

ROBYN MATERIAL ILLUSIONS

# HORN



MUSEUM OF CRAFT AND DESIGN



*Resisting Collapse (detail), 2017, Redwood, 51 1/2 x 30 x 10"*

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## FOREWORD AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

JOANN EDWARDS, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,  
MUSEUM OF CRAFT AND DESIGN

The Museum of Craft and Design (MCD) is honored to present *Robyn Horn: Material Illusions*. This exhibition features Horn's paintings and sculpture from 2011 to 2021, and showcases in particular her recent endeavors during the Covid-19 pandemic. Included are her chainsaw formed slipping stone, millstone, and industrial series sculptures, in addition to carved and layered multimedia paintings.

From an early age, Robyn Hutcheson Horn was surrounded by a creatively nurturing family of artists; her mother, Dede Hutcheson, and her sister, Karen Hutcheson, are accomplished painters. In her formative years, she was more interested in music than art. This passion led her to perform in several rock bands as a singer and guitarist before her curiosity shifted to painting. In 1973, she received her BA degree from Hendrix College in Arkansas, then worked for a typesetting company and later became Chief Photographer of Arkansas Parks and Tourism in Little Rock. She married John Horn in 1979 and credits her late brother-in-law, Sam Horn, for introducing her to wood turning and the lathe in 1983, which sent her on a path of sculpting. Outside of Little Rock, she



Robyn Horn with *Blackchurch Rock* (2021)

and John share a 20,000-square-foot facility that houses her wood shop and paint studio, as well as John's renowned letterpress printing studio. Together they stay steeped in creativity, one supporting the other.

In 1998, Horn began to implement carving techniques with a chainsaw and bandsaw, although the lathe and rounded forms are still integral to her practice. She regularly utilizes fallen redwood from California, in addition to exotic woods and burls. She brings an uncommon intensity to sculpting from a single large section of the tree. Distinctive to her process, Horn often carves what appears to be a series of attached components, referencing joinery. As if turning wood inside out to expose the secret crannies and underbelly of the raw material, she transforms the surface texture of the wood grain with repetitive mark-making. Her irresistible kinship for the material invites us to pay close attention to these richly textured, powerful forms, whether intimate or massive in scale. Her two-dimensional work is similarly infused with her reverence for wood. By applying multiple layers of acrylic paint and then making bold marks, scrapes, and cuts, she intentionally reveals the rich texture and underpainting. Her complex process and approach to balance, scale, and spatial connections result in powerful and magnificent artworks that have earned Horn a place in the pantheon of American art. In 2008, she was designated an Arkansas Living Treasure by the Department of Arkansas Heritage.

The Museum of Craft and Design and its Board of Directors gratefully acknowledge the extraordinary enthusiasm and support of so many throughout the country who contributed to the success of this exhibition, including MCD's curator Ariel Zaccheo, who took a critical lead role. We greatly appreciate the exceptional essays written by Lawrence Rinder, former director and chief curator of the UC Berkeley Art Museum & Pacific Film Archives, and art critic, former *Art in America* senior editor and author Janet Koplos. We thank Mark Richard Leach for his in-kind consulting and keen guidance throughout the process of developing the exhibition. Additionally, we give thanks to editor Terry Ann R. Neff of t. a. neff associates, who helped us realize this significant and thoughtful publication. Special appreciation goes to Kit Hinrichs and Studio Hinrichs for their ongoing pro bono work on behalf of MCD and for the outstanding design of this publication.

We are especially grateful to the generous supporters of the exhibition: Premium Sponsors—Fleur Bresler and the Alice L. Walton Foundation; Lead Sponsors—The Feltus Family, Jackye and Curtis Finch, Jr., Anita and Ronald Wornick; Advocate Circle Sponsors—Eleanor and Bruce Heister; Associate Circle Sponsors—Dana Martin Davis, Alyce and Steve Kaplan, Barbara Laughlin, Hal Nelson and Bernard Jazzar, Jamiene Studley and Gary Smith, Barbara Waldman; Patron Circle Sponsors—Center for Craft, Polly Allen, Lorne E. Lassiter and Gary P. Ferraro, Marion

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Further, we recognize our Founder's Circle, Curator's Circle, and Director's Circle donors for their steadfast dedication to the Museum of Craft and Design. Their commitment to leadership and their generosity ensure that our exhibitions, programs, and special projects are possible.

