



ART REVIEW: The Uncontained Art of Jason Middlebrook

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by Gabrielle Selz

Jason Middlebrook proudly refers to himself as a schizophrenic artist. For many years he has been torn between sculpture and painting. Instead of choosing one form over the other, Middlebrook has let the dichotomy play itself out to produce its own resolution. In his current show, “Every Tree is a Map,” on view through October 5 at Silas Marder Gallery in Bridgehampton, the artist has found in his recent plank paintings a vehicle that expertly straddles the line between three-dimensional volume and two-dimensional design.

A natural draftsman himself, Middlebrook is the son of David Middlebrook, a ceramic Funk artist—an unorthodox, freewheeling art movement that my father, Peter Selz, christened in 1967 with the first Funk Show at the Berkeley Art Museum. The elder Middlebrook later transitioned to working with stone in site-specific work.

His son Jason, who grew up as part of the hippie culture in Northern California, has always been concerned with the creative reuse of materials. From discarded plastic bottles to styrofoam to tires, he has embraced his surroundings and the detritus of his environment in his art.

A number of years ago, Middlebrook was invited to participate in a group show honoring the artist Alexander Calder at the Museum of Contemporary art in Chicago. Happily, one of the assemblage pieces from that exhibit is displayed at Silas Marder Gallery; it demonstrates that Calder and now Middlebrook share a fondness for the playful reuse of found material.

Calder, best known for inventing the mobile, also fabricated stabiles: freestanding, balanced, abstract sculptures. Stationary and elegant, Middlebrook’s piece, *The Green and White Warbler*, is a delicate bird and trompe-l’œil rendering balanced on a minimalist steel pedestal.



“The Green and White Warbler” by Jason Middlebrook, 2008. Oak plank, acrylic paint, steel, and cast concrete bottles, 64 1/4 x 44 x 17 7/8 inches. Photo by Gary Mamay.

This dance between rendering and fabricating creates the underlying tension in Middlebrook’s work.

If Robert Rauschenberg, in his Combine Paintings, explored the moment painting transitioned into sculpture and exploded into the real world, Middlebrook is tracing the reverse journey, the one that leads back towards the roots of abstraction embedded with natural forms.

The plank paintings, begun in 2008, are complex, layered geometric patterns done atop indigenous hardwood that has been roughly shaped into organic looking forms. Leaning against walls like colossal surfboards, occasionally hung from the ceiling, the planks bridge the gap between canvas and embodied object.

Middlebrook uses cherry, ash and maple, woods sourced from mills in the Hudson Valley, all within a 100-mile radius of his studio in upstate New York. Sketching and drawing, then taping and painting the surface, Middlebrook applies colors that both mimic and float over the existing grains of the tree.



“Many Types of Woodgrain” by Jason Middlebrook, 2012. Mixed media on walnut, 98 x 25 inches. Photo by Gary Mamay.



“Black Lines on Black Birch” by Jason Middlebrook, 2014. Spray paint on black birch, 101.5 x 18.5 inches. Photo by Gary Mamay.

Trees and their growth patterns—the records of their cellular life imbued in the heartwood like the veins and cells in the human body—are the jumping-off point and touchstone of these pieces. Varying in size from 3 feet to 12 feet, they have the polished faces and crystallized organic structures of geodes. Sometimes black and white, sometimes metallic and sometimes washes of brilliant colors, Middlebrook’s concentric designs—reminiscent of Frank Stella and Ellsworth Kelly—are both impositions on, and complements to, the underlying grains.

Middlebrook refuses to extinguish in the name of art. His process is one of accretion. The layering coats of paint, which reflect and alter the existing topography, instead form another skin. His colored shapes create an epidermis, a pentimento over the tree’s own life cycle.



Installation view of “Every Tree is A Map” by Jason Middlebrook at Silas Marder

Gallery. Photo by Richard Lewin.

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There is a decidedly fun element in these pieces that harks back to the rustic burl wood, burnt stained coffee tables that populated the west in the 1970s. This is art that reminds of surfboards, ritualistic totems and the Optical paintings of Bridget Riley all at the same time. Middlebrook's art runs the gamut and doesn't want to be contained. He picks up refuse and regenerates, yet all the while he is still very exacting and controlled, tightly adhering to the formal rules he sets for himself.

If Rauschenberg was "acting" in the gap between art and life, then maybe Middlebrook is mending the seam. Certainly he's putting down another layer between the two. It will be interesting to see what he does next.

BASIC FACTS: "Jason Middlebrook: Every Tree is a Map" remains on view through October 5 at Silas Marder Gallery, 120 Snake Hollow Road, Bridgehampton, NY 11932. www.silasmarder.com.

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