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## Material Origins

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THESIS APPROVAL

The abstract and thesis of Carol E. Minchin for the Master of Fine Arts degree in Art: Sculpture were presented May 17, 1996 and accepted by the thesis committee and the department.

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## ABSTRACT

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF Carol E. Minchin for the  
Master of Fine Arts in Art: Sculpture presented  
May 17, 1996.

Title: Material Origins

The intent of this thesis project was to use sculpture as a means of investigation for exploring the structural uses of Masonite, and to understand how those uses affect the nature of my work.

The transformation of this material into form becomes the a process that is adjusted and refined until a formal solution is found.

The tension, texture, scale, and form of the work contribute to a dialogue that results in sculptures that reference the human body and the growth of plants.

MATERIAL ORIGINS

by

CAROL E. MINCHIN

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

ART: SCULPTURE

Portland State University  
1996

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## INTRODUCTION

Making sculpture is a way to document the structural possibilities of materials. It is also a way to explore and discover how the uses of those materials can be expanded upon. The visual nature of this search became the record of a process. Masonite is the material I chose to investigate. It is a manmade material with unexpected flexibility.

Tempered hardboard or Masonite is an alternative material not usually used in sculpture. There wasn't a precedent to influence the handling of the material or the final form of the objects. The Masonite had minimal or no modification imposed on it. The sculptures were adjusted and refined through a dialogue of continual appraisal and modifying, looking, and changing that continued until a formal solution was found.

The sculptural forms that resulted from this search were reductive and monumental. Visually they have a referential relationship to natural forms; either to the soft undulations of the human body, with a definite posture or stance, or to the growth of plants.

## THE THESIS WORK

My thesis sculptures deal with the ways materials affect the form and meaning of my work. The material I work with is Masonite or tempered hardboard. What attracted me to Masonite was its unexpected flexibility, its structural possibilities and inherent, seductive, surface characteristics.

Masonite is a manmade material composed of fibrous waste, bonded or laminated together. It has two distinctly different surfaces. These surfaces, and their opposing characteristics, create tension. Suzanne Ramljak raises some interesting points about tension:

The essential component of seduction is tension. Without tension between opposites, a work...remains flabby and lax, lacking in interest. This requisite tension is created by the play between various poles: soft/hard, yielding/resistant, smooth/rough, matte/glossy, subdued/bright, familiar/strange. (30)

The composition of Masonite, with its dual nature, includes all these characteristics. One side is unfinished, monochromatic and warm to the touch; the other side is a variegated surface and cool to the touch. When bent, Masonite emphasizes the seductive tension and tactile qualities in the material.



In order to keep the Masonite from breaking during the construction process a balance between the inherent tension of the Masonite and the manipulation of the material had to be discovered. The Seduction (Figure 1) is a direct result of this process.

Masonite is a semi-rigid, flat material manufactured in eight foot lengths. To create the curved central form of The Seduction the material needed to be bent. During the forming process I discovered Masonite only bends one way without breaking. It bows symmetrically in half. The bilateral symmetry of The Seduction is a direct result of the process of curving a flat plane of Masonite. I could have fought against the natural symmetry of the material, but I decided to use it as a formal element.

In order to acknowledge this symmetrical bend in the Masonite I added two identical curving extensions to the U-shaped loop. This formed a Y-shaped, linear, vertical base on either side of the empty loop. The form now resembled a container. To emphasize the interior space of the container I filled it with corrugated paper.

I chose the corrugated paper because of its liquid, tactile quality. It was also easily manipulated and could



Figure 1. The Seduction

be stuffed into the core of The Seduction quickly and spontaneously. This process resulted in a random pattern that filled the core. The sculpture incorporated both an organized structure based on its symmetry and the chaotic element of the corrugated paper.

Two visual characteristics are evident when viewing the finished work. The scale is monumental and presents a larger than life size relationship to human form. The scale was determined by the unaltered size of the materials. Scale also helps to focus attention on the material and the atypical way it is being used. This use of material will be discussed in relation to To Stand (Figure 2).

