

Looks almost like Mother Nature's, Sharon Mizota

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A fallen tree inspired Charles Ray, who liked the way the elements had sculpted it. With Japanese woodcarvers, he made a re-creation.

On a break from installing his exhibition at Regen Projects, artist Charles Ray sits in the gallery, shoulders hunched, hands clasped in his lap. Soft-spoken and withdrawn, he comes to life only when he gets up to walk around his latest project: a life-size sculpture of a fallen tree, carved in wood. "I'm interested in where you find yourself in relation to the work," he says, "so your perception of it changes. Scale changes as you move through it or around it."

This dynamic experience intrigued Ray 10 years ago when he spied a hollow log off Highway 1 on California's Central Coast. Drawn to its decaying form, he imagined its story: "I kind of visualized the pressure over the years, the UV and the storms, and the rains. You could feel a lot of force had acted upon it."

It took him at least another year (Ray is uncertain of the dates) to decide how to represent the tree sculpturally.

"I thought of the concept at one point, of pneuma," he says. "It's Greek and it means breath." Intrigued by the idea of giving the tree its life force back, he investigated making an inflatable sculpture, but the production process was too crude for the level of detail he wanted. "Eventually it came to me that to bring it back, wood would be appropriate."

He traveled to Japan in search of a woodcarver. "In Japan, restoration's often re-creation," Ray says. "So when an old Buddha gets really old and starts falling apart, instead of restoring it, they just remake it." In Osaka he met master woodcarver Yuboku Mukoyoshi, who specializes in Buddhist sculptures and temples.

Ray returned to his studio and began the laborious task of documenting the tree's form. He cut the rotting timber into hundreds of pieces, made silicone molds and "reassembled the whole log in fiberglass," he says. "That served as a drawing for the carvers to copy." This three-dimensional "drawing" was shipped to Japan, where Mukoyoshi's team reproduced it in unfinished Japanese cypress, or hinoki.

"You can hear it sort of settling and creaking," Ray says. "The wood is still alive."

During the process, which took "a number of years, maybe five," Ray collaborated closely with the carvers. He originally intended the work to be very realistic. "They felt that was really crass," he says. In the finished piece, the marks of the woodworker's tools are clearly visible, as are the dovetail joints where pieces of wood were fitted together to make the 32-foot-long piece. When Ray was uncertain how to present the sculpture, Mukoyoshi suggested he look at how Buddhas are displayed on simple wooden blocks.

"At that point it kind of shifted, for me, out of fanatical control," says Ray, "It became Japanese sculpture." He titled the work "Hinoki."

It goes on view today through June 30 at the gallery and may already have found a buyer. The Art Institute of Chicago is interested in acquiring it, Chai Lee, the museum's assistant director of public affairs, wrote in an e-mail. Ray, who was born in Chicago, is pleased that it may find a home there.

The 54-year-old artist began his career in the 1970s with performances in which he positioned his own body as a sculptural object. Later he received acclaim for conceptual, abstract works such as "Ink Box" (1986), an open-topped cube that looks solid but is filled with black ink. In the 1990s he reinvented himself with a series of figurative sculptures styled like mannequins, many in his own likeness. A fiberglass reproduction of a fatal car crash, "Unpainted Sculpture," was the last major work he exhibited in Los Angeles, in 1997.

"He works at his own pace, on his own timeline," says Lisa Phillips, director of the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, who has written about Ray. "He goes against the grain — he's always gone against the grain and done things his own way with his own sense of integrity."

Paul Schimmel, chief curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, who organized a 1998 retrospective of Ray's work, says that "Hinoki" is "the most interesting, complex and challenging work in Charlie's career."

Schimmel thinks that the piece is about the process of making sculpture: "It may be in some ways a portrait — not of Charlie Ray, but a portrait of a sculptor."

Hovering over his work, Ray points out a groove where the carvers faithfully reproduced a scar from his chain saw. At the suggestion that the mark represents his presence in the work, he smiles and says, "I'm represented everywhere."