material other than wood. *Maroon* (1987), one of Puryear's first works incorporating tarred wire mesh, has a bulbous shape, circular wooden cap, and a variety of materials and textures. *Maroon* reflects Puryear's interest in paradoxes within singular forms: here he contrasts organic and geometric shapes, carefully handcrafted elements and raw wood, and a mysterious, unknowable interior space and a tactile exterior, all in the same work.

During the 1990s, Puryear continued to explore common themes in sculptures with forms that were increasingly complex, both in their composition and their symbolism. While Puryear's earlier sculptures had often featured solid wooden surfaces, the surface of *Brunhilde* (1998–2000) is open latticework that resembles a woven basket but is actually made from thin strips of laminated red cedar that were cut to precise lengths and then glued, stapled, and clamped

together. Evidence of this painstaking process appears in the staple holes on the sculpture's surface. With this work, Puryear activates the interior space without concealing it. The work seems inflated from within, its swollen shape suggesting an air-filled balloon or the inflated lungs of its namesake: the Valkyrie heroine of Wagner's operatic Ring cycle.

In the last gallery of the exhibition is a series of allegorical works made since 2000. Both in title and in form, *Le Prix* (2005) suggests multiple associations and meanings. It incorporates a wooden chain, painted gray, whose links are carved as a unit rather than looping loosely through one another, permitting the illusion that a typically flexible object is rising improbably and stiffly into the air. The title is ambiguous, meaning, in French, both "the prize" and "the price."

C.F.A.O. (2006-07), the final work on the sixth floor, makes reference to African tribal art. The sculpture is made from an old wheelbarrow that Puryear found in 1993 while he was an artist-in-residence at Alexander Calder's studio in Saché, France. He attached to it an oversized impression of a mask made by the Fang people of Gabon, West Africa, which is in turn supported by and enmeshed in a dense thicket of interlocking pine scaffolding. The title references the Compagnie Française de L'Afrique Occidentale, a nineteenth-century trading company that sailed between Marseille and West Africa and had ports in Sierra Leone, where Puryear lived during his 1964–66 tour with the Peace Corps. The combination of the workman's wheelbarrow with the mask form suggests themes of colonization and early contact and cultural exchange between vastly different societies.

About the Artist

Puryear was born on May 23, 1941, in Washington, DC, and now lives and works in upstate New York. As a high school and college student, he was interested in the natural sciences. He graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree from Catholic University of America in 1963, after which he studied printmaking at the Royal Academy of Sweden in Stockholm, and earned a Master of Fine Arts degree in sculpture from Yale University in 1971. In 1977, Puryear had his first solo museum show at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, DC. Later that year, he received an Individual Artist Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts and was awarded a studio at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center in Long Island City, New York—now a MoMA affiliate—by the Institute for Art and Urban Resources.

Although not in the purview of this exhibition, Puryear's career also includes prolific work in the form of public sculpture installations and architectural designs in public gardens, in locations stretching from Boston to Seattle to Japan. A few of his most notable projects include *Knoll for NOAA* (1983), a large-scale public art project on the shores of Seattle's Lake Washington; *Pavilion in the Trees* (1993), a bridge traversing the steep decline of a hill and connected to a gazebo-like structure in Fairmount Park, Philadelphia; and *North Cove Pylons*, two tall, illuminated sculptures in Battery Park in New York City (1993).

SPONSORSHIP:

The exhibition is sponsored by CIT and by Agnes Gund and Daniel Shapiro. Major support is provided by The Friends of Education of The Museum of Modern Art. Additional funding is provided by the George and Joyce Wein Foundation.

PUBLICATION:

The exhibition *Martin Puryear* is accompanied by a publication featuring essays by Michael Auping, Chief Curator at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth; John Elderfield; and Elizabeth Reede, Assistant Curator, Department of Painting and Sculpture at MoMA; an interview with Puryear by Richard J. Powell, John Spencer Bassett Professor of Art and Art History at Duke University; and a chronology by Jennifer Field, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Painting and Sculpture at MoMA. Illustrations of all works in the exhibition and other comparative material are also included. The book is distributed to the trade through Distributed Art Publishers (D.A.P.) in the United States and Canada and through Thames & Hudson outside of North America. It will be available in November 2007 at MoMA Stores and online at www.momastore.org. Clothbound: 9 ½ x 12 inches; 192 pages; 130 color illustrations. Price: \$60.

