

# HYPERALLERGIC

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### THE ALLUSIVE, IMPROVISATIONAL ARTWORKS OF THADDEUS MOSLEY

by Julia Friedman



Installation view of *Thaddeus Mosley* at Karma, New York.

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Thaddeus Mosley's eponymous exhibition at Karma is the nonagenarian artist's first with the gallery. A selection of 23 of Mosley's wood sculptures, from 1996 to the present, fills Karma's three spaces. Mosley's favored materials are walnut and cherry wood, his palette deep auburns and browns. His oft-mentioned influences include Constantin Brancusi, Isamu Noguchi, and Alberto Giacometti, and art from the cultures and kingdoms of Bamum, Dogon, Baoulé, Senufo, Dan, and Mossi. Mosley is a serious jazz fan, and he notes in the exhibition's press release that his sculptural process, like jazz, rests on improvisation: "I never know exactly what I'm doing. That's also the essence of good jazz."

The formal aspects of Mosley's work have been thoroughly considered over the years, as have the influences of Noguchi and jazz, but perhaps at the expense of exploring symbolism and allusions in individual works. In "Propelled Simulation" (2001), for instance, a narrow railroad switch points upward, while a wood component below suggests a trigger. Together these parts recall a gun. In "Masked Extension" (2011), what could be a nose on an abstracted figure also seems phallic; "Enclosure" (2006) suggests the opposite — a vaginal interior. And in "Geometric Plateau" (2014), two half-shell forms, evoking heads or hats, face each other atop a beam, with a large vertical shape in between, suggesting a barrier to their communication.

In the exhibition catalogue Mosley states, "I try to make things that generate their own spirituality so that people might feel something about it. What presence is to make something have a life of its own — the alchemy of turning something natural into something alive." This is a profound statement about the potential of the human

hand to transform and create anew from the natural world. It also implies that viewers should explore their unique interpretations of individual works. Mosley has had deep, lifelong engagements with the city of Pittsburgh, its artistic community, and its local wood. While his oeuvre has rightly been read as an array of improvisations on archetypal modernist forms, his body of work deserves to be further explored with an eye toward its complex symbolism.