



# Minoru Ohira

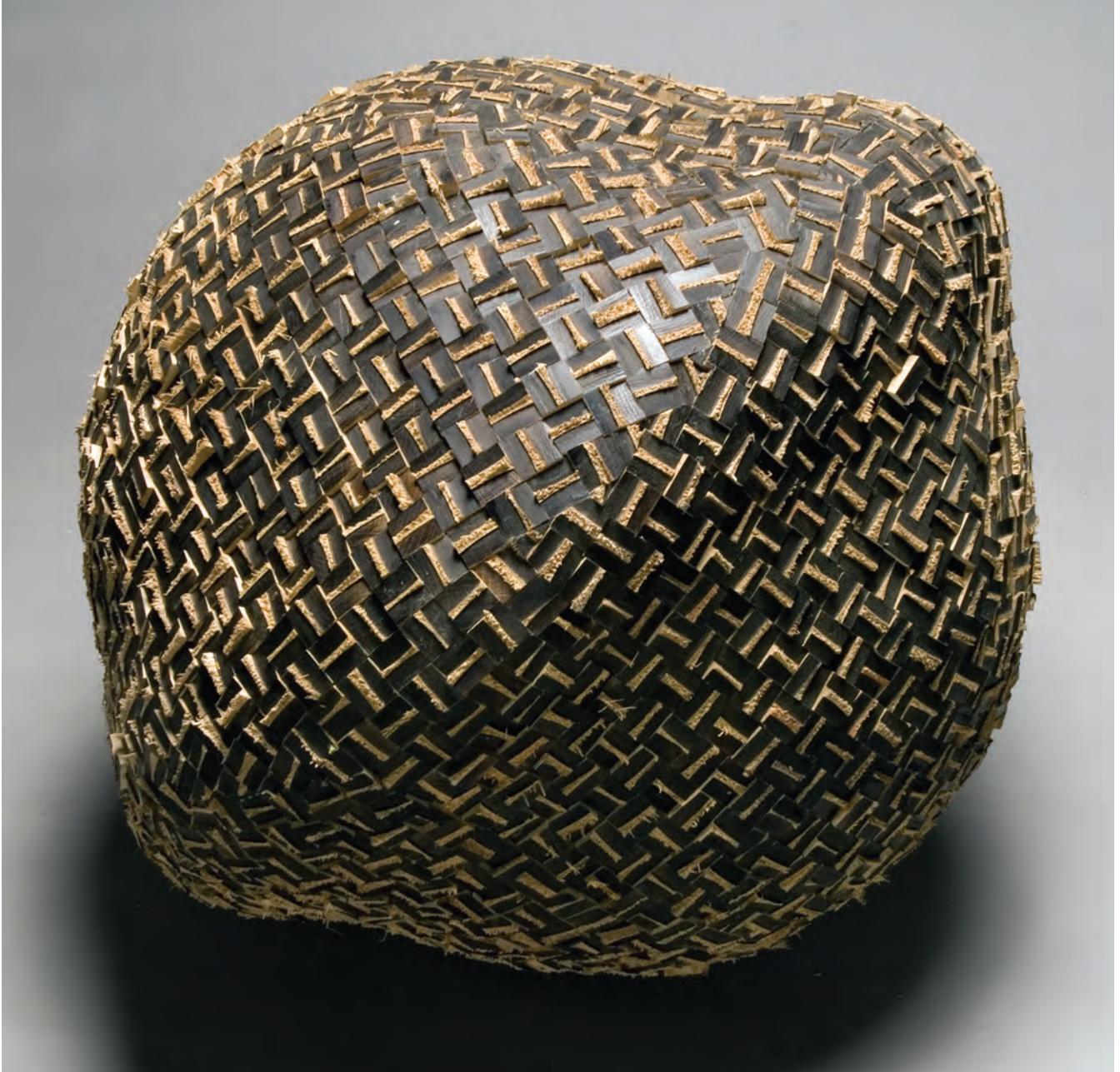


## Attractive to the Hand

BY KAY WHITNEY

Opposite: Installation view of “Memory and Nature” with (front to back) *Beginning bw-1 (fission)*, 2003, burned, cut, and chopped white oak on wood form, 36 x 45 x 38 in.; and *Grove of Shrine*, 2017, graphite on wood and Douglas fir poles, 6 ft. high. Above: *Volcanic series #1*, 2012. Douglas fir, resin, and graphite, 26 x 20 x 36 in.

