

ROBYN HORN

MATERIAL ILLUSIONS

“Surely, it’s a testament to our time that a lady hefting a chainsaw now feels like a very natural thing, and in fact somehow does not seem out of harmony with a strangely sensitive side to these works—their attention to the organic and to the properties of natural life and growth. But, whether it’s the cutting that goes against the grain or with the grain, in both cases we feel we’re attuned not to something weak and demure, but to a powerful force—a force to be reckoned with.”

—Henry Adams, “Defiance of Gravity”, *The Sculpture of Robyn Horn*, University of Arkansas Press, 2018.

Robyn Horn has been working with wood for over 35 years. She began working on the lathe in 1984, making wood bowls and vases. As her practice expanded, so too did the scale of her pieces and the tools needed to create them. Eventually, she turned to the chainsaw to carve her raw materials. Horn often works in series, making sculptures that contain qualities of asymmetry, geometry, volume, lack of balance, and contrast with heavily textured surfaces. In 2005, she returned to a long dormant painting practice, applying similar qualities in two dimensions.

Robyn Horn: Material Illusions showcases Horn’s latest work, much of which was created during the Covid-19 pandemic. While Horn had been planning and creating work for *Material Illusions* for several years, quarantining near her studio offered an unexpected period of uninterrupted focus. Realizing she was placed in an at-risk category, the artist began considering time in a new way.

Wood as a medium and material for art-making is inherently entwined with time. In order for stable, seasoned wood to become mature enough to work, decades and sometimes centuries may pass. In Horn’s sculpture, time is measured not only in the hours, months, and sometimes years spent on a specific piece, but also in natural time—a slower process—in forming the raw material.

Robyn Horn explores this geologic time, reproducing the splendor of natural rock formations in carved wood sculptures. Her entropic pieces throw the natural order into a state of near-chaos; wood appears as if slipping from stacks—perilously teetering on thin bases. Discussing her series, *Slipping Stones* (2020), Horn states, “The forms of the *Slipping Stones* are also affected by time, carved to look like they had once been geometrically linear and straight, but now are ‘slipping’ out of their natural order and about to collapse.” Under Horn’s hand, a material stable and sturdy enough to use in construction becomes elegantly precarious.

The series of recent paintings also hinges upon Horn’s ability to manipulate surfaces. Horn adds layers and layers of paint—the heavy impasto allows the artist to carve into the surfaces of the canvas and wood panels. Embedding an illusion of time elapsed, Horn frequently adds rust and charcoal to the surfaces of paintings. The rust is “farmed” from a sheet of steel. Water corrodes the metal over the course of a few months, after which time Horn transfers the rust onto a coating of clear acrylic on the painting’s surface. *Our Perception of Time* (2020) includes bits of steel embedded in the painting’s surface, a theme Horn has explored before in the sculptures that comprise *Industrial Series* (2016-). Thematically, the earthy colors and added rust suggest a sense of decay; while the recurring motif of empty, elongated hallways imply a journey with an unknown end.

Together, the paintings and sculptures generate a fortuitous dialogue. Horn says of their interrelated nature: “The layers of paint or rust look as though they are deteriorating right before your eyes, and the layers of wood are barely resisting collapse.” Teetering on the edge of undoing while maintaining a sense of inherent stability, these works and their maker truly are a force to be reckoned with.