

# HYPERALLERGIC

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### THE GENIUS OF THADDEUS MOSLEY

by John Yau



Installation view of Thaddeus Mosley at Karma, NY

Thaddeus Mosley is finally getting the attention he has been long due. A self-taught sculptor, at 94 he is still chiseling large, freestanding works composed of multiple pieces of salvaged wood that he carefully fits together. As reasons for this belated awareness, we might consider the rise of the investment class of collectors; racism in the guise of supposedly neutral theory; and the continuing triumph of period styles and theoretical positions over artists who determinedly follow their own trajectory.

In an interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist, Mosley talks about his first encounters with Isamu Noguchi. He initially saw Noguchi's work when Martha Graham's ballet *Appalachian Spring* (1944) premiered in Pittsburgh in 1959. A friend of Mosley's who was photographing the sets for a local television station invited him to help "carry the equipment" so he could get a closer look at the sets Noguchi had designed for Graham.

Nearly a decade later, Mosley met Noguchi through Leon Arkus, then-director of the Carnegie Institute, who had invited Noguchi to give a lecture. Although Mosley (who was in his 40s), was virtually unknown, Noguchi was familiar with his artwork and wanted to talk to him; Arkus had given Mosley a one-person show at the Carnegie and, as Mosley tells Obrist, "The Carnegie used to have a piece of mine on the stairs when Leon was the director."

Obrist, who often likes to move from one anecdote to the next quickly, doesn't pause to consider the backgrounds of the three men (African American, Japanese-American, and

Jewish) — or that Arkus, who was director of the Carnegie from 1968 to 1980, championed Mosley, who, in the age of Minimalism, Pop Art, and Conceptual art, was all but invisible in the commercial art world.

This meaningful encounter of three social outsiders from very different backgrounds, who recognized and helped each other, reveals another side of American art history — one that is seldom acknowledged.

Obirst brushes over this history, perhaps because he believes the art world has become more inclusive. I am not convinced, however, today's art world is any more open than the one Mosley described, especially with its focus on blue-chip artists, wealth, and the investment class. Given that Mosley is in the collection of neither the Whitney Museum of American Art nor the Museum of Modern Art, and I know of no in-depth studies of postwar American artists working in wood, a lot of inequities and oversights have yet to be addressed.

I first learned about Mosley from the poet Nathaniel Mackey, who curated the exhibition *Thaddeus Mosley* for the CUE Foundation (January 29–March 6, 2004). It was Mosley's first New York exhibition; he had to wait more than 15 years for his second, *Thaddeus Mosley* at Karma (February 29–April 26, 2020).

The poet Ed Roberson, another longtime champion and friend of the artist, notified me of the current Mosley show. A catalogue accompanies the exhibition, containing seven texts, including one by Roberson. Although outwardly handsome, the monograph lacks a Table of Contents, suggesting the gallery and/or designer have little regard for the writers. Adding insult to injury, there are no biographies for the contributors; this indirectly privileges known art-world personalities over lesser known writers. This kind of hierarchical thinking is why Mosley was neglected for so long.

Twenty-three sculptures are displayed between Karma's two spaces — a gallery with two large rooms and a storefront. The storefront space is dominated by "Geometric Plateau" (2014), comprised of a bowl-like and an open conical form that face each other, like heads sitting on the opposite ends of an elevated bench. A cylindrical shape, whose interior is visible through a large, vertical, gash-like opening, obstructs their view of each other as it rises well above them, twisting slightly.

Upon closer inspection, the bench appears to be a log that has been cut length-wise, so that the top is flat and the bottom mostly is rounded. The conical form fits into a hole at one end of the bench, which rests securely in the notch of a thick, slab-like object resting on the floor. At the other end of the bench, the bowl-like form fits onto a tapering cylinder. Both symmetrical and asymmetrical, "Geometric Plateau" is made of six distinct, chiseled pieces that come together.

This is Mosley's genius: Working almost exclusively with salvaged logs and branches, the forms seem to talk to him. He does not impose shapes with his chiseling so much as enhance them. It is striking to see how distinct the sculptures are from each other. In contrast to Constantin Brancusi, Noguchi, and Alberto Giacometti, all of whom have inspired him, Mosley does not make variations on a theme. There is no ideal form for him because no two of his salvaged organic forms are exactly alike.

While almost every critic writing about Mosley has noted the importance of the sculptors I cited to his work, as has he himself, I think it is more useful to recognize how far he has

traveled from them, beginning with the individuality of each piece. Every artwork — assembled from discrete, highly worked forms that have been fit together — has its own personality. There is something marvelous about Mosley’s sensitivity to weight, balance, and imbalance. This inquiry is further rewarded by the rhythmic indentations left by the chisels, the linear cuts made into thin surfaces — which is a kind of drawing — and the different-colored woods he brings together in a single piece (for example, “Curved Suspended,” 2013, made of walnut and cherry). Many details in Mosley’s work, including his monogram signature, add another level of pleasure to our experience of them.

For the freestanding vertical sculptures, which make up the majority of the show, Mosley embraces basic modernist issues, such as the stacking of forms, but he often inserts a sharp, knowing wit. In “Branched Form” (2017), which is nine feet high, he mounts his chiseled version of a bare-branched tree on the crown of a chiseled log. One of the simpler sculptures in this eye-opening exhibition, “Branched Form” has no relatives in the exhibition — not even distant ones.

In the aftermath of seriality, repeatable and modular forms, and signature production, Mosley is a welcome anomaly, someone who reminds you that there is a deep and real pleasure in making. Mostly unheralded, the masterful, under-recognized artist created a large body of work in his spare time (what a weird, unjust phrase), while living in Pittsburgh, working in a post office for decades, and donating pieces to charity auctions.

Largely promoted by a community of Black writers, artists, and musicians, Mosley’s work more than holds its own with his celebrated peers. He did not need the art world’s approval to keep going, but the art world certainly needs him for more reasons than I can count.