

# Against the Grain: The Work of Bruce Johnson



Bruce Johnson's large, muscular, but equally sensuous and approachable redwood sculptures are not site-specific, at least not the way the art world defines the term: art that it is created for, and displayed in, a predetermined location. Yet in many ways,

Johnson's work is inextricably tied to a *place*—the north coast of California with the last remaining stands of old growth redwood on the planet. Visiting the artist's studio in Timber Cove, nestled among stands of second growth redwood and hearing him speak passionately and articulately about his art reminds one just how central the material of redwood is to his work and his vision as an artist.

This connection to place in both Johnson's life and work brings to mind another term—regionalism—that in the contemporary art world is not always complimentary. It can imply a sensibility that is narrow and provincial at the expense of a more sophisticated and global vision. Seen another way, however—and this is particularly true in Johnson's case—a regional perspective in art not only grounds the work literally and aesthetically but counters the impersonality inherent in some contemporary art—notably public sculpture. Furthermore, a regional outlook focuses on the defining characteristics of a locale, including its history, landscape, and even such intangibles as spirituality. Johnson's art does all of this and more, engaging both viewer and artist—through his work—in a silent dialogue about the importance of materials and their origins and demonstrates how an artist can be deeply influenced and informed by a unique place.

While Johnson's work exhibits many of the positive qualities of a regional sensibility, this does not mean Johnson is a Regionalist with a capital "R". On the contrary, the aesthetic influences Johnson acknowledges are undeniably sophisticated and global, among them: Japanese art and design, indigenous architecture, forms found in nature, ancient and non-Western art, and such iconic Modernist artists as Henry Moore, David Smith, and the Japanese-American sculptor Isamu Noguchi, whom Johnson met in both New York and Japan and credits with having a most profound impact on his work as a sculptor. Johnson also cites the great American sculptor Mark di Suvero.

Johnson's path as an artist was also influenced by his studies at the University of California at Davis, home to one of California's most storied—and during its prime, radical—art departments, where Bay Area legends Robert Arneson, Manuel Neri, Wayne Thiebaud, and William T. Wiley formed the nucleus of the art faculty. It was there, in the mid sixties, that Johnson found his way to the sculpture studio and the rest, as they say, is history. Johnson's education at UC Davis is likewise part of his identity as a Northern Californian. Raised from early childhood in the San Francisco Bay Area, Johnson first established roots in Sonoma County following his graduation from Davis when, in 1973, he was hired to work on the historic restoration of a Russian Orthodox

chapel at Fort Ross State Park on the Sonoma coast. Johnson and his wife Margie, whom he met while at Davis, moved to the area for this project and they've been there ever since.

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The issue of place—in this instance, where an artist lives and how it affects his or her career and standing in the larger contemporary art world—is also germane to a thorough deliberation of Johnson and his work. For an artist like Johnson, who is so closely identified with Sonoma County—but who nonetheless has exhibited his work nationally and internationally—the question arises whether he is part of the “mainstream” of contemporary art if he lives outside established American art centers like New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Francisco—and works with such a distinctly *nonmainstream* material as redwood. If an artist works beyond the view of the art press and major galleries and collectors—i.e., the mainstream art world—should the resulting art still be seen in the same light as art created in one of the handful

of urban cities that seem to constitute the mainstream art world? For some, the answer is as clear as the *crack* and *boom* of the falling tree. In the 21st century—with instant access through technology to virtually any artist, gallery, or art critic anywhere in the world—is the concept of “mainstream art” still relevant? While mainstream implies conventional and accepted, it also suggests popularity and trends—all characteristics more suited to a discussion of the art market and less so a serious examination of the work of an artist of Johnson’s commitment and integrity.

Johnson’s current exhibition, *Root 101*, is at the Wells Fargo Center for the Arts in Santa Rosa, California. Root 101 is both a clever play on U.S. Route 101 (also known as the Redwood Highway) that runs nearby the Center’s new Sculpture Garden, where 16 of Johnson’s sculptures have been installed for the next two years, as well as a reference to his use of salvaged redwood—particularly the roots—as his primary material. The newer works are the result of Johnson’s acquisition several years ago of 80 tons of redwood stumps and chunks salvaged by a landowner from a tributary of the Eel River, north of the artist’s home. All of the sculptures in the exhibition are fairly recent and about half—dating from 2014 and 2015—are being shown publicly for the first time.



The newest piece in the exhibition, *Lookout* (2015), at 17 feet tall, soars skyward above the viewer and most of the other works in the show. As Johnson describes it, *Lookout* is “a tower, a marker, an observation platform” that is both beautiful and functional: visitors ascend to the top of the work by climbing a steel ladder hidden within the hollowed-out redwood body of the piece and

enter an organic onion-shaped copper clad observatory—not unlike the onion domes found atop Russian Orthodox churches. There is also an aspect of spirituality in much of Johnson’s work—not in reference to a specific religion but rather to his love of nature and his deep reverence for the beauty of the world. Enabling viewers to rise up through the cool, smooth interior of the sculpture and emerge to 360 degree views of the surrounding landscape seems completely in keeping with Johnson’s vision as an artist—and as a person.

