

A wooden creation, as lovely as a tree, Christopher Knight

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If a tree falls in an art gallery and the entire art world is there to hear it, what kind of sound does it make?

That's one question that comes to mind in the presence of Charles Ray's strange, evocative new sculpture, "Hinoki," which inaugurates a second space opened by Regen Projects. It's Ray's first L.A. gallery show in a decade, and he's spent the better part of those last 10 years working on this monumental piece. The sculpture is a hand-crafted doppelganger of a hollow, 32-foot-long oak log the artist stumbled upon rotting away in a field.

One answer to the question might be that in the presence of "Hinoki" you hear the sound of silence. Perception falters in a commotion. Any profound work of art commands a hush to allow experience to ripen fully.

"Hinoki" is a puzzle. The sculpture is assembled from scores of interlocking blocks of laminated Hinoki cypress, a wood native to central Japan, where it is used in the construction of palaces and temples. Each block was carefully carved in Osaka under the direction of master woodworker Yuboku Mukoyoshi and his assistants. Every detail of the once mighty, now fallen oak, outside and inside and including wayward limbs, is reproduced, right down to worm holes and termite trails.

The sculpture's exterior is like the surface of the ocean -- a sea of small, rippling chisel marks -- but the linear seams in the blocks' joinery are not hidden. The log is an organic shape, yet the geometric suggestion of a three-dimensional grid is inescapable. The virtual form might even have been plotted on a computer screen.

The cypress blocks on which the sculpture rests further describe the idealized, rational grid. They form a nominal pedestal, reverently elevating the work just above an earthbound plane.

The color of "Hinoki" is peculiar -- a sort of flaxen orange, like raw chicken skin, with a slight iridescence depending on the light. Over centuries the wood will slowly mellow and the color darken, until finally it is almost black. And because it is wood, rather than stone, metal or a synthetic, this is one sculpture destined eventually to fall to pieces. Art, like nature, inevitably decays.

Among Hinoki cypress' many appealing characteristics for its traditional, distinguished uses in Japanese construction is the wood's hardy resistance to rot. Using it to create a ghost double for a rotted oak tree underlines Ray's thematic arc. The blunt and inescapable impact of mortality is expanded, stretched out, slowed to a nearly imperceptible crawl.

The sculptor is a latter-day Mary Shelley, jolting artificial life into a corpse. That the sculpture is alive is further revealed by the presence in the gallery of several humidifiers, quietly churning out just the right amount of atmospheric moisture to allow the cut, carved, distressed and laminated wood to relax, settle down and regain a measured stability. A log is a segment of a tree trunk, but it's also a record of events. Ray's log embodies both.

"Hinoki" recalls Ray's last extraordinary show at Regen, 1997's "Unpainted Sculpture," which was an exact duplicate of a violently crashed American automobile rendered in spectral gray fiberglass. And it further brings to mind his earliest student work, known only from a pair of 1973 photographs: He propped his body high up on a wall -- not unlike a painting -- by wedging it against the wall with a wooden plank.

"Hinoki" doesn't possess the almost melodramatic appeal of "Unpainted Sculpture." It's more Eastern in contemplative tone and feeling than the Western expressiveness of a car crash. But "Hinoki" is distinctive as a log of Ray's career as an artist, which is easily among the most important of the last 20 years.