THADDEUS MOSLEY

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Introduction by Ingrid Schaffner
Poem by Sam Gilliam
Interview by Hans Ulrich Obrist
Essays by Brett Littman, Jessica Bell Brown,
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KARMA

Thaddeus Mosley home. Photograph by Tom Little

Thaddeus Mosley studio. Photograph by Tom Little

Introduction
Ingrid Schaffner

There is something positively antediluvian about Thaddeus Mosley's subterranean studio located in the cavernous, low-ceilinged, basement of a warehouse in an industrial park in Pittsburgh. Densely packed with art, tools, and raw material—including whole trees and other salvaged stuff—the space also seems to characterize the city itself, the rivers and forests of a primordial past, the continuous waves of migration and industry. A little damp, the space is dimly lit, except for an area staked out by sawhorses and fresh sawdust—an arena of action. Working primarily in wood, using hand-tools, joinery, and gravity, Mosley makes abstract sculptures that stand, bend, balance, reach, and extend in space. The air is filled with music; besides making art, listening to jazz is Mosley's other daily practice.

"As a child, I would walk across a field and see my father, who was a coal miner, come up from out of a hole in the ground. And that was enough for me," says Mosley—putting a Western Pennsylvania spin on Gordon Park's iconic photograph *Emerging Man, Harlem, New York* (1952). Mosley earned a degree in journalism, worked as a postal clerk, and is self-taught as a sculptor. In an early unpublished statement, he described his work as having less to do with art-making per se and more about a process of "exploration and discovery" and "what I learn about myself as a black man and an individual." Another thing to know

about Mosley, who turns 94 this year, and is powerfully built and going strong, is that he is not a tall man. He notes that upon meeting the similarly statured Isamu Noguchi—whose art's human scale and hand-crafted modernism inspired Mosley to pick up a chisel and start carving in the first place—that "we immediately saw eye-to-eye."

You can see Mosley at work in his studio in an old television episode of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* or, more recently online, in a video produced by the Carnegie Museum of Art in conjunction with the 2018 Carnegie International. As curator of this most recent iteration of America's oldest survey of contemporary art from around the world, my first studio visit in Pittsburgh was with the locally renowned sculptor Thaddeus Mosley. Three years and many studio visits later, an installation of twenty sculptures, spanning four decades, occupied a massive platform at the entrance to the International. For both those who were familiar and those who were new to Mosley's work, it made for an arresting start—one that evolved curatorially from a cat's cradle of connections to be made between the local and the international, between indoors and out, between the many generations of contemporary artists in the exhibition, between the institutionalization of art and the curatorial work of art history, between the museum and the city.

I also like to see the presence of Mosley's sculptures in the 2018 International as pointing ahead to future exhibitions, such as this one, and to veins of research that will enrich the present field. What, for instance, is the story of the Watt Lane Art Club that Mosley co-founded in the late 1950s? How does it factor into the larger culture and legacies of the Hill District neighborhood made famous by August Wilson's "Pittsburgh Cycle" of plays and by a legendary music scene? It was at the Crawford Grill that Mosley first heard Ornette Coleman perform in 1960; he said of the experience: "No one demanded more attention than Ornette did." Likewise, I would say: pay attention to Mosley's art, listen to the beat of the chisel that plays across its surfaces, feel the lift of forms reaching to transcend, and see where this looking leads.

Gordon Parks, *Emerging Man, Harlem, New York*, 1952
Courtesy Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Sam Gilliam

Thad Mosley

A friend since forever.

This work refers to Black cemeteries in Georgia,

probably forgotten,

however. Thad and I go way back.

In Pittsburgh he's known for the Sentinels, the guard;

Thad is the Sentinel.

He was a jazz critic, post-man, father, keeper of trees anywhere-

old trees, round trees, big trees, heavy trees.

Thad is not very big,

he is short and close to the ground.

Thad is the forest.

We talk often to summarize and to keep it going.

Thad is always there, fresh, new, FOREVER.

Congratulations.

Thaddeus Mosley home. Photograph by Tom Little

Photograph by Hans Ulrich Obrist

Hans Ulrich Obrist in Conversation with Thaddeus Mosley

HANS ULRICH OBRIST How did art come to you?

THADDEUS MOSLEY I could draw by the time I was in elementary school. Another kid and I would draw with colored chalk on the board for nature study class. We would do various seasons: spring, winter, and so forth. The teacher left our drawings up all year until the chalk deteriorated. But I didn't actually start looking at art until much later, when I attended the University of Pittsburgh.

HUO Have you always lived in Pittsburgh?

TM Yes. I was born in a town about 50 miles north. After the war, I went to the University of Pittsburgh, and I've been in Pittsburgh ever since. The university was directly across the street from the Carnegie Museum. I had a friend who was majoring in social work so that he'd have a job when he got out of school, but he was a pretty good painter. We used to go to the museum, particularly during the Carnegie International, and argue about what we thought was the best or most interesting work. I still have photos from the '60s of different shows there. But what really inspired me was the Scandinavian furniture that had started entering the United States in the early '50s. Kaufmann's department store in Pittsburgh devoted its whole eleventh floor to

Scandinavian design, and it was there that I saw for the first time really decorative furniture with details like small birds and fish made out of wood or brass. It was a way of living with art. They wanted a fortune for those pieces, so instead I thought, 'I can make that.'

HUO You went home and you did it?

TM Yes, I just bought some two by fours and steel rods and went from there. That's what really got me started. I was working constantly, expanding into making heads and small figures. My job as a clerk at the postal service took very little creative energy.

HUO You had a day job at the post office for many years?

TM That was my day job for 40 years. Sometimes I worked at night, so that I could work on my art during the day. I had a house on the Southside with a little building behind it that I used for a studio. That's the reason I bought the house. It had been a whiskey still during the prohibition.

HUO I often visit Brancusi's studio in Paris, and I understand he had a great influence on you.

TM I am into his wood carvings, like *King of Kings* (c. 1938), that revealed his African influence. When museums show Brancusi now, they seldom show any of his wood carvings, it's always the cast bronze, steel, or sometimes stone.

HUO Noguchi is another artist who still inspires many artists. Danh Vō just did a Noguchi related exhibition.

TM I've always seen Noguchi as one of the greatest American sculptors of all time, but I never thought he got nearly enough credit or exposure. I met him a couple of times.

HUO Where did you meet him?

TM I had a friend named Jack Shepherd who did photography for Channel 11 TV in Pittsburgh. Martha Graham had just graduated

Constantin Brancusi, *King of Kings*, c. 1938

Martha Graham Dance Company, *Appalachian Spring,* 1944
Courtesy The Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation Collection

Isamu Noguchi, *Appalachian Spring,* 1944–85

from what used to be called Western Pennsylvania College for Women and was premiering *Appalachian Spring* (1944) in Pittsburgh. My buddy told me, 'Now you can't say anything, but I'm doing the photography over at the theater for Channel 11. They're setting up the sets for the performance tomorrow, and you could help me carry the equipment.' That's the first time I saw Noguchi's work because he did the sets for *Appalachian Spring*. Later, Leon Arkus, who was the director at Carnegie, invited Noguchi for a talk. At the talk, someone said, 'Mr. Noguchi has agreed to shake everyone's hand as they exit.' I told my wife, 'We'll lessen the pain; we'll go out the opposite way.' As we were leaving in the other direction, Leon stopped me and said, 'Mr. Noguchi wants to meet you.' So I went over to him. We were standing in the doorway talking when he said, 'You're a little guy like me. I like what I saw of your work,' and so forth.

HUO Leon Arkus was one of the first people to support your work.

TM He was one of the few people in the world who thought I was doing something different and special. He might have been the only one. The Carnegie used to have a piece of mine on the stairs when Leon was the director.

HUO What piece was that?

TM It's called *Georgia Gray*. We were standing there talking about it, and everyone was looking, so I said, 'We're holding up to the line,' but he said, 'Let them wait.' Noguchi was capable of what I would call stone poetry. He was able to join different pieces together and still make them appear light, not cumbersome or heavy. One of the most important aspects of my own work is how different segments interact. Because of Noguchi, I've aimed for work that levitates or is slightly off balance.