Like *Lookout*, Johnson’s massive *Temple Bus Stop* (2014) combines elements of functionality and architecture with breathtaking detail born of the artist’s consummate craftsmanship. Two huge redwood “pillars” hold aloft a complex roof that brings to mind the Japanese temple suggested by the title. The organic pillars are anchored on textured concrete footings that elevate the sculpture and serve as seats or benches—like one might find in a more conventional bus stop. But *Temple Bus Stop* is anything but conventional. Its sheer physicality is undeniable, yet the elegant shape of the roof and the shelter it offers beckons the viewer to come forward and look more closely. Beyond the structural complexity of the roof, careful observation reveals endless surface variations in the details of the pillars. It is here that Johnson’s considerable skills as a builder give way to his touch as an artist. Johnson has accentuated the natural forms of the



redwood with inlaid sections of patterned copper and marks made directly into the redwood—a variety of lines and shapes produced by a variety of unique tools. It is almost as if Johnson is at once imposing his will on the wood by “drawing” on its surface while at the same time “listening” to the wood and working in harmony with it.





*Jura* (2014) reveals a more whimsical side to Johnson's work. Taking a cue from the natural shapes of the redwood stumps that form *Jura*—and that suggest prehistoric reptiles and ancient rock and plant formations—Johnson has emphasized these associations without losing sight of his instincts as a contemporary sculptor whose primary aesthetic language is abstraction. From one perspective there seems to appear the head of a dinosaur emerging from a rock outcropping or a thicket. From other vantage points these associations are not as literal, but the overall feeling of *Jura*—which, as Johnson points out, is

the root of the word Jurassic—is still primitive and primeval. It looks old and a little scary, too—especially the grimacing face that seems to be emerging out of the ground as if reflected in a Funhouse mirror. At the same time, *Jura* is playful and inviting—full of details and textures, both natural and added by Johnson—and the scale seems perfect for climbing. As *verboden* as that normally is in the world of fine art sculpture, Johnson in fact encourages interaction by adding foot- and handholds and climbing pegs to many of his works. In reference to *Jura*—Johnson describes *Jura* as being “tactile and punctuated for exploration.”

Tactility and engagement reach something of a crescendo in *Eko* (2009). Emerging from a gnarled and beautifully polished redwood stump are two diagonal wooden poles pointing in opposite directions. Within the composition lies a large “copper boulder” with a textured surfaces and faceted sides that serves as a counter-balance, both visually and physically, to a smooth steel cylindrical bell hanging vertically the larger diagonal pole. Tucked into the base of the sculpture is a short dense wood striker used to ring the hanging bell. The artist states that *Eko* (pronounced “echo”) “refers to the potential sound of the elemental bell.” In spite of the tension created by the two thrusting diagonal poles, copper boulder undulating roots and vertical bell, the work has a

balanced, Zen-like quality. If one looks closely, one can also see echoes Mark di Suvero or David Smith.





*Outburst* (2009) looks like it sounds—a large eruption of movement and texture that commands attention once it comes into view. Its scale alone—11 feet high by 10 feet in diameter—lends the piece more than sufficient visual power, but other elements provide additional tension and energy. The long diagonal redwood log jutting skyward through the center of *Outburst* is like a giant exclamation point and a very large copper sphere or boulder—similar to the one in *Eko*—dangles from the raised end. The heart of *Outburst* is a single upturned redwood stump that looks almost like giant wooden hands holding—or perhaps juggling—several more textured copper objects. Although the sculpture itself is static—with the exception of the

dangling boulder, which moves in response to the wind—the overall effect of the composition and the various elements is dynamic, uplifting, and indeed joyful.

*Olas de Paz* (Spanish, waves of peace), created in 2008, is the oldest among Johnson’s sculptures at the Wells Fargo Center and perhaps the most unique. While the large form is a single piece of redwood no wood is revealed and the sculpture’s flowing, undulating form is entirely clad in a skin of rippling, textured copper. *Olas de Paz* has a quiet, mysterious, almost understated presence that stands in contrast to works like *Lookout* and *Outburst*. Johnson states that the title “refers to the abstract energy of water found in the organic form of a massive piece of salvaged redwood”. He goes on to say, in reference to *Olas de Paz*, that he feels “the scale and presence of Henry Moore and the organic exuberance of Georgia O’Keeffe”, and indeed the spirit of these two giants of Modernist sculpture and painting can be felt by the attentive viewer as well. *Olas de Paz* is a *tour de force* of Johnson’s ability to wed natural and manufactured materials and wrestle large chunks of redwood into an abstract work of art of stark beauty.



There are another 10 works in the exhibition, each of which has its own distinct personality and presence, and illustrates the many

unique ways that Johnson uses salvaged redwood to create large-scale contemporary sculpture that is both bold and intimate. His belief in the importance of craft and his devotion to redwood are both widely—and deservedly—recognized and appreciated. He is a talented, intelligent, and thoughtful artist but this is sometimes overshadowed by his substantial abilities as a craftsman and builder. Johnson himself has made peace with the two sides of his artistic identity and has written eloquently on the subject: “Some people contend that art and craft are different,” he says. “I am a sculptor and I would argue that you cannot have fine art without good craft. On the other hand superlative craft without art lacks vitality. We each find our own balance. I am a maker seeking to imbue my work with form and energy.”\*

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