Lastly, we owe a debt of gratitude to Robyn Horn, not just for her extraordinary work over the last forty years, but for her encouragement, support, and guidance of fellow artists, colleagues, and institutions. Her wisdom, kindness, generosity, and human spirit have meant so much to so many. Horn's matchless commitment and selflessness have inspired and encouraged others across decades. In the quietest, most humble way, Horn, along with her husband, share a deep respect and affinity for living artists; their creativity and humanity have a transformative impact on us all.



*Lyrical Layers (detail), 2020, Acrylics, rust, and charcoal on wood panel*



*Resisting Collapse, 2017, Redwood, 51 1/2 x 30 x 10"*



*Industrial Series No. 9 "Pierced", 2016, Pine and steel, 18 x 11 x 9"*



*Landslide, 2011, Burned Redwood, steel base, 38 x 117 x 24"*





*Indiscriminately Curved, 2017, Chittam burl, 20 x 27 x 14"*



*Staccato, 2021, Box elder burl, 25 x 25 x 7"*



# ROBYN HORN IN TWO GENRES

JANET KOPLoS

When someone known as a sculptor suddenly adds painting to her repertoire, a viewer might be perplexed. What does this mean? What do the two genres have in common? The materials differ, the dimensionality differs, the physicality differs, and even scale may differ, so what's the relationship? In the case of Robyn Horn's sculptures and paintings, three commonalities are apparent: one superficial but not trivial, one organizational and suggesting further consideration, and the third metaphoric or poetic.

## PALETTE

The first one is simply the color palette. Both Horn's wood sculptures and her paintings skew toward predominantly warm hues, chiefly red, brown, yellow, and their variations. Color is a choice in any medium. Selected woods can offer a vast array of natural colors,

and can be stained or painted at will. In her sculptures, Horn has opted to limit color ranges within a given work, instead providing contrasts through surface texture or adding some darkening. Variations of the natural hues of her chosen wood are paramount: Horn clearly respects the material and what it represents. For her, the natural world does not have to be tarted up to be appealing and valued.

In paint pigments, "natural" is a meaningless term, yet when Horn turns from the sculptures to the paintings, she brings with her a predilection for the same hues she responded to in wood. There's no shift from neutrals to bright springtime tones, tropical heat, or psychedelic dazzles. The overall tonality of the paintings might be described as sepia. It's calming. The paintings harmonize with the sculptures, the biggest departure being small additions of blue. While any single

painting shows a greater multiplicity of hues than any single sculpture, they draw on the same palette.

It is curious and interesting, though, that the color range of the paintings does not evoke wooden elements. It's more likely to bring to mind industrial settings and metal materials that show oxidation or other discoloration. The color relationships within the two genres of work thus call attention to the character of materials and how materials are affected by their environments. That's a surface characteristic, but it's not a small matter. It adds a layer of meaning to Horn's work.

## ORGANIZATION

The organizational connection is motion. All the works, three-dimensional or two-, imply motion in some way. The sculptures, through their segmented, sectional, repetitive compositions, create a sense of deconstruction, falling, or even rotation. But Horn creates these effects without actuating them. Through judicious cutting, a single, unitary mass is made to look as if it has multiple parts. In other words, the compositional appearance, despite having all the tactility and palpability of conventional sculpture, is an illusion.

It is less surprising that the paintings are illusionistic, because illusion, such as the idea of spatial depth, is a common characteristic of paintings. Horn's approach to motion in paintings is different from her methodology in sculpture. In some works, a pile-up of repeated lines might generate the sense of falling, but more often, movement is suggested by blurring or smearing, leading viewers to reflect on the artist's motions in making the painting. *Questioning* (2019) and *Seemingly Serene* (2019) are examples of this expression of movement. And in a few works, a powerful illusion of perspective, created by converging diagonal lines, pulls viewers' vision deep into illusionistic space and suggests that one could walk into that space. The motion becomes the viewer's virtual experience in works such as *Time Advancing* (2020) and *Stepping Through Time* (2020). That the artist fully intends this response is evident in her titles.

## TIME

The third relationship among the works is the implication of time. Once again, clues can be found in Horn's titles: in some paintings and in the sculpture *Continuous Motion* (2020), words direct viewers to what may be seen in the

compositions. But viewers can find their way to that thought even without the verbal assistance. The aggregation of lines, like a crowd gathering; the vertical smears like the stains and deterioration of a building; those diagonal perspective lines that suggest travel along a mysterious route—all these, as we know them in life, require time. These elements plant in the viewer's mind the thought that time is the essential aspect of everything that we know. All experience is bound up in time. Knowledge comes with time. As a wise artist I know said, when someone asked him if he couldn't make his paintings faster, "Time is what you give to the things you love."