HUO With your sculptures, one can take the pieces apart, and then when they are together there is this feeling of defying gravity. They almost seem to fly. It's fascinating, like a dance.

TM Well I hope so. Part of the reason why I use different pieces is that it makes it easier to transport. I tell people that's my main talent.

When I first had a show at the Carnegie and the mover came to look at the work, he said 'I don't think I can do this job.' I said, 'Why not?' He said, 'Have you ever had any of these moved?' I told him, 'I move them all the time. They all come apart,' and I showed him.

HUO They're like a kit?

TM Yes, almost like Lego. I started making these assemblages because of a material problem. When you buy a log, you then have a large circular pole that you have to deal with. How do you make this different? How do you expand it? You bring in another log that looks different from that log, and you play out the difference.

HUO I grew up in Switzerland, so I encountered Giacometti's work at a very young age. His long, thin figures really got me interested in art. I read in David Lewis's book, *Thaddeus Mosley: African-American Sculptor* (1997), that Giacometti was a big influence on you. Where did you first see his work?

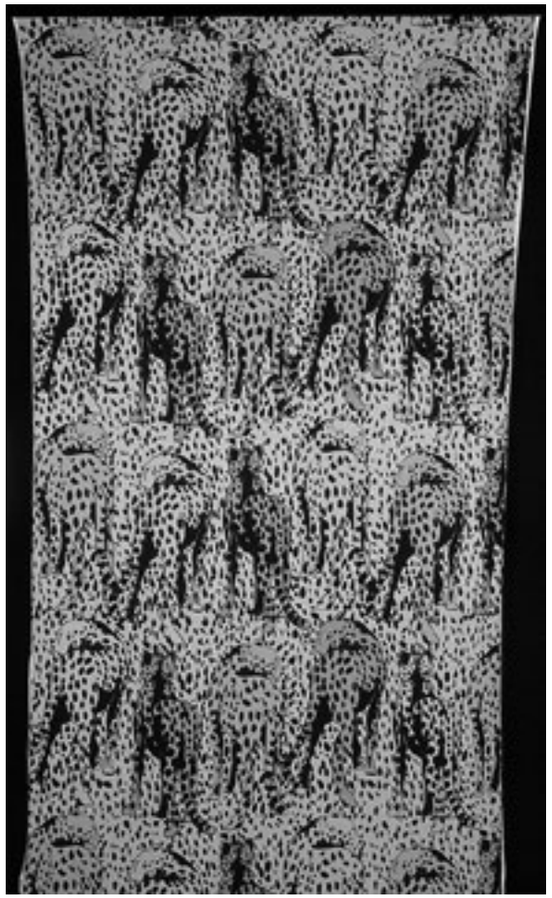
TM The Pittsburgh art patron G. David Thompson was a big collector of Giacometti. He lived out in the suburbs in a very modest neighborhood for a man with that much money. He had a Giacometti by the door and other sculptures in his yard. I used to go out there to get wood and would stop by just to look at it all. One day Thompson came out when I was there with a guy named Bat Smith. He asked, 'Do you guys know what you're looking at?' and we said, 'Yes, that's Giacometti.' He said, 'None of my neighbors know what any of this stuff is, they think I'm crazy.' The Carnegie had a lot of Giacometti as well. I don't know if Dogon sculpture ever influenced him, but when you look at Giacometti you see the thinness of the Dogon iron sculptures. They have a beautiful movement to them.

HUO Giacometti took a lot from African art. When did you first become interested in African art?

TM I was a junior in college taking a course on world culture. Before then I had never really seen any African art. In class, they showed us a picture of an African dance sculpture and then a picture of a Brancusi. Although I had no art background whatsoever I thought both of them

Alberto Giacometti, *L'Homme au doigt*, 1947

Male Figure with Raised Arms, 14th–17th century
Dogon, Tintam Village, Mali
Courtesy The Metropolitan Museum of Art



Jack Larsen, *Leopard*, 1966
Courtesy Minneapolis Institute of Art

were very intriguing. What I like about African art is that every object is unique, nothing is repetitive. The tribal arts in Western and Central Africa have probably the most diverse sculpture in the world.

HUO You told David Lewis that, as an African American artist, you feel an affinity with African art but you also feel distinctly American. It is like having, as you said, a split personality, like reading Stephen Crane while listening to John Coltrane.

TM Your memory fades when you get old, feelings fade, but I still like to read poetry and I did get to know Coltrane.

HUO How did you meet Coltrane?

TM He came to Pittsburgh to play with Miles Davis. I had a friend who sold what they call high fidelity stereo components way back before they became widely available. My friend set up the sound system for the concert, so I met Coltrane at the show. When Coltrane came with his quartet he played two straight weeks at the Grill. We went every night. I don't know if you know Jack Larsen?

HUO Yes, I know Jack Larsen's textile designs from the Black Mountain College.

TM The Weavers Guild had asked him to do a show at the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts. He brought his collection of African tribal weavings and hung them across the ceiling. I forget who we had out with us that night, but someone asked him, 'Trane, did you see these African weavings?' Coltrane asked where, we said, 'Way out.' He said, 'Can you take me?' So we took him out to see Jack Larson's collection.

HUO How did you meet Miles Davis?

TM I was good friends with a trumpet player named Tommy Turrentine, who was buddies with Miles. The two of them were waiting for the streetcar outside of a club downtown when I pulled up with some friends in my gold Volkswagen. I was young and I never wanted to pay for a parking garage—I always took a chance on parking in the alley and getting a ticket. When I pulled out, I saw Miles and Tommy standing

there. Miles said, 'Hey, Molly, stop, stop.' I said, 'We have a team, what do you want?' Miles said, 'Where are you going?' I said, 'I'm going off to hear JJ Johnson at the Crawford Grill.' He told me that they were going there, too. Miles had a voice problem at that time and could hardly talk but he did say after he got in, 'This sure is a little car.' On the way we drove past the Hurricane, where Jimmy Smith was playing. Miles said, 'Stop. Let's see Jimmy Smith.' We all got out. Coltrane and Cannonball were already in the club. That was the heyday of jazz in Pittsburgh.

HUO That's amazing. Dan Graham says that we can only understand an artist if we know what kind of music he or she is listening to. What music do you listen to when you work?

TM The other day was Art Blakey's birthday so I decided to pull out my old albums, the ones with Clifford Brown and Kenny Dorham. Then I pulled out Wynton Marsalis. Then I played some Oscar Peterson because he had a tribute to Ray Brown. Ray Brown's birthday was not long ago. Coltrane, Miles, and Ray Brown were all born the same year, 1926.

HUO When were you born?

TM 1926. Ray Brown, Miles, Coltrane, Joe Harris the drummer—we were all born the same year.

HUO What is your secret of being ever young?

TM I think the secret is doing something, staying active, and being interested in life. People always put so much stock in holidays, but I celebrate every day. I have a birthday every day. I have good wine every night. I do what I really love every day.

HUO That's great to hear. A lot has been said about your discipline. Besides your work at the post office and your studio practice, you also worked for the black newspaper *The Pittsburgh Courier*. Rumor has it that you work up to 12 hours a day in your studio.

TM At times, yes. When I heard in December 2016 that I was going to be in the Carnegie International, I had only a year-and-a-half to carve

the outdoor wood pieces. At that point I was 91-92 and working eight or nine hour days. Now, I only work about six hours a day.

HUO You have said that even when you worked 12 hours a day you actually were just a mere bystander to a larger process. Does chance play a role in your practice?

TM Some people make models for everything. I knew a guy who would make models in clay that he would then carve into stone. I always thought that his models had more interest, more spirit, and more spontaneity than his stone pieces. The only way you can really achieve something is if you're not working so much from a pattern. That's also the essence of good jazz. What's happening now with jazz is that everyone has become so academic, everything is so schooled out. The old jazz was a lot more spontaneous. I've heard artists say that they weren't going to do something until they knew exactly what they were doing. I never know exactly what I'm doing. I think you're always learning, always trying. To me, that is the interesting part of being an artist. When I used to teach down at Touchstone, I tried to get my students to see that and to find differences in ideas and materials.