Minoru Ohira uses wood in ways that make it seem like a newly discovered material. Surfaces flicker from light to dark—monochromatic or flecked with color, matte or gleaming, bristling with texture or smoothly uninflected, richly stained or overtly natural. Ohira, who remains true to a deeply profound and primal notion of nature, is committed to probing its capacity for beauty and revelation. His work begins with the most elemental definition of sculpture, relying on the simplest materials and methods. His most interesting objects are made solely of wood—carved, shaped, assembled, jointed, or fastened. Despite the refinement and sophistication of his forms, they conjure memories of basic things in the world, including tools, shelters, and totemic objects; there is a sense that they are not made up, but have always been present.



*Beginning bw-2*, 2003. Burned, cut, and chopped white oak on wood form, 26 x 32 x 28 in.

Ohira's work can be seen as a private, handcrafted reaction to Minimalism, expressionism, and personal experience, placing the experiential over the visual and demanding contemplation. A fusion of different cultures and histories lies at the heart of his approach. Born and educated in Japan, he gives Japanese aesthetics a clear force, emphasizing craft, simplicity, and the rural arts. "Iki and Yabo," a 2016 solo exhibition at Offramp Gallery in Pasadena, demonstrated this foundational influence: the Japanese term *iki* refers to the smart, chic, or refined; *yabo*, on the other hand, refers to the rustic or uncouth. Ohira's body of work reflects both sides of the opposition.

Before moving to Los Angeles, Ohira lived in Mexico City for three years, where he studied at the National School of Painting, Sculpture, and Engraving "La Esmeralda." During this period, he spent a great deal of time looking at pre-Columbian art, visiting ruins, museums, and small villages. Although he finds it difficult to point to specific influences, he credits indigenous Mexicans living in poverty as the source of his materials and working methods. He was particularly impressed by how they created objects and implements from any material that came to hand—natural, artificial—with nothing wasted. In an interview, Ohira once asked, "Don't you think it's wonderful to see

things that were once disposed of and dead recover as art?"

He mainly uses found, donated, or upcycled wood and deals with it as he finds it, employing every kind of woodworking skill to transform branches, dead trees, scraps from construction sites, building components, and furniture fragments. The fact that these sources are restricted affects how he works; as he puts it, "If I want to make a series or theme, the amount of material is very limited." His "theme" depends on the quantity and sort of wood he has collected: "Every sort of wood has a different character that forces me into a certain direction, so it's hard to develop the same theme. I don't think about my sculptures logically,



Above: Installation view of “Memory and Nature,” 2018. Right: Installation view of “Memory and Nature” with (center) *Tortuga #2*, 2004. Douglas fir, 38 x 48 x 40 in.

“I’m only expressing nature I feel around my life; the theme is in my memory, the shape that I make is simple, I am looking back at my cultural background.” Although the number of pieces based on a particular concept may be limited, all of Ohira’s work is thematically unified by a tangible sense of movement, intensity, and force.

The level of craftsmanship is extraordinary, but never exploited for its own sake—Ohira plays with his facility, consistently leaving traces of his process. He is always positioning the stages of fabrication against each other, opposing highly polished surfaces with expressionistic carving, using light and shadow to add intangible dimensions, contrasting solidity with transparency. Nothing is static—much of his work is about movement, each object seemingly arrested in its tracks, capable of rolling away. Ohira works with a variety of natural and man-made materials, including graphite, stone,





*Casa #2*, 2015. Cherry wood, maple wood, granite, and split found wood, 55 x 60 x 60 in.

stainless steel, copper, glass, and resin; he marks each of them with his particularly evocative view of nature and way of pulling a sense of elasticity out of rigidity.