The Seduction loomed twelve feet high when completed and mounted on the wall. It's physical presence referred to natural forms. It strongly resembled the growth of plants. The reductive form had a primitive quality that seemed to resemble a child's drawing of a flower.

In To Stand, an eight foot tall rectangular container was constructed from two by four inch lengths of lumber. A fan-like structure of twelve inch wide strips of Masonite was attached to either side of the core with bolts. In order to maintain the fan-like effect cable was attached at the top of the structure at two

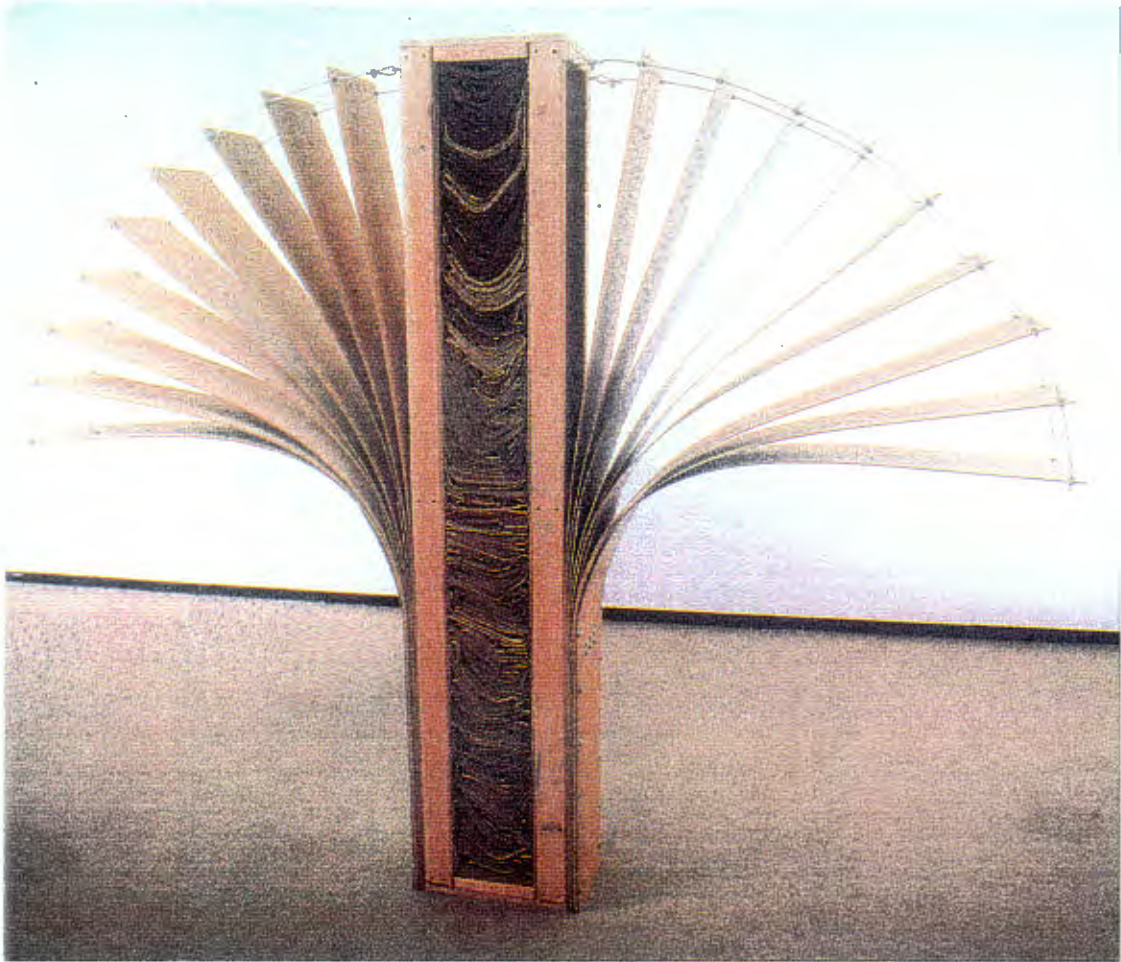


Figure 2. To Stand

points on each side and threaded through the Masonite. This created a double row of cables running through the layers. The rectangular core was filled with corrugated paper.

