

“This Is Out of Hand”

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Institute of Contemporary Art at Maine College of Art & Design



Installation view of “This Is Out of Hand,” 2023. Photo: Joel Tsui and ICA

David Nash likened stone carvers to “long-distance runners.” He himself prefers—and of course is best known for—working with wood. For artists, chosen materials, and relatedly, methods, are about sensibility. What, then, is the difference in sensibility that leads one to carve—essentially to take a whole, then reduce to reveal a form—versus build: mold, cast, or assemble? Though the techniques can yield similar-looking results, they present directionally opposite impulses in the making.

“This Is Out of Hand” (on view through September 16) spills into three galleries and a hallway with more than 60 works by 33 artists, drawn together through their engagement with the process of carving. As the title implies, carving’s simple hand-tool-material triangulation has long been superseded by waves of material and technical innovations, complicating the boundaries of the term as well as the work it yields. The exhibition reflects this diversity, and with no wall texts, prescribes little, allowing visitors to trace their own paths.

Vik Muniz and Marcelo Coelho’s *Sandcastle #1 (Chateau de Chambord)*, *Sandcastles* (2014) provides an excellent example of new technological frontiers. The two artists decided that they wanted not to build a sandcastle, but to etch an entire castle onto a single grain of sand. This effort at inversion took more than four years but eventually succeeded with the use of electron microscopy—using electrons as a light source—and a focused ion beam to etch the drawing onto the particle. The resulting prints establish surprising connections between sculpture and photography, even if the image, by the end of the exercise, starts to feel somewhat arbitrary.

font ix (2021)—one of a series of sculptures created by artist Catalina Ouyang with found baptismal fonts (this one is marble and French, from the 18th century)—dials up the emotional potential of materials. The piece, here displayed on a table, alloys a dog mandible to the trefoil font, from which a sinewy blend of plaster, epoxy, beeswax, resin, pulp, and horse hair—in moldy bubblegum hues—form a macabre mid-air wisp. Pages from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* are crumpled into the reservoir’s half-inch of stagnant water below, and on the ragged edge where the object was presumably stripped from its original ecclesiastical repose, close inspection reveals a smooth, anatomically accurate ear carved in relief and positioned horizontally, as if listening to the ground. If the molded assemblage is a declaration of decay and disillusionment at odds with the smooth purity of the stone fountain, the ear gestures at some third, more perceptive, orientation.

Materially and conceptually divergent works such as these coexist (in the exhibition, as well as in contemporary practice) with a strain of sculpture-making more overtly faithful to the revival of direct carving techniques in 20th-century Modernist practice. Here, Maine sculptors (often employing Maine stone) including Isabel Kelley, Andreas von Huene, Mark Herrington, Jesse Salibury, and others, carry some of these approaches forward in their pieces, using their tools to draw out the formal beauty of their materials. (The simultaneously cloth- and tentacle-like folds in Kelley’s *Messenger, Oceana* [2023], which sweep its stone plinth, are a great example of this potential.)

Take a seat in Kieran Kinsella’s *Catalpa chair prototype* (2018)—a jolly, rust-colored tripod stool carved from catalpa wood, beautiful as well as comfortable—and watch the film on David Nash’s *Wooden Boulder* in its entirety. In 1978, Nash used a chainsaw to carve a roughly spherical form from a felled 200-year-old oak, near his home in the Ffestiniog Valley in North Wales. Unable to get it back to his studio, he set it in the river. By turns buoyant and stubborn (it once gets lodged under a bridge, forcing Nash to intervene), the boulder has considerable star power for a half-ton chunk of wood, as the camera films moments from its total voyage of around 15 miles down the River Dwyryd over the course of more than 30 years.

For Nash, *Wooden Boulder* “...became a stepping-stone into the drama of physical geography.” One particular resonance of carving, which is especially evident in Nash’s project, is that it parallels geologic processes like erosion, by wind and water, on both vast and near-instant timescales. Nature is our original carver; but carvers, sensible to those forces, make nature sensible.