HUO What is your teaching philosophy?

TM My idea of teaching is probably different than other teachers. There are many who say, 'Okay, everyone in the class is going to make the same thing.' If the class is blacksmithing, everyone would make a hook. If it's sculpture, everyone would make a head. I didn't do that. Instead I'd say, 'Let's look at logs. What do you see in this log? What would you like to make?' My goal was to find out how they thought, and how they thought was determined by what they saw. If they were hesitant at first, I would encourage them through the more mechanical processes. I taught during the summer for almost 30 years, and I have never had a student who didn't make something. My idea is if you think you can, you can.

HUO That's great advice.

TM I've always had this idea that everyone would like to make something, whether it's art or a fish dinner, because making something is an expression of yourself. That's what makes art really interesting for

me—I'm discovering what I can or can't do. That idea of self-discovery and of finding out how far I'm willing to go in a certain direction or how long I'm willing to pursue an idea is very important to me. People ask me all the time, 'What are you working on now?' and I tell them that I'm just trying to make the same thing look a little different.

HUO What is in your studio right now?

TM Since last year I've made four new sculptures, and I'm just starting on another one.

HUO Do they have titles?

TM The only sculpture that has a title out of these last four is the *Salute to Sunbury* (2019), because it was inspired by wooden grave markers in Sunbury, Georgia. The federal government has only recently taken an interest in these unmarked slave graveyards and has tried to preserve them. I got the same feeling from looking at those Sunbury grave markers as I did from Brancusi's *Bird in Space* (1923). I give titles to my pieces when I do a show because everything has to be identified and insured, but I very seldom name them when they're first made.

HUO How do you find your materials?

TM Pennsylvania, particularly Western Pennsylvania, is known for wood. It has four or five big sawmills. I've bought wood from the same guy for maybe fifteen years. Sometimes I go down and look at the wood and ask him, 'Do you have a large curvy log about eight feet long?' and he'll say, 'Yes, I have lots of them, I'll bring you one.' Sometimes I'll just see what he has and he'll cut the wood to size. I tell him, 'I need some six inch bases cut about 30 inches in diameter,' and so forth, and he does it. He told me last year, 'When you first started buying wood from me for sculpture there were maybe ten or twelve other people who did the same. Now you're the only one.' I said, 'Those other people got smart.'

HUO You tend to use walnut, cherry, or sycamore.

TM When I first started carving, I would go to one of the city parks and cut down trees. I could get any kind of wood in the parks, but I had

Thaddeus Mosley, *Salute to Sunbury*, 2019

Constantin Brancusi, *Bird in Space*, 1923
Courtesy The Metropolitan Museum of Art

a hard time getting any definition from them. Over time I discovered the natural beauty of hardwoods. Walnut and cherry both have few knots and don't check as much as something like oak. So rather than hiding the structure of the wood and the interesting forms it takes, I try to highlight it.

HUO Do you ever carve in stone?

TM I was making stone sculptures at one point, but I don't carve stone very much anymore. I had a landscaping job putting in flagstone walkways and that's how I learned how to cut stone. The key to carving stone is that you have to be able to read it and see where the fissures are, because if you hit the wrong angle you can take off a whole half of a block. When I was younger and stronger I could lift it and move it around, but now I can't. And working with stone involves so much dust, you always have to wear a mask and really good eye protection. You never know where the chips are going to fly.

HUO Do you make drawings or models before you begin?

TM Sometimes. With my models or drawings, I hold them in my mind until I can almost see the piece. But with the piece I'm working on now, I just took the bark off the wood and started the first rough cut, because I can see what I want it to be. Naturally, it doesn't always turn out the way I want. Some things get top heavy or pieces won't fit together like I thought. Sometimes I just say, 'Well that's complete, I'll go on to the next one and try to make it a little more interesting.'

HUO You have made work that responds to African-American history.

TM I have done tributes to the courage of people like Harriet Tubman. I was once down in Charleston on this plantation, and I was thinking about the plantation slaves escaping out of there at night, walking through those swamps with water moccasins and whatnot and with very little clothing or anything else. They walked I don't know how many thousand miles to get out of slavery. Someone having the courage to do this 19 or 20 times and walking all the way up to Canada with these slaves? That blows my mind. I think my tributes are not so much about being political but about the activity of these very special people.

HUO In the '60s you were involved in the civil rights movement.

TM Yes, I was a member of the NAACP and I picketed buildings downtown with Bob Penney, Bud Brown, Nay Smith, John Simon, all these people. We would do this on our lunch hour and after work. Because I worked for the post office, I was a federal employee. One day our bosses called a group of us in and said, 'We have all your names and pictures. If you get arrested, you'll be dismissed.' I had to quit some of those open protests because I was scared of losing my job. My family was depending on me.

HUO It was in the '60s that you had a big museum show at the Carnegie and subsequently turned down offers from New York galleries.

TM They wanted me to quit my job, to put on two shows at once. I told them no—it sounded like a rat race.That has to do with how I grew up. My children came first before anything else. You'd have to go back to my childhood to understand my reasoning. My father was a coal miner, and it was a tough job, but we lived a pretty good life. My mother didn't want him to stay in the coal mines, so he took us back to New Castle. But shortly after, my mother and father got a divorce. After my father disappeared, our life was very difficult. Back then I made up my mind that if I ever had children, I would take care of them to the best of my ability. I've been lucky—I have married twice and have six children. All of them have become professional people.

HUO I'm sure Pittsburgh is glad it got to keep you. *The Phoenix* (1979) in the Hill district is symbolic of the '68 protests and has often been interpreted as being about the rise of the black community. Everybody knows it in Pittsburgh.

TM At the time, all these different people were trying to revitalize the Hill. *The Phoenix* was David Lewis's project in the sense that he was the head of UDA Architects, which was working on a library in the neighborhood. David wanted to have a sculpture on the site, so he asked me to do something. We got this wild log, and I came up with the idea of a phoenix rising from its ashes out of protest. There was a lot of controversy surrounding my sculpture because some thought it was a foul

Thaddeus Mosley, *The Phoenix*, 1979
Courtesy of the City of Pittsburgh

symbol. A group even wanted to take it down. But it was a women's committee who ultimately defended it successfully.

HUO Do you have any unrealized projects?

TM Not really. I like to make things that people can live with. What may still be unrealized are better ideas and better execution of those pieces. Sometimes I think they're going to turn out better than they do, so I have to accept what I've done. I don't think there is unlimited talent. At least I don't have it. I remember I always told my students that the first art is the art of sacrifice and of learning to live with what you make. That doesn't mean you don't try to get better, but there is joy and sometimes surprise in that acceptance. For me, sculpture is the joy and essence of my life. Of course, it makes a lot of people listen to me because I spend so much time with myself doing what I like. But art is like a complete lifestyle—I can look at work by people I've never known or by my friends and I can listen to great music and I'm surrounded by this every day. This is the way I live.

Thaddeus Mosley home. Photograph by Tom Litt

Thaddeus Mosley studio. Photograph by Brett Littman

Animated Abstractions
Brett Littman

In early January 2020, on an unseasonably warm Saturday morning, I hop on a plane from New York to Pittsburgh to spend the day with the 93-year-old sculptor, Thaddeus Mosley. I haven't met him or seen his work in person before, but have viewed on many colleagues' Instagrams his installation of outdoor wooden sculptures and benches from Ingrid Schaffner's 2019 Carnegie International—which, by all accounts, was one of the best and biggest surprises of the show. I was intrigued, particularly by the images of the installation dusted by Pittsburgh's harsh winter snow: they were abstract, architectonic, tactile, human, and absolutely beautiful. I had also heard that Thad was a big Isamu Noguchi fan, had visited our museum in New York often, and even had met Isamu once at a talk he gave at the Carnegie Museum in 1970—so I was excited to hear about his interest in Noguchi, and to learn more about how that might have affected his own approach to sculpture.

