



Art Review: Mel Kendrick & Alan Shields: Process and Form

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by Gabrielle Selz

What are the boundaries of a material? How does construction affect composition? Is a form a cavity or a protrusion, a shape or its shadow? Artists Alan Shields and Mel Kendrick both explore these questions in their examination of the relationship of process to form in their work currently on view at The Drawing Room in East Hampton until July 8, 2013.

Mel Kendrick

Since the 1970s, Mel Kendrick has approached sculpture from the outside in. Employing a minimalist aesthetic in his use of simple materials—a solid block of wood or a large chunk of concrete—he has gutted, hollowed out and reassembled his sculptures into startling constructions that blend an abstract design with a cubist sensibility.

The Drawing Room show consists of six pieces from Kendrick's recent "Red Block" series, a gesso and wood piece, two large molded and excavated concrete pieces, and a tall totem in the middle of the room. From the smallest sculpture, a rectilinear $7 \frac{7}{8} \times 8 \frac{1}{4} \times 4 \frac{3}{8}$ inches, to the largest, $68 \times 18 \frac{3}{4} \times 16 \frac{3}{4}$ inches, all these works correspond to the scale of the human form.

Set on pedestals throughout the room, the "Red Block" pieces confront the viewer just below eye level, their parts, in size and shape, corresponding to our body parts. Kendrick often uses Japanese red, a favorite paint color, to delineate the outside "skin" of the block, before he begins drawing into the wood with his saw, slicing and burrowing through to form a labyrinth of holes. A history of his scratches in the red paint—choices he didn't make—is left behind like scars on tissue.

Kendrick then extracts the tidbits of wooden shapes he has chosen to carve, like excavated intestines, and re-glues them in a similar though not exactly corresponding pattern. The resulting sculpture is a conundrum, a puzzle that almost fits together. The red shells, with their walnut brown interiors, are exposed as objects alongside their own echoes.



"Red Block 1" by Mel Kendrick, 2011. Wood and Japan color, $16 \times 7 \times 6 \frac{1}{4}$ inches. Photo by Gary Mamay. Courtesy of The Drawing Room.

In his newest block piece, Kendrick has abandoned red in favor of a white gesso color. *Untitled*, 2012 is a tall thin slice, the checkerboard color of the dark wood and white gesso reminiscent of the “Jacks” series Kendrick displayed at the Parrish Art Museum in Southampton in 2011. Though made of solid wood, this piece has so many loops pulled and then repositioned it evokes the crocheted delicacy of a piece of lace.



“Untitled” by Mel Kendrick, 2012. Wood and gesso. 30 x 6 x 16 inches. Photo by Gary Mamay. Courtesy of The Drawing Room.

Central to the exhibition is *Untitled*, 2012, a black and white gesso totem displayed on a pedestal made up of four ascending blocks of wood. It’s an emblematic sculpture, again combining the layered chunks of the “Jacks” series, with the burrowed out and reconstructed wormholes of his smaller “Red Block” pieces.

Like most of Kendrick’s work, this totem explores the process of concurrent revelation, top versus bottom, interior versus exterior space. The eccentric vertical, instead of suggesting a spiraling movement upwards, evokes a squashed, compressed, stoic form.



“Untitled” by Mel Kendrick, 2012. Wood with Japan color and gesso. 68 x 18 3/4 x 16 3/4 inches. Photo by Gary Mamay. Courtesy of The Drawing Room.

Alan Shields

Like Kendrick, Alan Shields was an artist who was endlessly fascinated by the possibilities of the material of his creations. That these varying possibilities stretched and reconfigured the genre of printmaking is a testament to his inventive genius. Shields, who died in 2006, began as a painter in the late '60s, and was soon running his radiantly colored canvases under sewing machines. But to say that Shield’s was a painter or a printer would be a misnomer: his work defies classification.

Shields, who grew up on a farm, was a master of bricolage, the art of using whatever was at hand. The 21 editions on view both upstairs and downstairs at The Drawing Room are screened onto everything from cottony, pulp-like paper to glass. Often, they are quilted, stitched and dyed, their

edges cut with a saber saw. It was common for Shields to add thread and glitter to his handmade paper, then emboss, tint, etch and/or stamp its surface. Creating the paper himself, he once said, was a way of making the color right in the fiber.

In 1974, Shields screened *Chicken Shit*, an edition of 20 on double-sided, wire-reinforced glass. One of these delicate pieces hangs by a thread in the corner of the gallery and is decorated in circles of vibrant colored paint and metallic glitter on a bed of grid-like mesh. At different angles, this 14 by 14 inch square of “stained glass” appears either transparent or completely opaque.



“Chicken Shit” by Alan Shields, 1974. Serigraph on wire reinforced glass (double sided), 14 x 14 inches, edition 14/20. Photo by Gary Mamay. Courtesy of The Drawing Room.

Then there’s *Joshua’s Route*, an edition from a series titled “The Raggedy Circumnavigation” done in 1985. A [serigraph](#) that has also been stitched, this 46 inch circular relief is a collage of two different types of handmade paper by Tyler Graphics. To create this part woodblock and part lattice, Shields drew on his apprenticeship with the famous printmaker, Ken Tyler, during which they collaborated on a technique of running string like a [spirograph](#) through huge circular vats filled with wet pulp, creating a form of spidery-like paper that is as much holes as it is surface.



“Josh’s Route (from The Raggedy Circumnavigation Series)” by Alan Shields, 1985. Relief, serigraph, stitching, collage on two layers of handmade paper by Tyler Graphics, 46 inches diameter, 51 1/8 x 51 1/8 inches framed. AP 1/9, edition of 20. Photo by Gary Mamay. Courtesy of The Drawing Room.

By exploring the boundaries of the materials he worked with, Shields was one of the artists who, like Robert Rauschenberg, broke down the hierarchy of fine art. A true environmentalist, Shields was an organic farmer and fisherman who recycled the everyday into his art. His often 3-dimensional editions were explorations of overlapping forms and substances.

In *Auriel Island*, 2001 (From the “Pop-Up Nature” Series), Shields created a 26 x 31 inches rectangular relief that is reminiscent of those pop-up nature books where hidden worlds are

revealed below the undergrowth. Assembled on handmade paper, grids overlap one another to form a dense, brightly colored, thick, layered and patterned surface.



“Auriel Island (from Pop Up Nature Series)” by Alan Shields, 2001. Etching and relief on handmade paper, assemblage, 26 3/4 x 26 3/4 x 1 inches, 31 1/4 x 31 inches framed. AP 2/3, edition of 13. Photo by Gary Mamay. Courtesy of The Drawing Room.

While Shields incorporated a multiplicity of materials and Kendrick focused on the qualities of a singular substance, the idea that a piece of art is also its scaffolding is paramount in both artists’ work. Conceptually, there is no separation between form and process, body and shell, puzzle and pattern. The deconstruction of the holes in the sculptures of Mel Kendrick and the lattice-like paper cutouts in the prints of Alan Shields are part of the finished constructed object.

In the end, all art may be unfathomable, and that’s a large part of its appeal: the notion that it represents an idea worked out as fabrication that we couldn’t know otherwise. By allowing us to witness the remnants of the process of their creative act in the work itself, both these artists have granted us entry into the mystery of imagination.

BASIC FACTS: “Mel Kendrick” and “Alan Shields” remains on view through July 8. The Drawing Room is located at 66H Newtown Lane, East Hampton, NY 11937. www.drawingroom-gallery.com.

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