The time that Horn binds into her sculptures and paintings gives them a conceptual scope of metaphoric proportions. Yet they are straightforward works of the hand—intimate expressions by one person that can be understood by another who makes the effort. And even the most nearly pictorial of them—the receding lines that might be a hall leading to a door—remain abstractions, with only the faintest indications of where Horn might be leading.

It's interesting to notice how strongly Horn's sensibility inclines toward the

visual element of line. That's a curious twist considering that a painting in essence is a flat surface, and that her sculptures are overwhelmingly masses. Of course, in all the works there is concern with surface texture as well, but line maintains a surprisingly strong presence.

The sculpture *Resisting Collapse* (2017), for example, creates its sense of potentially cascading motion with three sequences of parallel lines formed by incisions into the wood. The overall shape is a C, with what would be the upper termination of that letter stair-stepping downward to imply that the whole thing could be coming apart. To view it from the side is to be pulled into the chattering repetition of line. Likewise, *Indiscriminately Curved* (2017) is a more unified mass, not so much featuring the geometric slabs making parallel lines that we see in *Resisting Collapse*, yet it appears so be a concatenation of curved lines nestled into one another or perhaps splitting apart. In both cases, the work is dominated by the repetition of curves and draws one's eyes to the different character of those lines, which variously suggest spreading rot or splintering or incision.

Looking back to *Continuous Motion*, we can see that the entire leaning-O-shaped mass

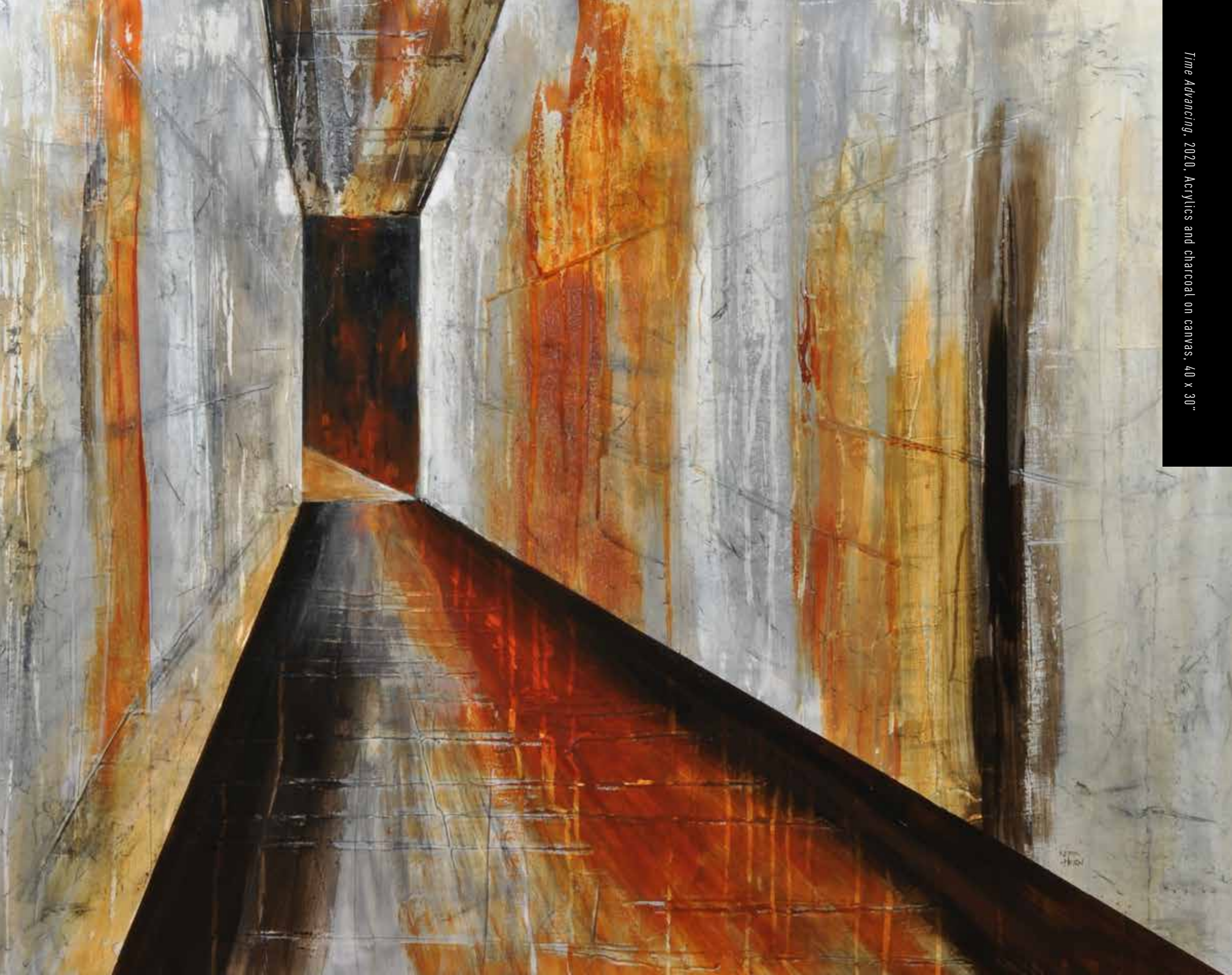
is defined by incised sequential but not identical lines. Horn shares a devotion to wood and a concentrated manipulation with the sculptor Mel Kendrick, but where he is inclined to actually assemble, she is committed to retaining a whole and decisively marking it.