At 11am, I arrive at his studio, which is located in a nondescript building in an industrial park in the Manchester area of Pittsburgh, near the Ohio River. Outside on the door I spot an old weathered poster advertising a studio sale of Thad's wooden stools—the proceeds of which would benefit a local Pittsburgh organization—so I know I am in the right place. Thad had told me to walk downstairs to the basement. There I see several walls covered by posters of art exhibitions, jazz

concerts, and ephemera, hear some jazz music in the distance, and find an open wooden door leading to his workspace.

The anteroom is filled with wooden sculptures—and directly in front of me I can see another room, also filled with wooden and assemblage sculptures. To my left, through a slit in the wall, I see a bunch of logs, haphazardly stacked. I yell hello a couple of times, hear some footsteps in the distance, and am warmly greeted by Thad himself. There is no one else in the studio except for us.

Thad is a compact, athletic man. He is very alert, very active, and to be honest, he doesn't look a day over 60 years old. We make some small talk, and then I ask him if I could walk around the studio on my own. He says that would be fine, as he wants to continue carving a large log he has set up on a bench. He promptly goes back to work.

I start by looking at a small log, which is surrounded by wood chips and shavings near where he is carving. On top of the log are a rubber mallet and hand chisels. I then walk over to a nearby work table on which lay a whole phalanx of chisels, many with handles wrapped in well-worn duct tape. I love seeing artists' tools; and these, with their patina and subtle abrasions, give me a sense of the physical nature of Thad's work.

I wander over to see the forest of sculptures and assemblages that populate the main studio room. There are a variety of shapes and forms, some low to the ground, some so tall that they almost touch the ceiling. Many of the works have wooden Japanese butterfly joints holding together fissures and cracks: this means that the wood is still "alive" and reacting to its environment, rather than air-dried and "stabilized" in advance.

As I move around each work, I begin to see how Thad constructs each piece, sometimes precariously balancing one carved log fragment on top of another in a poetic dance that defies physics and gravity. These kinds of works particularly resonate for me: every day I see Noguchi's sculptures in our garden and galleries, and I am always in awe of his effortless ability to use gravity to express the dichotomies between mass/volume and weight/weightlessness.

Photographs by Brett Littman

Photographs by Brett Littman

I also start to think about Enku, the 17th century Japanese monk, medicinal plant doctor, poet, and philosopher who made simple hand-carved wooden works of the Buddha and Buddhist icons that morphed from semi-realistic to almost totally abstract at the end of his life. Enku famously walked across Japan, and during his peregrinations he left or gave away more than 120,000 sculptures. Thad's sculptures, like Enku's, use the language of basic geometry, simple forms, and rough hand carving to express ideas and emotion. I wondered what it would be like to randomly come across Thad's sculptures in the woods—like a long ago-left Enku in a Japanese grove of trees—and how that would make one feel, finding this work surrounded by its natural ancestors. I look carefully at several works that include found objects like a metal globe fan blower, discarded chairs, hooks, and winches, and begin to make connections in my mind to assemblage artists like John Outterbridge and Mel Edwards. In the back room of the studio, where a small BMX bike is propped against the wall, I find more assemblage works. These are smaller scale and are made with inclusions of metal grating, tubes, and wires. They feel rawer and less formal than the works in the main studio room.

After about an hour, Thad suggests we take a quick drive over to his house to talk more in quiet without the din of his chiseling. Along the way, Thad points out a couple of important local historical landmarks and drives slowly around the Emmanuel Episcopal Church designed by Henry Hobson Richardson so I can fully appreciate the patterning of the brickwork.

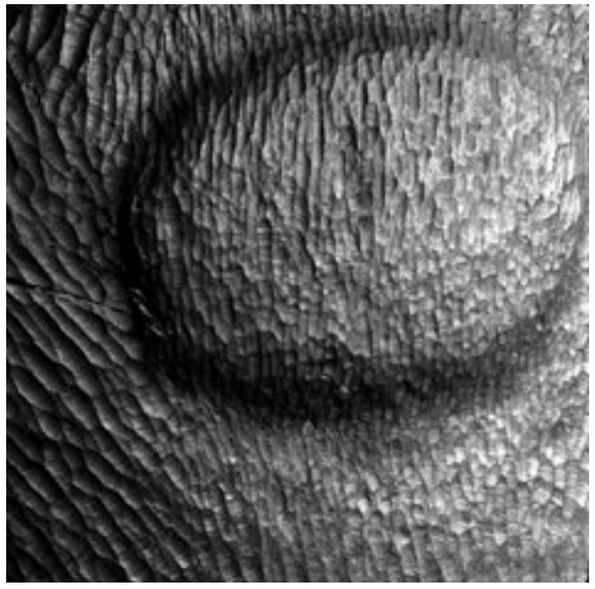
We arrive at his four-story wooden house in the Allegheny West neighborhood of Pittsburgh. Walking into the door, one is immediately confronted by a lifetime of accumulation. African masks and figures, paintings and drawings, black and white photos of jazz musicians and family members, books, records, CDs, found objets d'art and works by other artist friends, like Sam Gilliam, take up every square inch of wall space. I make a joke that Marie Kondo might have a heart attack here and Thad laughs.

We sit down at his handmade wooden dining table and Thad leans over to turn on his stereo. More jazz. We start talking about music, as I am also a jazz freak and have been lucky to see and hear many of the

greats over the years. I tell Thad that I saw in his studio a poster from an Ornette Coleman concert and that on the plane, by coincidence, I was watching Shirley Clarke's experimental documentary about Ornette called *Made in America*. We talk about the great musicians that hailed from Pittsburgh like Art Blakey, Errol Garner, Paul Chambers, and Kenny Clarke. He reminisces about meeting John Coltrane, Miles Davis, and others in the '50s and '60s when they toured through town.

I ask Thad why he has worked with wood for more than 60 years. What is it about this material that is special to him? He asks me if I know that Pittsburgh is surrounded by trees. This is news to me. I guess that my impression of the local ecosystem and geography of Pittsburgh has been formed by photos from the 1920s of smoke-belching steel mills on the Ohio River, which didn't have any trees visible in them at all. He tells me that he started thinking about wood when he saw a carved wooden fish, or bird, by a Scandinavian craftsperson in a department store show in the 1950s and had the simple thought: "I could do that." This leads to a funny sidebar about his second wife, who commented that when they met, she brought her sister to see his clean modernist Bohemian apartment in Pittsburgh, with his Scandinavian wood living room set. He tells me that in the '50s and '60s, large logs were left on the side of the road in Pennsylvania by park rangers when they cleared the forests of dead trees. He would get tipped off when the rangers were planning to lay them out so that he could scavenge them with his pickup for the cost of gas. Since wood was basically free, it gradually became his go-to material. He points out to me that there is no elevator in his studio, and at his age he can no longer carry 250-pound logs down the stairs himself. The maximum for him now is about 125 pounds (which is astounding in and of itself). He waxes about the beauty of the natural forms of trees in the woods; how wood has many visual facets in its bark, tone, and grain patterns; and how, for him, it has become a supple and rewarding material from which he can begin new explorations each time he begins a new piece. He notes that wood is a material that just needs the artist to "bring just a little something" to it.

Thad tells me about his background: going to Pitt, ending up as a postman and a writer. He worked at the United States Postal Service until he retired because, with six children dependent on him, he couldn't rely on income from his art to pay his bills. He was a part-time sports and



Photographs by Brett Littman

music writer for the local paper in the ’50s and ’60s. He also protested and worked within the civil rights movement but is clear to make a distinction for me about why he doesn’t see his art as political or tied to identity or race. I ask him to tell me how he would describe what he does and he responds, “I make animate abstractions.”

I ask Thad what interests him about Noguchi’s work. He tells me he loves the way that Noguchi understood how to build things; the way he could reveal the inner nature of any material he worked with. He deeply respects Noguchi’s knowledge of form. When Thad goes to a museum to look at sculptures, he says, he often lies on the floor to try and see how things are constructed. As one can imagine, this strategy has led to interesting conversations with various gallery attendants and guards over the years. I ask if there is a sculptor that, for him, unlocked the secrets of construction, and he rattles off Brancusi, Rodin, Michelangelo. Before I leave Thad’s house, we enter into a conversation about what gives a sculpture “presence.” He says, “I try to make things that generate their own spirituality so that people might feel something about it. What presence is to make something have a life of its own—the alchemy of turning something natural into something alive.”