His distinctive objects combine the geometry of Modernism with global craft traditions such as braiding, basketry, and joinery. He never uses squares or measuring devices, relying instead on an internal feeling for scale and proportion. The sense of touch is central to how we perceive his works—Ohira refers to this as “attractive to the hand.” He uses common hand tools to accentuate this effect, most frequently hatchets, splitters, gouges, Japanese handsaws, and a variety of clamps. Though he employs a range of glues (liquid nails, resins, and epoxies), he considers their use to be “very un-Japanese.”

His materials retain an impression of their origins and may be left as is or laminated, carved, shredded, or shaved to the point of transparency. All of the finishes, including the epoxy resins, are achieved by hand with abrasive papers. The thicknesses and assemblies vary dramatically; a piece may be opaque or translucent, skeletal or solid. Many of his sculptures are based on an internal framework consisting of boards, branches, or plywood. The surface, which may be made of fine twigs or small bits cut off a branch with a hatchet, veils the interior structure. For this reason, Ohira’s work can seem paradoxically flimsy—he removes substance, often creating a see-through weave, a fragile form pierced by the space it inhabits.

A recent retrospective at the Palos Verdes Art Center in California presented 25 years of Ohira’s sculpture. Whether natural and organic or artificial and constructed in appearance, his works share a complex organization of interdependent parts—vertical and horizontal sections, low and tall forms, craggy, irregular shapes juxtaposed with deliberately defined geometry. The “Volcano” series (2012) consists of deeply carved, egg-like, doubled monoliths. Oval forms pierce the surface coating of graphite and resin, the pattern of incised and carved lines left raw in a way that confuses the natural with the constructed. He has been dealing with similar forms since 2003. In the “Beginning Bw” series, large carved pieces are cov-

View of work installed at the National Art Center, Tokyo, with (background) *Santa Ana Wind*, 2007, maple, split and chopped found wood, and wood frame, 134 x 106 x 71 in.; and (center) *Tree in Desert*, 2008, split and chopped found wood, maple, and white oak frame, 177 x 72 x 72 in.

ered with hundreds of pieces of charred wood chips.

In *Grove of Shrine* (2017), an installation of carved, unfinished Douglas fir poles surmounted by polished, graphite-covered forms (ovoid, spherical, and vase-like), dramatic lighting casts dense shadows, seemingly doubling the number of elements while emphasizing the contrast between gleaming black organic forms and crudely rectangular raw wood. The poles, though anchored by small squares of steel, appear lightweight and precariously balanced. *Floating Weed* (2016), which also employs contrasts between light and dark, but in natural light, resembles an inverted thistle with its roughly carved, toothpick-like sticks of yellow cedar standing on end. When brilliantly lit, it can cast daylight shadows that, as with *Grove of Shrine*, have the illusory effect of multiplying the number of sections. The pieces are joined at the top and surmounted by a piece of rounded gray granite that resembles the ferrule of an umbrella. Both of these works are poetic meditations on difference and equilibrium.

In *Casa #2* (2015), an elongated open-work stem capped with a piece of round granite penetrates a hollow spherical shape. This compendium of woodworking techniques—the wood is sawn, bent, cut, joined, and split, polished and left raw—also gives rise to humorous male/female connotations. The crudely finished disk of maple at the top shows its grain, while the sphere beneath it consists of a scaffolding of curving split-wood segments skinned over with evenly spaced chips of wood. A bent hoop of pale wood at the floor anchors the crisscrossed meridians. The elegant post is made of narrow strips of cherry forced into an elongated oval by small circular wedges that hold the components apart. Sitting at an angle on the floor, the sphere looks as if it could be spun like a top around the central post.



While Ohira's work resembles no one else's, he has strong conceptual ties to artists such as Isamu Noguchi, Emiko Tokushige, Ursula von Rydingsvard, Kimio Tsuchiya, and Martin Puryear. His objects engender a sense of calm fused with dynamism. Painstaking and deliberate fabrication methods could be considered a meditation for both artist and viewer, as every object is the consequence of repetition and refinement. Though the works

appear to be pure and simple, they are, in reality, eccentric hybrids full of dislocations and oppositions. In today's mediated art world where digital scans and farmed-out fabrication are ascendant, Ohira's work stands out for its passionate and intuitive feeling, lack of irony, extreme labor, and harnessed intensity.

*Kay Whitney is an artist and writer based in Los Angeles.*