To Stand appears to be both a solid structure and a container. The form is a result of using two by four inch lengths of lumber as a framework. By letting the Masonite sections on either side of the core fan out, I acknowledged that the form is constructed of linear elements. The sculpture is filled with a seemingly solid core of corrugated paper that is created out of linear sheets applied in a random way.

Masonite and corrugated paper are alternative materials not normally used in sculpture. Masonite is used as underlayment in construction. Corrugated paper is used as wrapping in the packing industry to protect goods being shipped. By creating large scale sculpture from ordinary materials I was acknowledging the use of materials in art from everyday life. The materials used had minimal or no modification imposed upon them.

In Allegory of Spirit (Figure 3) I use the same rigid structure as in To Stand. I began to investigate scale with this piece. Using a rectangular frame of two by four inch lumber, I built a section that was eighty

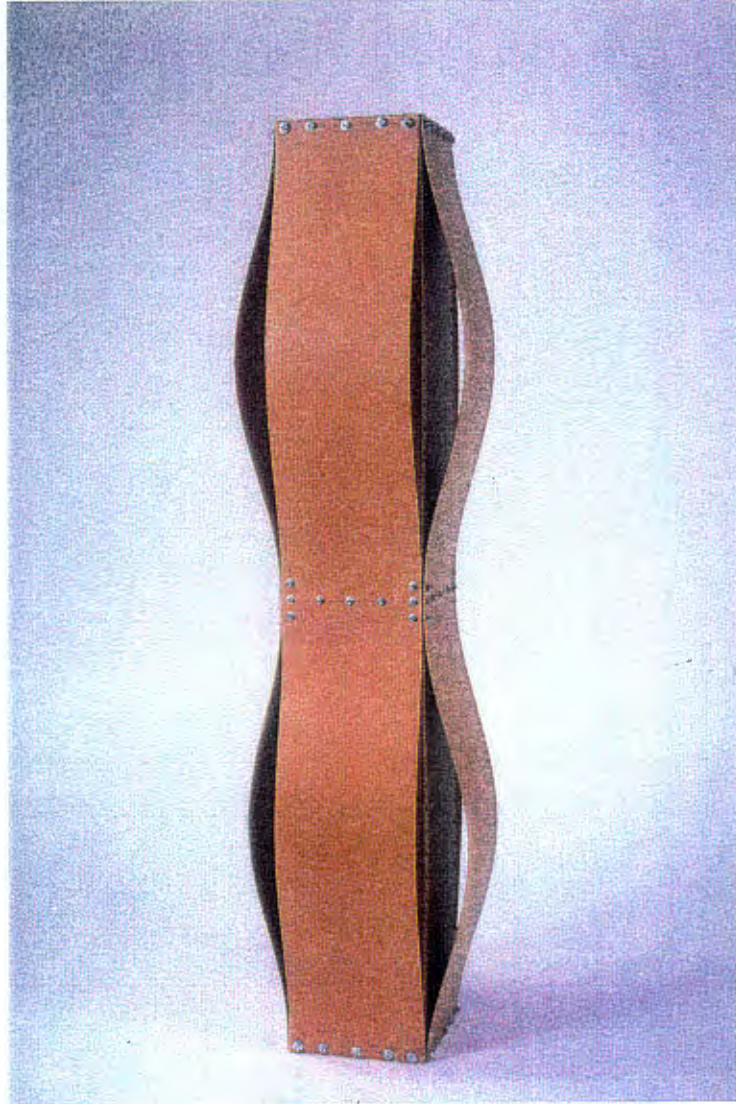


Figure 3. Allegory of Spirit

inches high, twelve inches wide by twelve inches deep. The frame is enclosed and covered with planes of Masonite that act as a transition between the single, bent planes of Masonite that are attached to the surface and the core. These sections are bolted to the center, top, and bottom. When viewed, the negative spaces become important. The interior openings allow space to circulate around and through the volume of Allegory of Spirit.

