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Sam Durant: "Build Therefore Your Own World" at Blum & Poe



"Transcendental (Wheatley's Desk, Emerson's Chair)," 2016,
Painted wood, 53 3/4" x 34 1/4" x 34 1/2"

Every spirit builds itself a house, and beyond its house a world... Build therefore your own world (2017) is Sam Durant's architecturally scaled wooden sculpture based on homes built by the first emancipated African Americans living in Concord, Massachusetts. Originally created as a site-specific outdoor work where the form of the house was splayed on the ground and covered by a yellow canopy, in the gallery the large wooden walls are vertical and held up by angled supports. Although they do not form an enclosed structure, they allude to the footprint of the home. Each wall has a text by a contemporary African American poet. Although there is a disconnect between the impermanence of the small vinyl letters that spell out the poems and the carefully and beautifully constructed walls of the deconstructed house, the work has a resonant presence.

The title of Durant's exhibition "Build Therefore Your Own World" comes from an essay by Ralph Waldo Emerson and the myriad works explore aspects and artifacts of American history, specifically the relationship between slavery and the 19th-century Transcendentalist writers. The sparseness of the show is deliberate as it gives pause and inspires the viewer to make connections between the works. It also calls attention to Durant's role in these representations. For example in *Race Traitor* (2016), a steel casting of a Billy club—a weapon carried by African American self-defense groups that often included white collaborators—Durant casts himself in the role of "race traitor," calling for African American equality and clearly stating that Black Lives Matter. These themes are further articulated in *Transcendental (Wheatley's Desk, Emerson's Chair)*, (2016) a jarring coupling of painted wooden facsimiles. The white desk of Phillis Wheatley, the first published African American, is bisected by Emerson's green writing chair, creating a formal as well as conceptual relationship between the two writers. Similarly, in *Erasure, Appearance (Garrison's Walking Stick, Thoreau's Pencil)* (2016), bronze 3-D renderings of the original objects—Thoreau's pencil (that bears the markings of his father's pencil factory) and Jack Garrison's walking stick (gifted by the town of Concord, MA on his 100th birthday)—Durant calls attention to both the struggle to create and to survive.

Through juxtaposition of objects that come from black and white historical figures, Durant has created poignant cross-pollinations suggesting purposeful and collaborative intermingling. Durant is known for politically motivated installations, and although his artworks exist in the realm of aesthetics and are creative representations of loaded political, social and cultural subjects, they are also thoughtful meditations on history made palpable.

—JODY ZELLEN

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