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TWO BAY SHOWS

Wood Sculptures As Faux Geology

Against the Grain at the Oliver Art Center, California College of Arts and Crafts, Oakland
Works by four sculptors, Mincher Wilcox Gallery, San Francisco

By Kenneth Baker



Dennis Leon's 116-by-80-by-112-inch plywood sculpture *Altered Rock* (1989), from the *Against the Grain* show

There happen to be shows of contemporary wood sculpture on both sides of the Bay right now. *Against the Grain* at the Oliver Art Center on the Oakland campus of the California College of Arts and Crafts [with] works by Robert Brady, Kathleen Edwards, Linda Fleming, Sam Hernandez, Oliver Jackson, Louise Lieber, **Dennis Leon** and Michael Stevens. Meanwhile, at the Mincher Wilcox Gallery, [are] works in wood by ... Roger Ackling, David Nash, Diane Samuels and, again, Linda Fleming.

The concurrence of the two shows is coincidental, but it does reflect the fact that in recent years wood has satisfied the demand of a growing number of sculptors for a versatile, available material that they can work directly, without the aid of, say, metalsmiths or a foundry crew.

Dennis Leon's two landscape sculptures dominate *Against the Grain*, both by their size and their inventive economy.

Leon fastens together irregularly shaped sheets of plywood so they resemble outcroppings of rock. Both his pieces hug the wall and tower over the viewer. It is easy enough to peer around the side of either object and see how it is made, yet look straight at either one relaxedly and your imagination turns it into a cliff face.

Scarred Surfaces

Sometimes Leon stains the surfaces of his faux-geologic objects, but in the two works here, he has done little to disguise the plywood or conceal the screws holding components together. In *Whispering Rock*, he has routed and scarred parts of the surface to suggest petroglyphs. Yet the work refers as directly to the false boulders and bluffs of early Hollywood as it does to the ancient roots of art in the Southwest.

No matter how you look at them - as evocations of landscape, mimics of stagecraft or sheer flexions of form - Leon's sculptures are smart and convincing.

Leon manages the difficult business of representation in sculpture with a sophistication and confidence that eludes several of the other artists represented in *Against the Grain*.

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