The scale, which is human scale, locates the form at a different point in the spatial field than the previous piece. Its' eighty inch height makes it appear closer to the viewer and therefore, more approachable allowing more intimacy with the work. I repeated this scale with a variation on the form for my next piece.

For Void of Potential (Figure 4) I continued the systematic progression of my construction process. I built another rectangular frame. This time I didn't enclose it with Masonite. The rigid two by four inch frame is exposed. Three planes of Masonite are secured to the center of the piece with bolts. Differential degrees of bending were used on each of the layers. The top section presented some problems.

The Masonite hadn't been bent to such an extreme

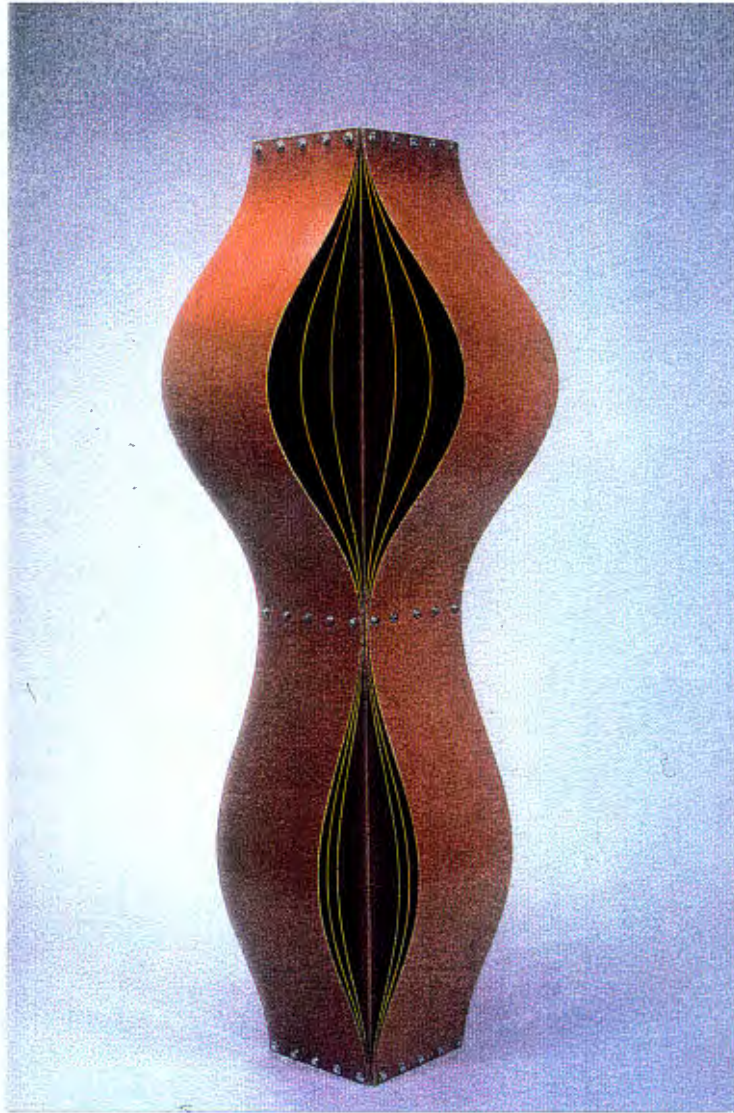


Figure 4. Void, of Potential



before. The material broke because of the pressure being exerted on it. I needed to stabilize the surface. I mixed a variety of glues and painting mediums together and coated the sections immediately after they were fastened. This not only prevented breakage, but gave a wonderful depth to the existing surface emphasizing the tactile qualities. Additionally it created another surface that acted as a membrane covering the Masonite. I would continue to repeat this process.

