

Alma ALLEN

Artforum,

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Alma Allen, *Not Yet Titled*, 2019, walnut, 23 × 44 1/4 × 40 1/2".

Cast and carved from sober materials such as marble, wood, and bronze, the deceptively lissome sculptures of Alma Allen contain more than one crack at the idea of truth in materials. In press and press releases alike, Allen is insistently compared to Constantin Brancusi, who nudged modernism forward with his own quest to manifest the essence of natural forms through direct engagement with his materials. (It's a bird! It's a plane! No, it's the essence of a bird, rendered from a single plane of bronze, don't you see?) Allen, whose work has been shaped by the sun-bleached vistas of Joshua Tree, California, and the humpbacked mountains surrounding Tepoztlán, Mexico, seems to have had the same objectives, only he landed closer to Georges Bataille's maxim: "Truth only has one face: that of a violent contradiction."

The works in Allen's untitled solo exhibition at Blum & Poe dated from 2016 to this year, and all of them were titled *Not Yet Titled*, cheekily rebuffing the viewer's interpretive impulse. This refusal to buttress the equivocal forms with anything so neat as explicit meaning felt like a semantic reflection of the equivocal logic of the works themselves. In one 2019 piece, for example, a roughly four-foot-wide lump of hard walnut was carved until it looked like a soft bowl, the kind left behind by a giant pressing its thumb into a ball of clay. The dark, knotty wood has a propensity to crack, and Allen let its fissures bloom in the curves and basin of the sculpture, where his engagement with the material (whether direct or mediated by robotic tools

of his own making) takes on other resonances. Visually, the cracks also perfectly echo the kind of splitting that occurs when you try to make a pinch pot out of clay that is too dry. In another 2019 work, a thick sheet of silver-tone bronze was worked into a loose, wobbly tube, the seam finished off with two circular discs that give the effect of a fabric shirt being pulled taut by a large, invisible torso. Another bronze lump, this one from 2017, had been patinated like oxidized metal (another material deception). Its surface is now so mottled that it resembles the aforementioned walnut wood. The smooth shape is interrupted by a large split, clearly the product of deliberate design as much as it recalls the accidental cleft that might be swiftly made by an ax. Even the more resolutely anti-representational objects reiterated this tension between the honesty of form and material, making the journey of their fabrication anyone's guess. A key joke in the show was another carved walnut work from 2019. It had the smooth, plump shape of a tufted ottoman, weirdly interrupted by a phallic protrusion that also appeared in several other works in other materials. It might have been a self-conscious reference to the macho aura of modern sculpture, or perhaps Allen stuck a Pinocchio's nose on the work lest we get so taken by its beauty that we start to regard it as truth. There was almost no material here that Allen hadn't reworked to mimic the characteristics of another substance.

Scattered across Blum & Poe's three ground-floor galleries, the objects and their arrangement recalled a microscopic image of grains of sand, enlarged to show off the intricacies of the forms and to spark quasi-spiritual ruminations on their origins—a designed object must have a designer, no? Mustn't a bird have an essence? Won't wood reveal its secrets? A self-taught artist who began by selling small, hand-carved objects on the street, Allen interrogates his own place in the vacuum of art history in the only way he knows: by manipulating the nature of materials, a knotty, manifest language of the world. His results are beautiful—not for their fidelity to some truth about the material world, but for their wry, patient, even violent cross-examination thereof.