Later that night I attend a wonderful dinner party hosted by Thad and his girlfriend Terrie. It is populated by an intergenerational group that includes local artists, curators, architects, collectors, philanthropists, and even one of Thad’s daughters. We drink and eat and talk about politics, shows we have seen, how to make great sushi rice (Terrie, who is Japanese, has cooked the whole meal and served homemade sushi rolls), and vintage cars. I feel very much at home here in Thad’s world: it is an honest, humble, heartfelt community he has built here in Pittsburgh—something that any artist would envy. At 10pm I decide to take a ride back to my hotel with some guests who are leaving. Thad walks us out and bids us goodbye, but he has no intention of ending the party early. While the car pulls away, my last view of Thad is him returning to the house to enjoy the glass of wine he left on the table.

Thaddeus Mosley studio. Photograph by Tom Little

Thaddeus Mosley studio.

Singular Forms of Self-Determination

Jessica Bell Brown

In *Aero Intersectional* (2018) Thaddeus Mosley brings together three distinct formations of walnut carved into a singular presentation resembling a bird perched on a stump. In some places Mosley has treated the surface of the work, which stands at an astounding seven feet high, with oil to accentuate the wood's natural qualities. This draws us up from the bottom register of the work toward a single point of connection at its apex. Mosley takes advantage of the practicality of mortise and tenon joints here, deceptively piecing together smaller units of wood. Producing an almost trompe l'oeil effect, like that of a painter, the artist replicates the form of bark through strategically chiseled marks and carvings. "My chisel marks are not simply surface texture. They are as important to the articulation of sculptural form as mass," he reminds us.[1] Mosley fabricates the appearance of precarity: he places the upper register of the sculpture in such a way that it seemingly hangs in the balance. Themes of ascendancy, resilience, and at the same time, instability emerge from Mosley's spatial intervention here. The power of Mosley's hand and his attentiveness to the most delicate of details is evident. Painter Sam Gilliam celebrated Mosley, his longtime friend, with poetic details about his life and work:

> He was a jazz critic, post-man, father, keeper of trees anywhere-old trees, round trees, big trees, heavy trees.

> Thad is not very big,
> he is short and close to the ground.
> Thad is the forest.[2]

Always maintaining a connection between the groundedness of the tree form, and its expansiveness in the forest, Gilliam keenly observes the metaphorical and allegorical spaces in which Mosley's sculpture operates. What if we were to examine intimations of this aerial activity and locate them as a part of allegorical and ironic devices within black aesthetics? How would a cosmology of triumph over gravity unfold? I have often pondered what black flight could look or sound like. Mosley's gravity-defying forms might offer an answer. Take *Misterioso - T. Sphere Monk* (2008), in which the artist makes a nod of admirtion to jazz musician Thelonius Monk. Mosley directs viewers' eyes to travel along a form that sprouts from the earth, echoing the winding syncopation of key changes quite particular to Monk's cyclical mode of abstraction. Umbra Workshop writer Steve Cannon once detailed a brief history of black abstraction that is critical to understanding Mosley's sensibility as an artist amidst his generation:

> Arriving from art schools and universities, self-taught artists and veterans, this generation of artists chose unconventional ways to inform themselves about the history of art—western and otherwise. Contrary to popular notions of art history, these artists were aware not only of western traditions, but also the infusion of other cultures outside that tradition. African-American artists in particular were aware of the rich history and diversity of African art, and the art of Native Americans, Latin Americans, as well as the art of Asia[3]

Cannon importantly marks a correlation between the coterminous maturation of jazz and black abstract art in the decade after the Civil Rights Act of 1964:

> What's fascinating about a culture which espouses the democratic spirit as personified in the poetry of Walt Whitman, the freedom of jazz and the explosion of rap music, is how the tension and agonies between freedom and equality are made manifest in works of art—in spite of, and not because of racism which haunts the society like a dream gone mad.[4]

Cannon seems to suggest that the pursuit of political and intellectual freedom might be made manifest through aesthetic endeavors, as it was for artists creating in the two decades between the rise of Abstract Expressionism and the civil rights movement. Black artists found respite through cultural and material production despite a social and political context outwardly hostile to people of color, or at the very least, in a country that had not "manifested the promise of democracy to all its citizens."[5] In the land of the free, one could experience freedom as an individual, through the creation of new forms. In Mosley's abstraction, fancies of flight and ascendance evidence a kind of strategy of self-determination. Cannon narrates a history of black abstraction through naming artists such as Ed Clark, Sam Gilliam, Mildred Thompson, Joe Overstreet, Jack Whitten, and Al Loving, among others. Many of those artists were known in the circles of New York. But in Pittsburgh, away from the nucleus of the art world, at the age of 28, Mosley began to toil with wood in his home at the end of his days working a full-time job as a postal transportation worker in the city.[6] As a young artist Mosley did not find himself thrust within the center of dialogues on postwar abstraction, though his forms are absolutely conversant with the cohort of artists Cannon celebrates as pushing the politics of abstraction forward.

"I work mostly in wood, so the kind of art I make is hard to produce in a place like New York, anyway. In western Pennsylvania, there are a lot of saw mills, so there's always a lot of wood. When I first started, I wasn't too particular about the type of wood I used. Basically, I would carve anything. Early on, I got interested in African tribal art and Scandinavian design, just from reading and spending time at the Carnegie Museum," the artist once recalled.[7] In his sculptures, he creolizes a pan-African language of form that stretches from the European modernist avant-garde across the African diaspora. Many writers have observed Mosley's works evoke the elongated stepladders of the Dogon people of Mali, and recall the carved wood grave markers in the slave cemeteries of Sunbury, Liberty County in coastal Georgia, inflected with Kongo cosmograms. The resonance with those forms is undeniable, as much as they resound the organic forms of Noguchi, Brancusi, and the Spanish sculptor Eduardo Chillida. Like Western artists, Mosley reminds us that artisans and makers of the African diaspora were equally preoccupied with metaphysical questions around space,

human existence, and nature. Amiri Baraka's groundbreaking poem and treatise on black creative production, "In the Tradition," contextualizes Mosley's diasporic inclinations near perfectly: "our fingerprints are everywhere / on you america, our fingerprints are everywhere, Césaire told you / that, our family strewn around the world has made more parts of that world / blue and funky, cooler, flashier, hotter, afro-cuban james / brownier / a wide panafrican / world."[8]

NOTES

1 David Lewis, *Thaddeus Mosley: African-American Sculptor* (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Museum of Art, 1997), 82.
2 Sam Gilliam, "Thad Mosley," 2019.
3 Steve Cannon, "Two Generations of African American Abstractionists" in *The Search For Freedom : African American Abstract Painting 1945–1975* (New York: Kenkeleba Gallery, 1991).
4 Ibid, 121.
5 Ibid, 19.
6 Kevin Kirkland, "Pittsburgh Sculptor Thaddeus Mosley: 90 Years in the Woods," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, Sep. 22, 2016.
7 Quoted in Jeff Sewald, "Thaddeus Mosley, Sculptor," *Pittsburgh Quarterly*, Summer 2010.
8 Amiri Baraka, "In the Tradition" (1982) in *S O S: Poems 1961–2013* (New York: Grove Press, 2014).

Thaddeus Mosley home. Photograph by Tom Little

Thaddeus Mosley studio. Photograph by Tom Little

Thad Mosley Sculpture
Ed Roberson

Art comes from all around, not just from where we stand to make or see it. Some art makes us see that there is more to it than we can see, as part of our observation. Sculpture does this. When we look at some art, we can see history; time is one of its properties, like shape or color. Sometimes, we are made to follow time as it works with the object. Thaddeus Mosley creates sculptures out of this dynamic. Wood lives.

He articulates what we see and suggests what we can't see. His forms in wood demonstrate that what we see immediately is only part of what we can see finally. His works are abstractions of actual shapes in time: the limbs of a tree, a chevron, a bird—all at once in varying scale. He makes present a negative space, articulated into the sculpture much as Henry Moore does. He often creates negative forms with weight. Think of the floating holes of air behind a Barbara Hepworth, to which she gives a background sky with her accents of oxidation. Then watch how Mosley uses his skill at chiseling. He is the premier sculptor in natural wood in this country.

