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ALLAN WEXLER *Breaking Ground*

by Joyce Beckenstein

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When Allan Wexler looks into the forest he sees its trees as nature's I-beams, their leafy boughs as protective rooftop canopies. More interested in dwellings for the human spirit than in constructing habitable spaces, Wexler's architecture-as-sculpture-as installation-as conceptual art isn't easy to pin down. *Breaking Ground*, a three-part exhibition at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts—his 10th solo show at this gallery—features hand-worked, photo-based, inkjet drawings, two new freestanding sculptures, and a 1975 conceptual work. Together, this triumvirate of forms connects the baby boomer who came of age in the '60s—an age that questioned everything—to the mature artist who questions how gravity is related to the gravitas of everyday life. Some of the clues he finds are housed in a small glass vitrine at the gallery entrance: tiny plaster and paper models of a plywood plane, a ladder, and a rock attached to string. Look at them carefully, and then follow their mystical reincarnations.

Wexler's extensive drawing series—a seldom-exhibited medium for him—suggests the first human attempts to gouge a primal hovel from unlevel earth. "Descension" (2013), a rectangular pit with a door, ostensibly connects by passageway to a distant opening, a ladder rising from it. Next follows "Ascension" (2012), a rectangular plane excavated from earth that hovers over and casts its dark shadow above the hole it left in the ground. While the riff on the Christian idea of ascension is apparent, Wexler is more specifically exploring congruent architectural and spiritual dilemmas: human building as transcendent toil. Architectural processes: cutting and filling, relating positive to negative space, and floating a plane, speak to life's transience, the way we define our place on earth and our ultimate departure from it. With profound wit, "Grounded" (2014) depicts a floating plane tethered by rope to four large rocks, an existential tug of



Allan Wexler, "Adams House in Paradise", 2014. Tree sapling and museum board, 59 × 84 × 36 □. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

war between a place called home and the netherworld.

The surreal aura pervading these drawings owes to Wexler's complex layering of media that results in sculptural trompe l'oeil effects. He achieves them by first creating a model "landscape" made from plaster, museum board, and hand-made miniature three-dimensional paper props. With small rasps and chisels he incises earth-like surfaces imprinted with man-made tools. He then photographs the model, further reworks the image by computer and then prints the completed drawing in sections that he matte finishes and waxes. The sheets are then assembled as a grid, like architectural scaffolding for the original photograph.

Wexler hopes for some intervening accident as he constructs, deconstructs, and reconstructs this compendium of architectural, sculptural, and drawn forms—like the crack in the model that sired "Rift" (2013). The artist placed two chairs on opposite sides of this "fault," a ribbon-like earthquake depression that formed in the plaster. The resulting line, formally unifying and dividing pictorial space, also suggests a human fissure, a line between two people, best negotiated before being crossed.

How do these drawings connect to Wexler's early architectural sculpture and installations? "Tree Branch Transformations" (1975) visualizes the progression of his thinking, and the evolution of his interest in the intuitive merger of the natural and the manufactured with creative intervention. A series of manipulated twigs housed in six narrow corrugated boxes at first looks like a child's collection of found ephemera. In one box painted twigs progress from a natural state to garish acrylic color; in others they're spliced, rotated and then implanted with miniature steel beams, referencing how modern skyscrapers bow to trees as ancient architectural columns and supports. He later proceeded to make constructions and installations that defined different aspects of architecture through inventive inversions of space and function. For example, his "Gardening Sukkah" (2000) (held in the collection of the Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio) converts a simple gardening storage shed into a ceremonial space for ritually celebrating the harvest.

The recent drawings distill the practical and spiritual range of his thinking into "plane poetry," art that rises to metaphysical heights reminiscent of Walter Pichler's (1936 – 2012) dream drawings. These recent multi-media works are nothing short of mystical, as are two new freestanding sculptures. In "Adam's House in Paradise" (2014) and "Shelter" (2014), Wexler seamlessly transforms natural and constructed space into metaphysical form. Each of these breathtaking pieces originated from felled backyard branches, their sprouting arms and calligraphic twigs embracing delicate negative spaces. Wexler meticulously cut and folded museum board to fit within these openings, effectively interpreting a tree's natural canopy as a groined vault. Experienced in the round, these sculptures morph from a natural form once rooted in earth to a metaphoric cathedral. From an imaginative perspective, the structural parts separate: an angel may appear, a butterfly takes flight.

Some may leave this exhibit asking, “What does Allan Wexler really *do*?” So accustomed is he to this question that he carries 20 business-like cards with answers to hand out at parties when queried. Response #10 reads: “My work transforms an electric bulb into a miniature sun, causes a tabletop to miraculously float, and constructs a column that grows from earth to hold up the sky.”

A companion show of Allan Wexler's work, "Sight Lines: 35 Years of Drawing" is on view at Schema Projects, from May 9th to June 8th.

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