

A Careful Wonder:

Wood and Tenderness in the Jewelry of Steven KP

*When I approach the blank of wood, the knots and their forms are already within. As I spend time with the wood, carving, removing material, refining the surfaces and refining the wounds, the knots lighten, the knots loosen.*

Wood carving is an act of intimacy, time, controlled movement, and knowing touch. The carver chooses a piece of wood, cuts it down to a “blank” [rough-cut to size with an axe], marks out a calculated plan, and uses a careful selection of tools to cut away the wood—one disciplined, strategic move after another—to reveal a composition of shape, mass, texture, surface, hue, and scent. These qualities are distinctive to wood. They guide the carver as they reveal a vision hidden in the raw material.

In the essay quoted above, the artist Steven KP writes that the forms he carves are “partially undone”—“gestures rendered slowly in between being fully tightened and unraveled.” The sculptural forms in this latest presentation, carved from cherry wood oxidized to a dark monochrome, twist in and around, over, onto themselves in a state of doing or undoing. They are intricate and complicated but possess a beginning and an end. Like a story, they invite the eye to follow along. Pliant and idiosyncratic, the distinctive grain figure narrates the recorded history of a tree, reciting it back to the woodcarver at its own pace for the woodcarver to discover, shaving by shaving.

A piece of wood expands, contracts, and responds to environmental conditions long after a tree is felled. Its color will change over time in response to touch, as well as exposure to air, humidity, and temperature. Always in flux, it retains its structure and beauty on its own terms. In KP’s carved knot forms, the material is depicted in an endless act of tightening and loosening. Knots are unobtrusive symbols of relationships, memory, and time, in each careful stroke. Loops, entanglements, and binding lines mimic the stories of our connections with others. They begin and cut off at will, sometimes without warning.

Wood is a warm material. Products of earth, water, and sun, trees stretch heavenward and bear marks that document their experiences with privation and infestation. Trees have long been seen as myth made real, noble body and flesh growing and expanding throughout a life span all their own. Colossal in stature, fostering communities, communicating through fungal networks, and silent only to human ears, they have long captivated the imaginations



of lesser beings, like humankind, who can only aspire to their height and longevity.

KP is an artist who works within the parameters of jewelry. The use of wood in objects of adornment has a long history, from the earliest fertility amulets to Victorian mourning jewelry and the emergence of costume jewelry in the 1940s amid wartime rations on metals. In KP's work, wood comprises the entirety of the "jewel"—uncommon even among contemporary artists who use their work to critique traditional and cultural assumptions about fine jewelry.

Inherently, jewelry travels through space and time as a passenger. Wooden objects traditionally support, shelter, or serve the body—these objects adorn it. Though they can be observed off the body as small autonomous sculpture, they conform to human proportions and, as such, derive a completeness of meaning by being brought into contact with the body. The conversation initiated between object and wearer, wearer and passerby, and object and passerby welcomes endless encounters and revelations. Wood, the familiar and sensual material that supports the body throughout the day as it eats, works, convenes, loves, and sleeps, can also comment on sentimental and material conceptions of value—including questions surrounding adornment as enhancing qualities of beauty.

Western society inherits its approach to beauty from the ancient Greeks. Plato's concept of beauty, an amalgam of desire, harmony, and goodness, has excluded many ideas and forms despite its "objectivity." In Jewish thought, however, beauty is a much more amorphous construct. When encountering a sight of unexpected and uncommon beauty, one is instructed to recite a blessing that exalts the exceptional creations of nature. The question of whether this astonishing sight is "beautiful" is irrelevant, though implied. Moreover, it is not enough to simply experience a moment of uncommon and unusual beauty—one must pause and acknowledge the creation of wondrous things.

In his book *The Secret Life of Trees*, Peter Wohlleben describes a healthy forest as close groupings of trees with irregular twists and in various stages of life. Ordered, upright, harmonious groves are signs of commercial forest farms, which may serve a lumber economy but will not nurture a thriving ecosystem. Life forms in the botanical world sustain droughts, lightning strikes, fires, and parasites. We know that the traces of these experiences are recorded in cellulose fibers, disrupting blemish-free grain patterns with marks of suffering. These scars and irregularities are sought after by woodworkers—their rarity is a sign of value and beauty. Humankind still has much to learn from trees.