Among the paintings, *Our Perception of Time* (2020) is a mural-scale work with structural lines that reveal the panels on which it is painted; diagonal lines evoke I-beams or steel sheets, implying the same kind of mass we recognize from Horn's sculptures. In addition, the panels across the top repeat vertical patches of rusty orange, evoking streaking rust or peeling paint that once was continuous and now has deteriorated into linear vertical movement. That aspect might recall the painter Gerhard Richter's streaky spreads of pigment, while the main part has a grandeur that may bring to mind Charles Demuth's *My Egypt* (1927), a celebration of industrial forms. Yet the blackened edges of the mural also hint at wooded landscape—an optional interpretation. These varied associations show how abstraction allows the viewer to expand upon the facts of the artwork, to find resemblances—whether or not they are

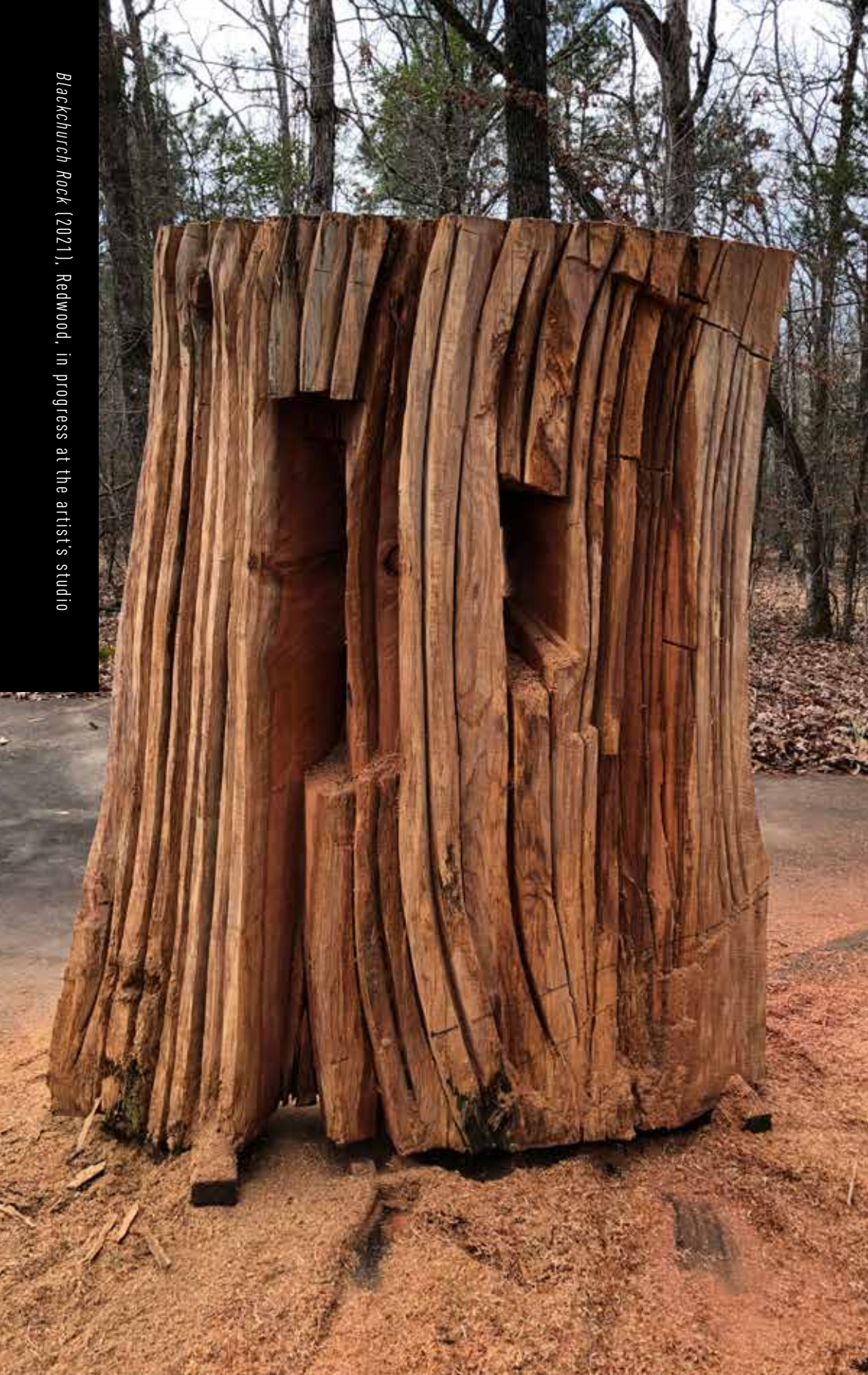
intended by the artist—that enrich the interpretation.