The multi-layered effect of Void of Potential creates certain tensions that are caused by the expansion of the form or material trying to push up and out into the atmosphere. The atmosphere is yet another surface. The energy of this expansion is always contained within boundaries and must function within those boundaries.

The surfaces and edges of Void of Potential become boundaries where they meet. The meeting point of these create additional forms with their own edges, boundaries and spaces that circulate around and through the volume.

The imagery of Void of Potential was a result of the layered planes of Masonite being bent in different proportions. In this piece the core is exposed and not stuffed. For a while I became more interested in the container itself and became less interested in what it

contained. Being able to see the internal structure of the sculpture helps in understanding how each layer is dependent on the other for its final physical form.

The scale of the object is the height of a door; human scale. It's something we can relate to. It has a vertical, upward thrust and appears to expand into the place it occupies. This upward thrust, coupled with the apparent swelling of the object, references the natural, soft undulations of the human body.

Using the construction techniques and visual effects of Allegory of Spirit and Void of Potential, I constructed a forty inch rectangular core, covered it in Masonite and layered three bent planes on each side. These sections are fastened with hardware at the top and bottom. The core of lumber is exposed and open at the top of the sculpture. The pattern visible in the wooden core unintentionally relates to the corrugated paper used in other forms.

The scale of Embrace Me (Figure 5) is intimate and invites the viewer to embrace it and look into it. This permits the viewer to see how the work is constructed, and notice the seductive tactile qualities of the material.

There are always limitations to any medium. I had



Figure 5. Embrace Me

been using twelve inch wide strips of Masonite. In order to broaden my means of expression and to learn more about the material I began to use full size sheets of 4' x 8' Masonite.

To manipulate 4' x 8' sheets I constructed a jig system or mold to hold the planes in place when bent. The form that resulted from this method was Primogenitor (Figure 6) a raindrop shaped container that is four feet tall and filled with corrugated paper. The simplicity of the shape makes the material the focal point. The smooth, subtle sheen of the material, combined with its' variegated surface, creates an illusion of a rougher surface quality. This quality and the rhythmic, repetitive, pattern of the corrugated paper, adds to the vibrational presence of Primogenitor.

The construction of Primogenitor began a metamorphosis. Instead of using a rigid structural frame, I returned to the method I used in The Seduction. The Masonite became its own structure. It appeared that there was a merging between the corrugated paper and the Masonite container. This merging creates a balance that makes the form seem anchored to the ground.

The raindrop shape, suggests tension at its curved



Figure 6. Primogenerator

end. As in previous pieces the surface was stabilized with a glue mixture creating an apparent membrane over the surface. Visually the membrane gives a sense of structure beneath the surface. This structure suggests tension. There are varying degrees of tension in Primogenitor; passive and active tensions. Tension is a unifier and creates a bond between elements or parts. The strength of this work appears to be its' balance of tensions. The tensions give the structure its stability.

The reductive form of this work differed from the previous pieces. I was now working with full sized sheets of Masonite without altering them in any way. It wasn't possible to be as complex because of the difficulty of manipulating the material.

As an observer, I noticed that the symmetry of Primogenitor was not as obvious. The vertical axis was not visible because of the scale. It was four feet high and didn't permit the viewer to look directly at its axis. An observer would not be immediately aware of its symmetry because of the way it was presented.

With Plato's Void (Figure 7) I experimented with positioning. It is a horizontal version of Primogenitor. Using the same construction methods a hollow container was built and fastened with brass hardware. The core was



