ARTIST SPOTLIGHT: CURVED AND POINTED
Katy Cannon, M.F.A.

Abstraction is elimination of detail and codification of information. We operate by its principles in all our systems of communication and even in our coherent thoughts. Since we must communicate in the world outside ourselves and not mind-to-mind, we have the ability to simplify our perceptions into compact, expressible forms, such as words and symbols. The ability to recognize that “bird” means any, all, or one particular bird, has a more playful side, such as seeing birds in the shapes of clouds or lines of curved wood.

I find it fascinating that the essentials I pick out of a visual experience, and translate through inarticulate wood, can relate some of the feelings of that experience to another. And I find sculpture to be something altogether different from pictures. An artist making images has to create only one side of things—the side we see—and can even create something altogether imaginary. A sculptor, on the other hand, while dealing with his or her imagination, also has to deal with the physical facts of the world. Gravity, size, and relationships of placement demand a functional kind of attention—the same kind we give to everyday objects. But sculpture further demands a special kind of attention—the importance of what it looks from every side.

The only really good way to see sculpture is to do so in person. Like so many things in life—taking a walk, attending a concert—“seeing” sculpture is as reliant on the sensations of the body as much as it is the eyes. Our sense of touch relies very much on weight; and it is only in comparison to our own bodies that we understand physical similarities and differences between ourselves and other things, plants, and animals. This leads me to consider how I experience the world as a part of nature—a being in the world—not outside of it as one looking at a picture.

If this work is about control, then it is also about abandonment—the pursuit of order and the submission to chaos. While I go about construction instinctively, I am tapping into a mode of problem solving unfettered by too much solution. For example, I could have studied boat building, or even just soaked my wood before constructing the Hull, but instead I just kept inching the curves tighter and tighter, finessing the planks into place. I can not remember how many of them snapped.
I want my work to be a struggle, so that what I learn is my own. The order I achieve is my triumph, not over nature but over my own awkwardness and ignorance—it is a true manifestation of my will. The wood’s splintering, splitting, and cracking is the inevitable return of chaos. The Greeks called these two opposing states by the names of two gods, Apollo and Dionysus, and defined beauty as the combination of the two. As aspiration to order against hardship and blithe abandonment to danger represent the beautiful extremes of the human soul, so art demonstrating these conflicting forces offers a yin-yang view of—dare I say it—life itself.

Along the way, someone interpreted my Bird #2 as a sprouting seed and turned my attention from animals to plants. The three works following that shift in thought have all had plant-forms as their inspiration, and as I neared completion of Hull, I began to think of this body of work as “my flowers.” Floral beauty maintains timelessness through its ability to be reinvented through ever-changing time and across cultures. While, of course, the form, color, and scent of a flower are born again and again each spring in much the same way, the meaning of that beauty is open for interpretation. It is precisely this same adaptability that also gives timelessness to art. If we concur that viewers of different times and cultures will come to different opinions about the same work of art, then we must agree that the artist’s intention is of little import to the value of the work. It is, instead, the properties of the work itself that stand out from the background of the world as worthy of attention.

In his book The Botany of Desire: A Plant’s-Eye View of the World Michael Pollan proposes that in the evolution of flowers, “Beauty had emerged as a survival strategy.” Standing out from the background vegetation, a flower could attract the attention of pollinators and dispersers of seed. As foraging animals, humans naturally noticed flowers and attributed meaning—future food—to the blossoms. But as civilization advanced, “We gazed even farther into the blossom of a flower and found something even more: the crucible of beauty, if not art.” For in a flower we see both creation and decay, the cycle of time sped up and embodied. So perhaps, through evolution, we are hard-wired to appreciate formal regularity as much as we are novelty. For me, the simplicity of abstraction opens avenues of imagination and memory far more powerfully and with much more freedom than anything that requires me to guess at intention or implication.
I often ask myself if I am doing the right thing with my life, spending so much time with art. But, as I think any artist knows, the compulsion to see, to hear, to feel what is in your imagination is as much a part of the world as everything else. As art critic Dave Hickey stated recently, we study art simply because, “We would rather look than not.”

KATY CANNON grew up in Helena, Montana. She earned her B.F.A. from the University of Idaho and spent two years living in San Francisco before moving to Albuquerque, New Mexico, where she earned her M.F.A. from the University of New Mexico in sculpture. She currently lives and works in Albuquerque.

NOTES:
2 Ibid., 109.
3 Dave Hickey, “The Sisterhood of the Arts,” lecture, 11 February 2010, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque.
Katy Cannon, *Abstract (Tree Roots)*, 2009; alder and fir tree roots. Approx. 66” x 52” x 136”; varies according to installation. Photograph by Jeff Willis.

Katy Cannon, *Hull*, 2010; alder, redwood, pine and elm. 48” x 60” x 35” (detail). Photograph by Jeff Willis.

Katy Cannon, *Abstract (Bird #1)*, 2009; alder. 114” x 12” x 6” (left) and *Abstract (Bird #2)*, 2009; pine. 108” x 16” x 6” (right). Photograph by Jeff Willis.
PLATE 1. Waldemar Cordeiro. (a) *Opera Aperta* [Open Work], 1963, Aluminum paint and mirror on canvas, 75 x 150 cm; (b) *Ambigüidade* [Ambiguity], 1963, Oil, mirror, and collage on canvas, 75 x 150 cm. Images courtesy of Ana Livia Cordeiro.

PLATE 3. San Carlos of Cabaña Fortress, one of the main venues of the Havana Biennial. Image courtesy of the author and Havana Biennial curatorial committee.