PROGRAMS:**Conversations: Among Friends**

Tuesday, November 13, 7:00 p.m.

Theater 2 (The Roy and Niuta Titus Theater 2), 11 W. 53 Street

John Elderfield, The Marie-Josée and Henry Kravis Chief Curator of Painting and Sculpture, The Museum of Modern Art, and organizer of the exhibition, and artist Martin Puryear discuss the work in the exhibition. This event is presented with The Friends of Education of The Museum of Modern Art, an affiliate group whose mission is to foster a greater appreciation of art created by African American artists and to encourage African American membership and participation in and throughout MoMA. The Conversations: Among Friends series explores works of art as reflections of their political and social context. Tickets are \$10; members \$8; students, seniors, and staff of other museums \$5. Tickets are extremely limited. For press access, please call in advance.

A Critics Panel

Tuesday, January 8, 6:30 p.m.

Theater 2, 11 W. 53 Street

Through a series of presentations and a moderated discussion, critics offer their perspectives on the work of Martin Puryear. Critics will include David Levi-Strauss, scholar, critic, and chair, MFA Art Criticism and Writing Department, School of Visual Arts; Judith Russi Kirshner, professor of Art History and dean of the College of Architecture and the Arts, University of Illinois at Chicago; and others to be determined.

Brown Bag Lunch Lectures

On Monday, November 26, and Thursday, November 29, Jennifer Field will give a Brown Bag Lunch Lecture in Classroom B in The Lewis B. and Dorothy Cullman Education and Research Building at 4 West 54 Street, from 12:30 to 1:15 p.m. Attendees may bring their own lunches. Tickets are \$5; members, students, seniors, and staff of other museums \$5.

Tickets for programs can be purchased at the lobby information desk, at the Film desk, or in the Cullman Building lobby. Tickets are also available online at www.moma.org/thinkmodern.

EXHIBITION WEB SITE:

An accompanying Web site will feature images of each of the works in the exhibition, accompanied by excerpts from the exhibition catalogue and an analysis of the artist's sculptures based on the mediums, varied scale, and chronological development of his work. Also included will be installation imagery of the exhibition. The Web site will be available at www.moma.org/martinpuryear when the show opens to the public on November 4, 2007.

TRAVEL:

The exhibition will travel to three additional venues: Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Texas (February 24–May 18, 2008); National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC (June 22–September 28, 2008); and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, California (November 8, 2008–January 25, 2009).

For high resolution images, please register on our press office Web site:

www.moma.org/press.

Press Contact: Meg Blackburn, 212/708-9757 or meg_blackburn@moma.org
No. 106

Public Information:

The Museum of Modern Art 11 West 53rd Street, New York, NY 10019

Hours: Wednesday through Monday: 10:30 a.m.–5:30 p.m. Friday: 10:30 a.m.–8:00 p.m.

Museum Admission: \$20 adults; \$16 seniors, 65 years and over with I.D.; \$12 full-time students with current I.D. Free, members and children 16 and under. (Includes admittance to Museum galleries and film programs)
Target Free Friday Nights 4:00–8:00 p.m.

Film Admission: \$10 adults; \$8 seniors, 65 years and over with I.D.; \$6 full-time students with current I.D. (For admittance to film programs only)

Subway: E or V train to Fifth Avenue/53rd Street

Bus: On Fifth Avenue, take the M1, M2, M3, M4, or M5 to 53rd Street. On Sixth Avenue, take the M5, M6, or M7 to 53rd Street. Or take the M57 and M50 crosstown buses on 57th and 50th Streets.

The public may call 212/708-9400 for Museum information. Visit us on the Web at www.moma.org.