

BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY

"Scavenging curlicues from scraps of wood"

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Duncan Johnson majored in photography, but he ran out of steam and returned to a childhood pleasure: building stuff out of wood. Which— as his Atlanta debut at NationsBank Plaza reveals—was a good thing for him and us.

What began seven years ago as primitive little boats built of scavenged wood scraps has evolved into evocative, elegant sculptures simple in their general form but intricately made of the same lowly materials. These eccentric spheres, ovoids, cones and vessel shapes encourage a rush of associations, from architecture to galaxies to the African and Indian ritual objects Johnson admires. The found-wood compositions may sound like kin to Louise Nevelson, but their allusive forms and superb craftsmanship share a stronger affinity to Martin Puryear.

Johnson, 34, of Brooklyn, N.Y. may take more than a month to nail and glue and screw together the hundreds of circles and rectangles that comprise a piece such as "Thaw". This jigsaw puzzle of circles and rectangles coalesces into a flattened, wall hung oval harnessed by a spiraling line that starts at the edges and curls into the center, like a shell or a galaxy. This ambiguity of scale infuses the work with a cosmic quality. It's hard to decide which to admire first—that almost spiritual aura or the physical beauty of the surface patterns created by these little wood pieces and their tree rings and grains. In "Thaw" the wood is natural. Most of the other pieces are rubbed with stains and pigments in low-key —mossy green, dark brown, deep-sea blue, honey gold.

Johnson's attention to the surface is also apparent in the multiple incisions and protruding pieces as well as the play of solid and void. "Cascade" exemplifies the linear quality of some of the work. It is a geometrical composition of carved and gouged horizontals and vertical lines and fretwork animated by wood screws that function as lines as well as relief. Johnson manipulates solid and void in the three dimensional sense as well. Some of the pieces are hollow, with large spaces to look straight through. The openings frame views beyond the sculpture and also permit a look at the construction of the pieces, which resemble the insides of ships and show the engineering aspect of their creation. IN others the windows lead only to darkness and mystery. These sculptures are at once primal and contemporary. I found myself thinking simultaneously of the honey comb "Star Wars" battleships and Anasazi cliff dwellings. Engaging to think about, beautiful to look at, and they smell good too. You can't ask for more than that.