Preparing green wood for carving is parallel to attending to the flesh of a body in one's care. It demands patience, respect, and—most of all—time. Working in woodcraft makes one sensitive to the environment in which the material is cultivated, as well as to its singular properties. In many cases, a woodcarver will have learned the craft at a young age from a relative, and this imbues the processes, techniques, and tools with memory and emotion. The intimacy of the practice of learning and making keeps the remembrances and connections vivid and tactile: in the case of KP, his grandfather served woodworking knowledge with a side of the history of preceding generations. Family inheritance is stories and skills, not just DNA or material wealth.

Two years ago, we found ourselves rather suddenly separated from the daily contact with others. KP expands upon the current body of works with a collection of photographs portraying members of his creative peer group in his adoptive home city of Providence, RI. The subjects in these photographic works gaze directly (or nearly) into the camera's lens; the stare is dispassionate but steady and self-owning. They are adorned with the carved jewels but are not subordinate to them. In other images, the pieces dangle amid entwined bodies, the knots a mimesis of the relationships portrayed herein.

Viewed collectively, these compelling individuals and loved ones represent the artist's "chosen" family. Their gathering here recalls various conceptions of "family"—genetic, chosen, or otherwise—and how all forms of personal connections have been challenged in unexpected ways during this cataclysmic time. The concept of "chosen families" is known to queer individuals who form supportive and loving communities that help them heal and flourish when biological families have rejected or subjected them to violence and abuse. And even when one grows up in a family surrounded by love and stability, as everyone should, the experience of inhabiting a body that is "othered" by a hegemonically heteronormative society naturally leads one to seek out others who have endured the same. Reflecting on the importance of connections during the upheaval of the past two years, KP noted, "[it] brings to mind all of those we have lost, familial or from our chosen family. I work a lot with my ancestry, what's in my blood, what I was steeped in as a child. But that is a portion of who I am in these families. Connections, touch—they're complicated things. They aren't neat, straight lines, they're kinked-bent over-onto themselves."

What forms of care can we take with us as a pandemic turns endemic, embedding itself into daily life and routine? In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty cites collective disorientation as the potential for positive change:

"what such moments can do—whether they can offer us the hope of new directions, and whether new directions are reason enough for hope." As KP notes, the "shattering" effect—in the words of Merleau-Ponty—shakes us out of complacency, and urges us to strive for healthier, more fulfilling connections.

In recent discussions on the intersection between craft and queer identity, it has been often mentioned that craft offers us a way to think about how we move through the world. Values of tenderness and care, time and repetition, and learning and memory are guides for a craft-oriented life, as well as qualities we aspire to bring to our interpersonal relationships and the way we care for our own selves—our bodies too. Knots of wood, their beginnings and ends turning over and onto themselves—made lovingly and carefully and worn proudly by a scarred and beautiful person as they navigate a challenging world—remind us of the complex wonders of this universe.

Jennifer-Navva Milliken

Jennifer-Navva Milliken is the Executive Director and Chief Curator for the Center for Art in Wood. Prior to her arrival at the Center, she served as an embedded staff member in international art museums, as an independent curator, and as the founder of a cross-disciplinary art space. Her exhibitions have been presented in museums, art fairs, galleries, and unconventional spaces, and her writings have been included in exhibition catalogs, anthologies, and publications that investigate and critique the intersecting fields of art, craft, and design. With a global perspective, honed through a life split between two continents, she is driven by the extraordinary power of the arts to challenge preconceptions and bridge divides.

1. From Steven Kaplan-Pistiner, "Passages," 2021, p. 5.
2. Ibid., p. 6
3. ומלועב ול רכש מלועה רלמ וניהולא 'ה התא רורב / Blessed are you, Lord, our G-d, King of the Universe, who has such things as these in his world.
4. From an email conversation dated September 10, 2022.
5. Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 1945, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge Kegan and Paul, 2002), quoted in Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Duke University Press, 2006), p. 133.