To understand the sculptures, we must first recall our understanding of the material. In many ways we see a tree as having no motion. It is never anywhere other than where it is. We not only see it as stable, even unmovable, but we also feel the wood as something we can hold on to, that will hold us. A seat, a chair, a post to lean on.

The fact is, a tree moves, only at speeds that are not perceptible to the time of our eyes. It reaches for food, it gets a drink, moves into the warmth of sunlight too slowly for us to notice—except in the calligraphy of its grain. We are in awe of its movement in a strong wind, for instance: the control of its balance through structure and flexibility into a choreography that is as instructive as any war dance or balletic tale like Stravinsky's "Rite." And should the tree have a limb ripped off, we are, after a while again, awed to see it knot over the absence into a kind of decoration. Besides mass, volume, and scale, these are the lines, colors, and shapes through which Thad Mosley sculpts his visions in three dimensions.

What the wood retains, he extends into fuller discussion: into the life of shapes, of forms, into structural lines of movement and balance. Wood is his material, but he is not mimetically recreating a tree story, not creating a landscape painting with all its art history references. Mosley's work is a discussion between the artist and his material. He is fluent in and deeply respectful of its language, living nature, historical tales, and sense of movement and decoration.

In any art, a line from here to there articulates how long, how far, how wide, how much—space. In Mosley's material, the wood is lined. The grain of the wood is a drawn line of living laid down in the body of the material. The line is rarely straight, neither in grain nor shape. A sequence of shapes draws a line of movement. It can be direction as much as a line of transformation—growth, or diminution.

Mosley's seemingly simple sculpture, *Phoenix II* (2015), is a tour de force of weight in space. It is made up of three parts, one of them sculpted from a different section of wood. Each part is different in character. Taking the basic columnar statement of height, one is a base—abstract, clear and clean as geometry; the next is the column—historical, a record of its source with its intact natural forms; the third is the capital—articulated, carved. It is the intellectual, the effort, the discussion with the material on display.

The image is vertical, yes; but it resembles something perched. There is an off-balance element that points to a controlled construction. We see a dynamism in the third section that acts against or develops out of the

stack-up of weight, which is supported by a heavy, static base outlined by the other two sections. It acts: it appears alive, as if incarnated. The carved and chiseled shape of this section elaborates and stylizes the forms wood takes in its own lifetime. This transformation perches on the material of its origin, in flamboyant defiance of nature. The mythological image of the phoenix simply hints at a more complex discussion of what is spatially occurring in this Mosley work.

Mosley appears very African in his spiritual sense of materials as having a sacred and natural life of their own. In *Masked Extension* (2011), we see the three-part sculpture of a vertical cone with a changed direction—a seemingly pure abstraction, an awkwardly clean geometry with no outward dialectical subject. But notice where the articulation, the carving artistry occurs. It occurs in that transforming middle—become top—section. The geometry of this part of the sculpture is a cross-section of the whole, but it is enlarged, and is placed counter to the originating direction of the cone.

The top, capital, primary section of this sculpture seems to have been the elaborate middle out of which the cone now culminates in a new directional point. This top section is the face of the sculpture—the place of development, of movement. With its big fleshy round head, it is the fulcrum in the distribution of weight throughout the sculpture. The re-directed point then becomes the changed direction of the geometric ideas.

Mosley's curiosity and ability to sniff out ideas, to change direction, to solve problems such as weight in space have sculpted a mask of the art which his mind wears. Its voice—its discussions, narratives, lessons—is spoken in mass, volume, and scale; in tone, shape, form, and surface. This sculptural self-portrait is also a very telling graphic of how amazingly far the African mask tradition has evolved in Mosley's hands.

Comparing the spartan erudition of Masked Extension to the boldly frank sculpture, *Diver* (2014), we take up again the subject of wood. Here, though, we are confronted by the stark wood as planks. They are outstretched as workman-like or buttressing arms, but they are also a set of wings. A serendipitous natural growth, only slightly chisel-enhanced, appears (if seen below the two raised arms) as two breasts

anatomically lifted in place within the composition of the sculpture's structural and surface effects. Mosley's eye for making is well matched by his eye for seeing.

Mosley's art does not depend on a hard re-statement or quotation of art history for the impact of its ideas. His references are mostly natural, vernacular, graphically universal in their suggestiveness. To any eye unclouded by contemporary art-speak, he can be seen as one of the most original thinkers in practice. I, however, still think of Mosley's artistic lineage as African, and regard him as a most original American thinker.

One of the few instances in which he has clearly outlined a reference is the work in walnut, *Repetitive Reference* (2015). Mosley is on record as saying this work is based on Dogon sculpture. The reference is to the *chiwara,* an antelope figure mounted on the back of another antelope. It is a traditional tribal symbol of fertility, not only human, but agricultural animal, universal fertility. It is also the symbol of family, of lineage. The spatial projection of this piece compels the observer to stand back, as well as a presence of one who commands a distance of respect.

What is dismissively called "tribal art" has the distinctive characteristic of creating a vitality, a perceptible exchange-interchange of presence. Much of Mosley's work does this. It requires a good size room not because it is large, but because it projects its presence. A Mosley sculpture calls the environment to action, it makes you feel the room. You are supposed to feel that the sculpture is there, interacting with space. If someone on the street suddenly points up, all eyes in the crowd look to the sky. This sculpture makes you look for something in yourself. It goes beyond the creation of negative space. Added to the line of direction in which the horns of this piece are pointing, there are carved lines, waves of texture written into the pointing section's form. Even though that form is the axial section of the sculpture, it is made clearly not static by those rippling waves.

The four-part piece, *Invictus* (2019), also has a carved wave surface, but here the effect seems to drape or clothe the form. Indeed, the form of this section suggests someone sitting. The hunched shape angles at the position of the hip joint and the bent forward neck.

Most startling in this assembly is the piece that balances on what would be the lap of the large crouched shape. It has the shape of a horn, or a double-head log drum, or a child rolled in a blanket. How or why it is nestled or held the way it is can leave the observer a little unnerved about the meanings of the pattern of hollows, cut-in signs and picked-clean natural deformities that act as empowering fetishes in this sculpture.

There is no explicit reference to a Christian *pieta*, a Madonna, or seated African queen-mother fertility figures that form the legs of traditional royal stools. All of that is there however, in the worshipfully careful butterfly repairs of the leaning, distorted and check-cracked base and pedestal.

Something reverential also lifts out of the sculpture, *Benin Strut* (2018). The royal crown of the *igwe* of the Kingdom of Benin, the country referred to in the title of the work, does have two distinctive horns that extend up into a curl. Again, Mosley makes no attempt to quote the elaborately strict geometry of this form. He gives only a rough, naturalized statement of its shape that appears more like the arms of the revering celebrants than the feathers in the crown of a king.

A cross-section of a tree limb retaining its beaming color ring of heart wood is positioned where there might be a head; there is a spur where the commoner's slack belly might protrude, and the twig of a tit or a little penis. Though not pretty like the intricately articulated traditional crown, but the sway and uplift in the assembly of these menial forms is absolutely joyous. Mosley does not quote recognized forms, he uses them. Whether the viewer knows the historical art repertoire or not, she responds to the shapes, colors and surfaces that Mosley constructs with original, personal, human emotions.

Those works that are identified as figure studies, like *Inverted Dancer* (2007), often bear no resemblance to human musculature. This piece can fairly be described as three tree branches and board positioned to *pose* into *effacée devant* with alarming grace. The homeliness of the elements is hilarious. Except for the top body section, they are all natural, unadorned pieces of tree parts. The assembled figure which the structure presents, however, is striking in its paused grace, one leg extended,

toe pointed to the ground to accent the control of the dancer's—the sculpture's—balance. With even a little understanding of wood growth, it is clear that a tree can grow grace. A graceful sculptor can invoke ballet out of the pieces of a tree, as Mosley's sculpture here attests.

