

# The Boston Globe

## Stepping into the material world of Mel Kendrick

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Murray Whyte



The title of Mel Kendrick’s first-ever major career retrospective is “Seeing Things in Things,” which sounds like a dodge because, at least partly, it is. Kendrick is noncommittal in that old-school Modernist way: For him, the work *means* nothing because it *is* nothing beyond, as the old saying goes, the thing itself. Kendrick, an alumnus of Phillips Academy, home to the splendid Addison Gallery of American Art, which mounted the show, might borrow from fellow Phillips artist alum Frank Stella: “What you see is what you see,” Stella once said when asked about his work, the ultimate verbal shrug. It’s an explanation by way of non sequitur.

Let’s not mistake the lack of commitment to language for the same in the work. Just the opposite: Kendrick’s oeuvre, almost all of it sculpture, is robust and imposing, alive with a zeal for making. The largest gallery here — “Seeing Things in Things” spans a half dozen rooms across the museum’s entire second floor — is a communion with giants. The hollowed trunk of a monstrous maple tree perches on angular timbers, like an ancient, crippled beast on crutches. Another work, composed of swoops of textured heavy wood beams, rears up like a startled cobra.

I get the feeling that Kendrick would hate such analogies; the titles in this room run the oblique terrain of “Sculpture No. 2” and “Black Dots” (and there is plenty of “untitled” throughout). None of these pieces were made to be anything but what they are: wood and steel, whipped into shape by gesture and mark. Still, try *not* to see a pair of hobbled behemoths on the far side of the room, loping their broken bodies toward the door. I did my best, and I failed.



A view of Mel Kendrick's “Seeing Things in Things” at the Addison Gallery of American Art. FRANK E. GRAHAM/COURTESY ADDISON GALLERY OF AMERICAN ART

The show spans 1982 to more or less right now, which makes it suspect as a retrospective on strict terms. Kendrick graduated from Phillips in 1967 and went to New York's Hunter College in 1971 to do his master's in art with celebrated faculty members Robert Morris and Tony Smith.

In the early 1970s, what would become known as Minimalism had a strong hold on the art world. Smith, along with artists like Sol LeWitt and Donald Judd, was one of its pioneers nearly a decade earlier. Morris was an important figure in Minimalism's bleed into what would become Conceptual Art, encompassing forms such as performance, video, and photography. What followed was an intellectual bloating of what had been an aesthetic revolution, as the art world merged more tightly with academic theory and became so insulated that it separated from the larger world almost entirely.

It was in this milieu that Kendrick's career began in earnest, and to his apparent consternation. In an interview in the excellent catalog the Addison produced for the show, Kendrick recalls that he was flailing. "I was just doing everything that was in the air, I have to say," Kendrick tells his Phillips classmate and friend, the painter Carroll Dunham. A foray into video, Kendrick says, "was incredibly tedious."

Then, in 1982, a clean break. After some years of making sleek, Minimal sculptural works — heavily influenced, I'd think, by Smith's crisp geometric work — Kendrick pivoted to the more vivid and immediate practice that sustains him today. The short version is that Kendrick planned less and made more. Instead of working toward a conclusion, the work simply evolved.



An array of works by Mel Kendrick. FRANK E. GRAHAM/COURTESY ADDISON GALLERY OF AMERICAN ART

I could call it liberating, but you can see for yourself. One standout piece, "Nemo," from 1983, is a spidery form of leggy black and white bolts of wood bundled into an uncomfortably small gallery — intentionally, I'm sure — that makes it feel like a caged animal. The artist may not like the implication, but: The work has personality. I don't want to project too much, but I imagine that making it was more than a little fun. Minus the frustrations, I'm sure, since it's a study in virtuosic joinery.

Of course, in the '80s, art wasn't supposed to be fun. It was supposed to be deadly serious, made largely to fit into a greater theoretical frame. The tenor of those times would have made Kendrick something of an outsider. He's a material enthusiast, suspicious of doubletalk. His concern was, and is, immediacy, the task in front of him, solving formal problems step by step. Liberating as it might

have been for him, imagine the impact on a viewer, drowning in artspeak. The works don't tell you what to think, and they give nothing away; that leaves your own visceral reaction to fill the ample space.

That being so, Kendrick will have to forgive us for seeing our own things in his things. One gallery sporting dozens of small works perched on steel pedestals evokes everything from Picasso to Brancusi to the totemic forms of ancient cultures. They're fantastically articulate, each one a perfect haiku of formal play. (At least one, a little red and blue guy from 1983, was distinctly rooster-like; Kendrick just calls it "Tiny Red and Blue," because of course.)

Anyway. There's an undeniable lightness to confronting material riddles with no concern outside themselves, even with pieces so materially dense and heavy. You can all but observe Kendrick puzzling out various formal challenges he set for himself, in real time. "Black Trunk," which describes the piece just fine, has compelling presence, all smooth and dark and towering. A series of untitled works from 2007 is almost literally a puzzle, with Kendrick making three-dimensional explorations into each piece, fitting them with their own mirror forms and then slapping them with bright red paint, giving them a playful, festive feel.



Mel Kendrick's "White Block/Spiral," from 2015. MURRAY WHYTE

Exploring is a good word for what Kendrick does, setting out for destinations unknown, each journey driven simply by the quest itself. Several works feel like questions with partial answers, taken to extremes. A handful feel like vivisection, with Kendrick flaying the bark off trees in careful whole sheaths, allowing him to display innards and skin side-by-side. They feel serious and intimate and violative, the artist probing uncomfortably deep.

But the lasting sense of “Seeing Things in Things” is an artist who seeks questions more than answers across materials and eras through the act of hands-on making. One jarring piece, “White Block/Spiral,” from 2015, felt like a radical departure, its sleek white concrete skin, incised in radiant swirls, looking an awful lot like the 3-D-printed or algorithm-guided laser-cut work I’ve seen in recent years. There’s the rub: Kendrick achieved its achingly contemporary sheen by age-old methods, hand-cutting every little arc and groove with a wire. Kendrick has always made things, and will always make things, because, really, what else is there?

### **MEL KENDRICK: SEEING THINGS IN THINGS**

Through Oct. 3. The Addison Gallery of American Art, 180 Main St., Andover. 978-749-4000, [addison.andover.edu](http://addison.andover.edu)