And with that thought, maybe we should take a step back to gauge what Horn may be thinking or feeling in these works in disparate genres. Maybe there's another thing that they all have in common. They all exemplify art's potential blending of nature and artifice. Unlike many artists today, Horn is not making sociopolitical commentary or exploring perceptual theories, and not attempting to redefine the limits of art. She's embracing art as a way to engage with existence, to accept what nature provides and make her mark upon it, to engage deeply with a material, whether wood or paint, to map her place in the world. She's looking at literal reality, substance, to see how it can be manipulated. And that's a way of saying "I was here."

*Time Advancing, 2020, Acrylics and charcoal on canvas, 40 x 30"*



*In Our Time Alone, 2020, Acrylics, rust, and charcoal on canvas, 60 x 48"*



*Blackchurch Rock (2021), Redwood, in progress at the artist's studio*



*Our Perception of Time, 2019, Acrylics, rust, steel, and charcoal on plywood panels, 63 x 288"*



# ROBYN HORN: SELF AND WORLD

LAWRENCE RINDER

There are certain artists who might as easily have been naturalists, as their work derives from the observation of the forms and processes of nature. Some artists have been both: John Ruskin, for instance, or John James Audubon. Among the Moderns, there are also some artists for whom the forms of the earth and the objects of the natural world are not simply an excuse for a landscape or still life, but are themselves objects of serious, concerted study. For these artists, the practice of making art is a kind of natural science; by reiterating the forms, textures, patterns, and volumes of nature, they aim to arrive at a deeper understanding of the nature of things. In this category, we find artists from Claude Monet to Barbara Hepworth, from Robert Smithson to Suzan Frecon.

Many artistic developments of the twentieth century that were once thought to be a progressive refinement of art for its own sake were in fact a consequence of artists' discovering the most expedient ways of expressing their insights into

the character of the natural world. The Impressionists' fascination with the nature of light is well known, as is the Cubists' concern with temporality and the so-called Fourth Dimension. Abstraction for its own sake existed, but more often than not, the impetus for abstract forms was the artist's observation of something wonderful and strange in the world around them. Art was revolutionized primarily when artists found new ways to translate natural phenomena into aesthetic phenomena. That is, to create works that did not simply illustrate things they had seen, but rather to manipulate the materials of art—whether those of painting, sculpture, or even video or film—into a thoughtful expression of the principles of nature. Robyn Horn's sculpture and painting fall squarely within this important tradition.