Comparison of this piece with his earlier sculpture, *Region in Suspension* (1996), will point out his graphic sense of implied human movement even without skeletal or muscular structure. In *Dancer*, a fantasist shows you a tree dance, far beyond the Disney-style caricature. In *Region*, it is the same wood. This time, not found rustic pieces, but the sophisticated carved abstraction that suggests the trained grace of high fashion models on the walkway, or a classy stripper's entrance strut onto a stage. Easily recognizable, a movement we love to see moving in three dimensions presented as if in two.

Mosley composes his work not so much in drawings on paper as elaborate markings on the raw wood log itself. They all disappear, having been worked out in the finished sculpture. He sees the writing in the wood. But some of his sculptures translate the writing he sees into signs or language that he means an ordinary viewer to see. These are nearly calligraphic. Like a Rosetta Stone, he places forms side by side sculpturally in a visual language with which we are familiar. His work, *Paired to Natural* (2007), is such a sculpture. You simply have got to read it.

The twisting grains and forms in wood, still active visually, are the retained lines of movement, of growth, of obstacle, of change, and finally, accommodation. This is what the sculptor, Thaddeus Mosley works with: his material in all senses. The artistic material, the accommodation of the artist to his material, the accommodation of his material to his experience with an idea, with his art.

Mosley's sculptures leave an object resulting from the hand-to-hand (hand-to-wood) exchange of ideas, of feeling: that work of accommodation. It is a discussion of an experiment, out of which experience is retained as the sculpture, a work—of art. Not a draft, a selfie "been there" of conceptual art. He presents an actual working out that the viewer can follow again and again, taking her own pictures, notes. The viewer can work through the idea of weight, of movement, in space.

A viewer can pick it up each time she sees the sculpture and at whatever angle she encounters it. Work so densely thought out and envisioned presents near-infinite views of its artistry.

These sculptures can be simply lifted apart like a giant wood toy. This usually requires the combined lift muscle of a couple of strong men, though, it should be noted that Mosley does this several times sculpting each work himself with only the assistance of a small hand winch. Hidden engineering is often the key to the beauty of these sculptures: Mosley's principle mantra of "weight in space." Beyond their studied balance, a buried system of carved hole and peg, of disguised troughs and iron support rods, of deep insight is what holds the sections, not just in place as much as embodying their beauty of motion. Weight in space.

Thaddeus Mosley studio. Photograph by Tom Little

Thaddeus Mosley home. Photograph by Tom Little

Site and Source

Connie H. Choi

The specifics of site have played an important role in the work of Thaddeus Mosley. A lifelong resident of Western Pennsylvania except for the time he spent in the Navy, Mosley has deep ties to the area, its history, and its community. He was involved in civil rights protests in Pittsburgh in the 1960s as a member of the NAACP and continues to be politically vocal with works that pay tribute to African-American leaders and criticize war. Mosley has invested in Pittsburgh's arts communities, frequenting the city's museums, jazz clubs, and theaters and familiarizing himself with its art and cultural producers.[1] A friend, fan, and supporter of many local artists, musicians, writers, and others, Mosley has a strong sense of responsibility to his city. He cofounded the Watt Lane Art Club (later Group One) in the late 1950s with the artists Charles Anderson and Lee Cowan as a way to provide exhibition opportunities for African-American artists in Pittsburgh. Although the group disbanded a few years later, it reflected a commitment to the importance of the arts to the city, a tenet that has been a significant part of Mosley's decades-long career.

The artist's home and studio are filled with items that root his life and practice to a strong sense of place. These items include his personal art collection, with works by artist friends, African sculptures, and objects accumulated over the years; posters and photographs

of artworks and jazz musicians; and hundreds of invitations to local art exhibitions. For the 2009 Mattress Factory exhibition *Thaddeus Mosley: Sculpture (Studio/Home)*, the museum projected a panorama of Mosley's home that visitors could navigate and reconstructed part of his studio in the gallery. For museum co-director Michael Olijnyk, "In a city like Pittsburgh that is steeped with tradition, oral histories become a unique view into the past. Stories told over generations are met with curiosity about places and people forever changed by time. With this exhibition, we're showcasing Thad's sculpture, of course, but also Pittsburgh's rich history told through his incredible voice."[2] That commitment to Pittsburgh, seen in Mosley's mementos and his deep knowledge of the local arts communities, is also found in the materials that make up his sculptures.

In his use of natural materials—mostly wood but occasionally stone and metal—Mosley is "an artist's artist driven obsessively to explore the endless permutations of his chosen medium."[3] Deeply impacted by African sculpture and the work of both Constantin Brancusi (1876–1957) and Isamu Noguchi (1904–1988), the artist considers shape, form, weight, and balance in sculptures that celebrate, rather than hide or disguise, their own materiality. The importance of site can be seen in the ways Mosley collects these materials. His chosen media come from the city he lives in and the places he frequents: logs are often selected from local sawmills and the trees felled and discarded by the city's Forestry Division, stones taken from demolished buildings, and metal retrieved from scrap yards.[4] As the artist generally transports these materials himself, the modularity found in his works—with large sculptures often formed by several pieces of wood—is actually a practicality due to the size and space limitations of his car. The sculptures therefore contain a trace of the artist's process and a reminder of their objectness. Likewise, when using found metal, Mosley has stated, "I never weld these pieces or alter them. By incorporating them into a sculpture, I change their context; then they come alive in a new way."[5] These objects thus all retain the history of their locations and original uses, even as Mosley transforms them into artworks.

Rather than choosing materials with specific themes in mind, Mosley works with them to generate the ideas for his sculptures. He spends time with his materials, slowly getting a feel for their individual

Installation View: *Thaddeus Mosley: Sculpture (Studio/Home)*, 2009
Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh, PA

characteristics, forms, and textures. Mosley has stated about his various media: "Every time I go to my workbench I walk by them and get to know them better."[6] This process of understanding the specificity and individuality of each piece ensures the final work does not overwhelm the uniqueness of its components. There is a historicity and playfulness that often emerges as a result. Mosley uses the natural quirks of his materials—twists and knots in wood, textures in stone—in the end composition, honoring the life of the objects before they came to be a part of his work.

This respect for his medium also nods to Mosley's interest in jazz. Instead of putting ideas to paper, he draws "with hammer and chisel—a sculptural improvisation, a journey"[7] only possible due to Mosley's deep understanding of his materials. The resulting chisel marks play across the surface of the wood in rhythms similar to those one might find in jazz and dance. These marks are another trace of the artist's process, of his literal hand. Here again, site constitutes an important role in Mosley's practice. The chisel marks locate the works in the artist's studio, in the daily, persistent physicality of the manipulation of materials. They call attention to the natural curves and cracks of the wood, formed over the years when the trees were still rooted in their original locations. The play of light and shadow deliberately created by the chisel ripples across the forms and creates an illusion of movement or a sense of levitation that counters the weightiness of the actual materials.

While Mosley's chosen media are all for the most part derived from nature, they were also once a part of the fabric of a city, one with a long history in industry. The sense of urbanism is therefore a strong component of his work. In addition to sourcing wood from around Pittsburgh, Mosley has collected found materials of interest over a number of years. Occasionally, these industrial objects, such as steel cables, railroad ties, and pieces of old machinery, find their way into his work, hinting at Pittsburgh's history as a steel town and present as a hub for the technology and health care industries. Mosley's commitment to his city—from his support of area artists to his use of local materials—imbues his sculptures with a sense of place. Through a broad understanding of the power of materials, Mosley locates himself and his work within the specificity of his city and his community.

NOTES

1 For example, Mosley has seen every Carnegie International since the 1950s and many jazz musicians, including Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, and Miles Davis, perform live in Pittsburgh.
2 Quoted in Mary Thomas, "Mattress Factory displays the fluid shapes of sculptor Thaddeus Mosley," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, Apr. 1, 2009. Accessed December 22, 2019.
3 Melissa Kuntz, "Thaddeus Mosley," *Art in America*, November 13, 2009. Accessed December 22, 2019.
4 David Lewis, *Thaddeus Mosley: African-American Sculptor* (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Museum of Art, 1997), 75.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid., 76.
7 Ibid.

