



Joan Snyder, "Oratorio," 1997

spotlight on the artist, who is a seeker and a finder, a selector and a ferreter-out of things. Of course, we do not want the artist to become a worshipper of materials who presents four-by-eight-foot sheets of plywood or rusty fenders without comment or interpretation, expecting gallerygoers to respond almost automatically to some on-the-fly poetic power. When materials are fetishized, they become static. But how does an artist convey a dynamic feeling when no mark of brush, chisel, or hand is in evidence? I expect that the answer has something to do with an artist's ability to maneuver the materials so that they act dialectically or metaphorically.

Donald Judd is the grand extreme case. His boxes, with their elegant look-no-hands fabrication, are Constructivism *in extremis*: materialism stripped down to a singular avowal. An artist who adopts such a radical method can achieve odd, unexpected visual effects. Judd pulled an awesome delicacy out of plywood. More recently Richard Serra, with his huge, curving sheets of steel, has achieved a quirky monumentality. There is a connoisseurship of materials about what Judd and Serra do. Their dissent from traditional practices is fueled not so much by a distaste for fixed ideas of craft as by their obsession with craft. Escaping from old methods, they rush straight into newer, more elaborate techniques. If the

two-by-four suggests, through the very way it is poised and juxtaposed, a particular kind of non-carving or anti-carving—well, this, too, is an idea about carving. Ultimately, unconventional materials will align themselves, like more traditional art materials, in the echo chambers and the dream spaces of tradition.

OVER TIME, the lumberyard has developed its own lyric tradition, which is alive and well in the recent work of Chris Macdonald and Joel Shapiro. These artists intervene in the materials, but lightly. They say, geez, isn't this stuff cool—much the way Judd pointed to the loveliness of a sheet of plywood. Macdonald is a showman, a prankster, a sneak. This sculptor returns, time and again, to a small group of favorite subjects, which includes trucks and heavy construction equipment, such as cranes and backhoes, as well as trains and spaceships. Macdonald reimagines his vehicular images as idiosyncratically boxy or angular abstract forms. The results have a winning simplicity, so that it generally takes a few minutes before, with a snap of surprise, I get the allusions. It is the slowness, and then the suddenness, of the references that give the work its child's-eye aplomb and its buoyant wit.

Whether Macdonald is working with huge pieces of lumber and lengths of

threaded steel rod, tiny pieces of wire and rubber—or, in his show this season at Hirschl and Adler Modern, creating two-dimensional renderings of his sculpture with oil pastels on black paper—he is doing handstands with the quotidian and turning ordinariness on its head. Macdonald's sculpture has probably never looked more wonderful than it did back in 1988, when he packed the David Beitzel Gallery, which then occupied a deep, narrow space at 113 Greene Street, with his hilariously hunky constructions. But there were echoes of that over-the-top installation this winter when Macdonald filled a patio outside Hirschl and Adler Modern's second-floor gallery with one of his gigantic wheeled contraptions, called *Sphinx* #3. Marooned on an upstairs patio on the Upper East Side, this oversized wooden gizmo was a winning absurdist presence. Macdonald's amused conjugations of truckstop, art gallery, and lumberyard are downhome (and downtown) Surrealism.

Unconventional materials can have a "what-if" dimension. Macdonald often seems to be saying, What if a boy grew up and became a sculptor but kept playing with building blocks? In his new works on paper, done with oil pastel and oil crayon, the question is: What if I use art materials with a kindergarten directness? Macdonald eschews all possibility