Horn has been lucky to live for several decades in a beautiful region of Arkansas noted for its extraordinary rock formations. These cracked and weathered stones, as well as natural processes more generally, have been the implicit and explicit subjects of most of her works. The geological formation that underlies the area around Horn's home is charmingly referred to as a "crumple zone." This type of formation

is caused by the collision of two plates of the earth's crust that, in this instance, about 275 million years ago resulted in the creation of Arkansas's Ouachita Mountains. Once considerably higher, these mountains now are little more than tall hills. The tumbled down mounds of broken stones that crown Pinnacle Mountain like ancient tumuli attest to the eons of erosion that brought down this once mighty range. Horn is interested in the forms of these stones as well as the slow and inexorable process of weathering over time. Her sculptures capture qualities of shape and fracture and seem suspended in perpetual, though precarious, balance.

In observing Horn's sculptures, we experience a tension between seeing them as things (that is, stones) and as abstracted metaphors for natural form. This tension is heightened by the fact that though they resemble—and are inspired by—stone, they are, in fact, composed of wood. Horn has mastered the craft of carving enormous pieces of wood with a chainsaw. Her deft touch results in works that are simultaneously massive and lyrical. We can appreciate volume, shape, and texture as well as feel the latent energy that resides in the dynamic relationships among masses of varying

sizes and orientations. There is, in her work, something both very specific—the particular tensions that hold together these particular "stones"—and something more general or symbolic of how nature operates, especially in the mode of decay.

Horn's sculptures echo those of certain other key twentieth-century artists—not as artistic imitation, but as a progressive iteration of insight building upon insight. One of the clearest of these echoes is to Barbara Hepworth's radical introduction of space into the center of her sculptural forms. Hepworth, who was committed to the study of natural forms and their expression in art, came to this innovative approach to describing mass as a means of incorporating an irrational, poetic voice into her otherwise landscape and figurative based works. Horn, meanwhile, consistently develops her sculptures around a hollow core in a way that accentuates the tenuousness of their balance and that also, to me, alludes to their location in an existential space of universal form and time: the hollows introduce a feeling of the infinite. Another formal gesture Horn employs that can be traced to earlier models is the radial fracture, a kind of fan-shaped form that is suggestive of the kind of iterative