Region in Suspension, 1996, walnut, 88 × 72 × 48 inches

Propelled Simulation, 2001, railroad switch, walnut,
red sandstone, 101 × 74 × 18 inches

Inclination, 2003, walnut, 57 × 32 × 62 inches

Perge Modo, 2005, walnut, 96 × 55 × 24 inches

Rhizogenic Rhythms, 2005, walnut, cherry, 84 × 36 × 30 inches

Enclosure, 2006, walnut, 61 × 25 × 20 inches

Paired to Natural, 2007, locust, 79 × 30 × 18 inches

Inverted Dancer, 2007, bass, hickory, 102 × 36 × 18 inches

First Port, 2008, walnut, 79 × 51 × 17 inches

112 *To the Point*, 2008, cherry, locust, walnut, pine, horns, 87 × 33 inches

Misterioso - T. Sphere Monk, 2008, locust, 78 × 28 × 24 inches

Closed Chimes, 2009, walnut, metal balls, 56 × 8 × 14 inches

Floating World, 2010, walnut, 62 × 36 × 14 inches

Vertical Phase, 2010, walnut, 58 × 19 × 19 inches

Masked Extension, 2011, walnut, cherry, 48 × 52 × 26 inches

Curved Suspend, 2013, cherry, walnut, 36 × 27 × 27 inches

Geometric Plateau, 2014, walnut, cherry, 94 × 70 × 24 inches

Mirrored Space, 2014, walnut, 90 × 38 × 19 inches

Model for Motion, 2014, walnut, 75 × 49 × 18 inches

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Diver, 2014, elm, 54 × 36 × 12 inches

Cross Current, 2014, walnut, cherry, 90 × 42 × 19 inches

Phoenix II, 2015, chestnut, walnut, 94 × 17 × 12 inches

Repetitive Reference, 2015, walnut, 88 × 52 × 26 inches

Opposing Parallels - Blues Up and Down for G. Ammons and S. Stitt, 2015,
walnut, 88 × 36 × 28 inches

Directional, 2015, walnut, 71 × 46 × 43 inches

Slanted Message, 2015, walnut, 69 × 19 × 13 inches

Curved Closure, 2016, walnut, 81 × 37 × 39 inches

Circled Planes, 2016, cherry, walnut, 108 × 45 × 22 inches

Intersect, 2016, walnut, 58 × 33 × 49 inches

206 *Bark Patterns*, 2016, walnut, cherry, oak, chestnut, 94 × 32 × 22 inches

Totem for Nabta Playa, 2016, walnut, 92 × 20 × 18 inches

Illusroy Progression, 2016, walnut, ash, 96 × 24 × 18 inches

Components, 2017, walnut, 49 × 24 × 24 inches

Branched Form, 2017, walnut, 96 × 36 × 24 inches

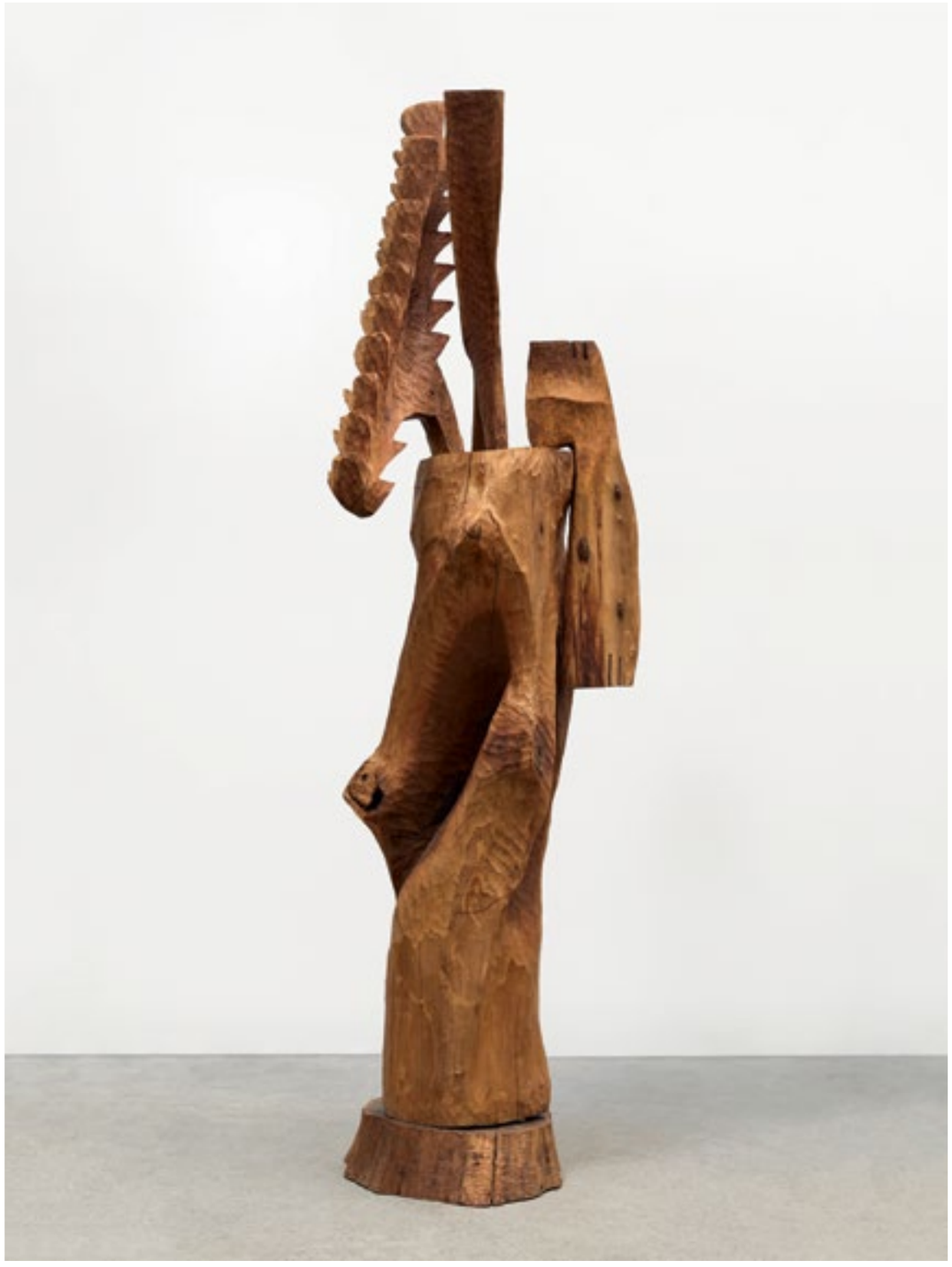
Oval Continuity, 2017, walnut, 35 × 28 × 25 inches

Tilted Space, 2017, walnut, 54 × 32 × 24 inches

Rich Turn, 2017, cherry, 98 × 27 × 13 inches

Polar Course, 2017, walnut, found sycamore, 69 × 20 × 12 inches

Interior Decipher, 2017, walnut, 104 × 32 × 15 inches



Spatial Occupation, 2018, walnut, 114 × 36 × 36 inches

Aero Allegory, 2018, walnut, 90 × 6 × 20 inches

Benin Strut, 2018, walnut, 112 × 24 × 24 inches

Aero Intersectional, 2018, walnut, 84 × 67 × 36 inches

Untitled, 2018, walnut, 22 × 12 × 12 inches

Untitled, 2018, walnut, 22 × 12 × 12 inches

Untitled, 2018, walnut, 22 × 12 × 12 inches

Untitled, 2018, walnut, 22 × 12 × 12 inches

Untitled, 2018, walnut, 22 × 12 × 12 inches

Form Closed, 2019, walnut, 78 × 24 × 18 inches

Invictus, 2019, walnut, 75 x 29 x 24 inches

True to Myth, 2019, walnut, 100 × 36 × xx inches

Off Minor, 2019, walnut, 55 × 22 × 20 inches

Sunbury Salute, 2019, walnut, 93 × 24 × 14 inches

Returner, 2019, walnut, 57 × 30 × 24 inches

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