Figure 7. Plato's Void

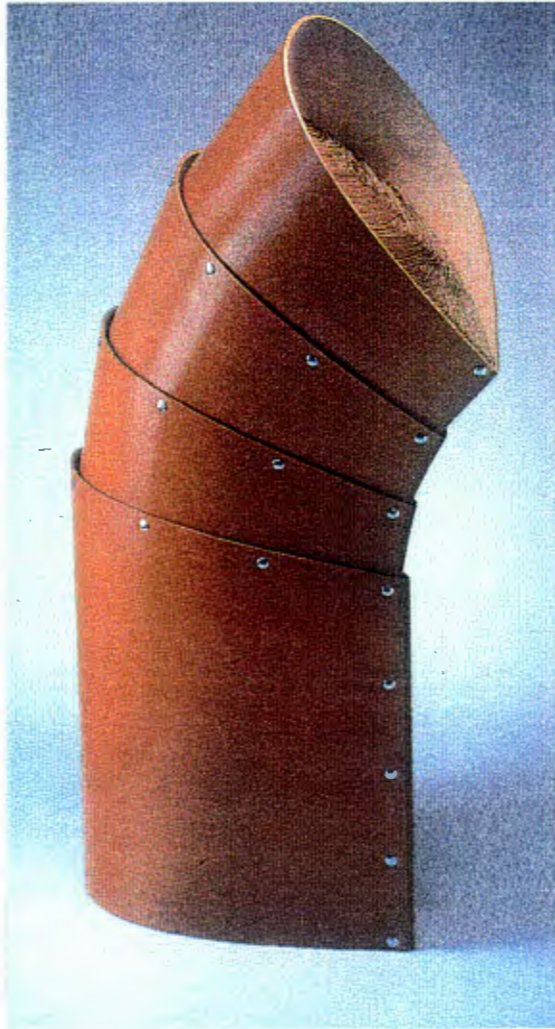


Figure 8. Naught Till Us



left empty. Interior and exterior space were juxtaposed.

The horizontal position and scale of Plato's Void suggests a form in a gestating state. It has a passive tension that implies a state of waiting.

With Naught Till Us (Figure 8) I interfered more with the material. I decided to cut it at an angle and build upon layers as I did in Embrace Me. It is a multi-layered, telescoping form that gently curves. Each layer is successively smaller and had to be sized to fit into its' shell. This sizing of sections or layers is derivative from Embrace Me. With each level the distance of the membrane from the back of its shell becomes greater. As the shell grows in height the tension of each level is intensified so that it appears to be increasingly difficult to restrain it.

Naught Till Us has four curving sections anchored with step bolts. With each level, I adjusted and refined the forms through a dialogue of continual appraisal and modifying, looking, and changing. Corrugated paper fills the core at an angle that implies impending growth; forms generating themselves out of a vortical center. The work curves down toward the viewer holding itself out for direct inspection.

Scaled at almost eight feet tall, it has a strong

presence. In an interview, Anish Kapoor spoke of scale:

Scale is a crucial part of content. A small pile of coal does not have the same meaning as a big pile. An essential issue in my work is that the scale always relates to the body. (50)

Like Kapoor, the scale that evolved from my unconscious process relates to the body. It helps to make the viewer aware of the seductive qualities of the materials.

Naught Till Us uses all the knowledge I've gained during my investigation. It involves a dialogue about the merging of materials into form.

## CONCLUSIONS

I have discussed my work in terms of process, materials, scale, form, tension, and texture. All of these elements and how they were used contributed to my continuing dialogue with the body of work.

Each form was generated out of the previous work in a cycle of growth that paralleled my own. During the process of my investigation I tried to detach myself from my work in order to objectify what I was doing technically, psychologically, and intellectually. This was not always a conscious effort.

In order for the artist or viewer to be willing to learn, some thing or idea needs to seduce us. Seduction is a means of persuasion. I used the tactile, sensual qualities of the material not only to entice the viewer to look beyond the surface, but to persuade myself.

What I found was not always pleasant, but was necessary for the process of growth and change. During the past two years I have come to understand my work by knowing myself.

It has been an extraordinary journey. I began by working strictly in an intuitive manner. My intuition is now informed by technical knowledge and intelligent

choices. Art does not provide answers, but perhaps it can ask some eloquent questions.

My work has changed. There are great risks in change, but I believe that total immersion in the process of creation is necessary. It is the process that concerns me.

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