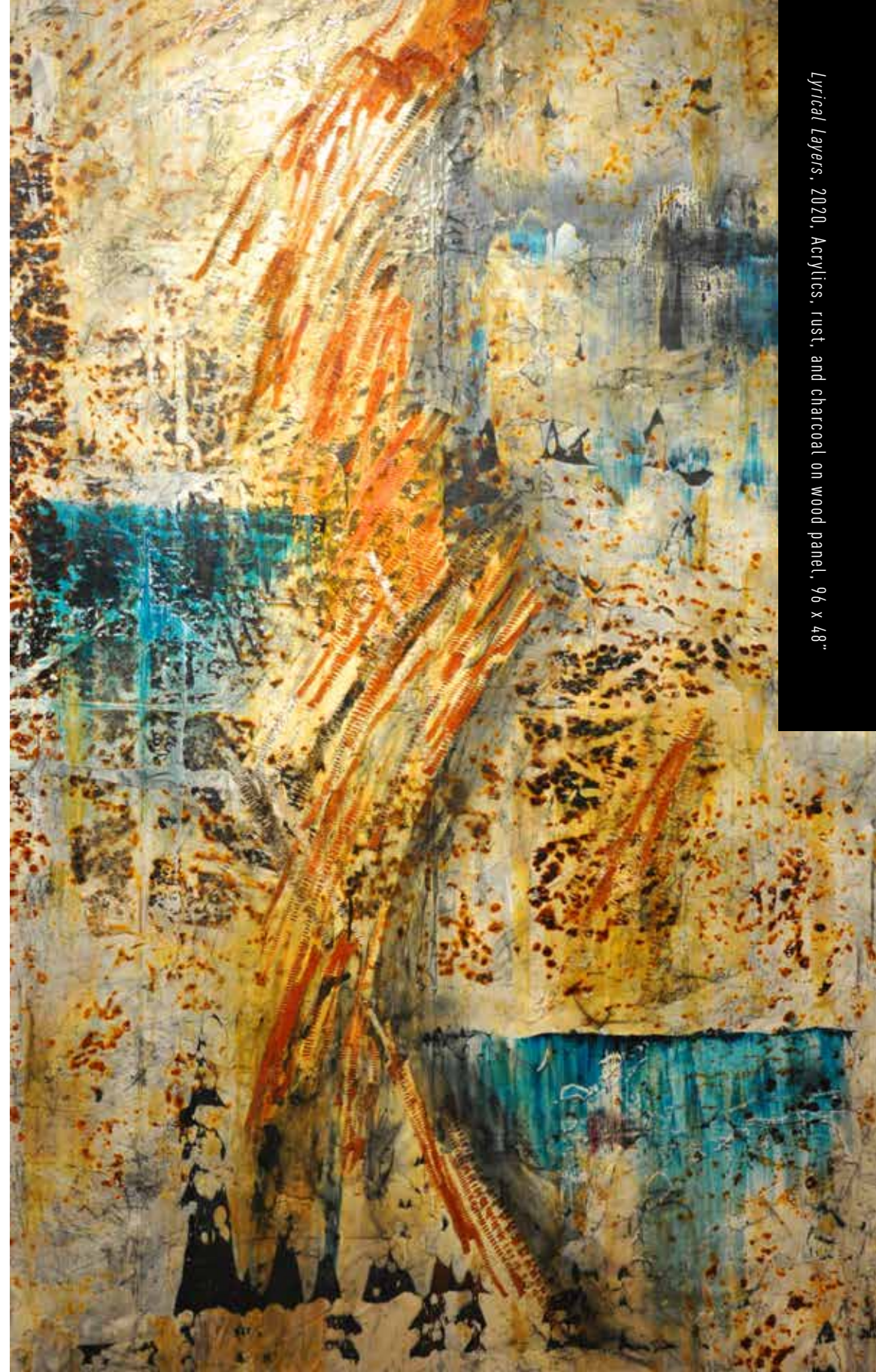


motion one might see in an Eadweard Muybridge stop-motion photograph. Artistic precedents for this can be found in the Futurist sculpture of Umberto Boccioni and in Marcel Duchamp's painting *Nude Descending a Staircase*, a work of particular interest to Horn. If the hollows signify infinity, these radial fractures signify time and entropy.

These same themes find expression in Horn's paintings. As in her sculpture, Horn uses the materials of art to suggest the fundamental character of natural forms and processes. Here, too, she is focused on processes of change and decay over time. If time is most clearly expressed in her sculptures by the suggestion of fracture and imminent collapse, in her paintings, Horn exploits the colors and consistencies of paint to suggest the exposure of layers through erosion and the transformation of matter through rust and decay. Indeed, she actually uses rust itself as a pigment in these works. In some of her recent paintings, Horn has introduced forms strongly suggestive of architecture, including walls, doors, stairs, and corridors. To me, this signals a change of direction for her, from a focus on the physical materials and processes of the

natural world to an exploration of interior, psychological space. Curiously, these nonphysical spaces appear to be subject to the same processes of disintegration as the forms she represents from our material world. Is the mind subject to the Second Law of Thermodynamics? This seems to be among the potent questions Horn is asking.

Horn's ongoing reflection on the transience of material and immaterial form situates her work in the company of the Romantics. Echoes of Caspar David Friedrich's magnificent painting of a wooden sailing ship crushed by a mammoth, crumpled ice floe, *The Sea of Ice* (1823–24), abound in her sculptural work. Interestingly, a precedent for her paintings of interiors, often with a bright window placed at the far end, also has a precedent in the German Romantic painter. It was Friedrich who in 1805 began a series of modest sepia drawings of the interior of his Dresden studio. Introspective and serene, these drawings inspired numerous other artists in the nineteenth century to take up the theme of a room with a view. There is in these works, as in Horn's recent paintings, an expression of the integration of nature and artifice, interior and exterior, self and world.



Lyrical Layers, 2020, Acrylics, rust, and charcoal on wood panel, 96 x 48"

*Blackchurch Rock (detail), 2021, Redwood, 70 x 79 x 15"*



*Hidden Passageways, 2020, Acrylics, rust, and charcoal on canvas, 40 x 40"*

*Industrial Series No. 42, "Sliced", 2018, Oak, acrylics, and steel, 19 x 13 1/2 x 12 1/2"*



*Questioning, 2019, Acrylics on carved wood panel, 48 x 36"*





*Another Component of Time, 2020. Acrylics, rust, charcoal, and steel on wood panel, 30 x 24."*



*Small Red Door, 2011. Acrylics, rust, and charcoal on wood panel, 60 x 48"*



## Robyn Horn: Material Illusions

documents the exhibition of the same name on view at the Museum of Craft and Design, San Francisco  
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*Really Learning, 2019. Redwood, 50 x 21 x 9 1/2"*

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