

Robert Kinmont

RAEBERVONSTENGLIN



Robert Kinmont, *16 Dirt Roads*, 2014, copper, dirt, 3" x 12' x 5'.

After dropping out of the art world for thirty years, Robert Kinmont has returned to a mostly cordial welcome as a missing member of the generation of John Baldessari, Bruce Nauman, and Ed Ruscha, but he may be even better than this sympathetic "school of" reception suggests. His work tends to attract such adjectives as post-Minimal and Conceptual, but it is warmer, more modest, and more playful than those words imply.

Take the relationship between *Glider*, 1973, a Super 8 film, and a companion piece, *Trying to Understand*, 2015, a digitally restored and shortened version of this original, presented alongside a set of three wooden boxes. The film shows Kinmont releasing toy balsa-wood gliders high in the mountains. The air is too thin for them, and they tumble to the ground rather than fly. Racked up in the three boxes are identical gliders, lined up in a row. The arrangement recalls Étienne-Jules Marey's extraordinary nineteenth-century chronophotographs of landing birds. Marey captured his birds via a photographic gun, which featured a rotating shutter that enabled multiple exposures; in the 1880s, he used the chronophotographs he had made as the basis for anatomical sculptures, plasters and

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bronzes through which the position of his subjects' wings could be examined. Kinmont's gliders were born as sculptures but became briefly animated by being released to fall through the sky. The gliders are boxed in three sets of eight, adding up to that number sacred to film, twenty-four, the number of frames per second—the duration of a heartbeat at rest.

Marey's technique for the analysis of the flight of birds was reversed to become the basis for the Lumière brothers' invention of cinema. Marey's chronophotographs also became some of the most studied artifacts in the race for heavier-than-air-flight, and the forms they revealed were the inspiration for Otto Lilienthal's beautiful wooden gliders, one of which tumbled its maker out of the sky to his death in 1896. Kinmont's work evokes all the elements of Marey's fateful process, but out of order, and with transposed materials. In the pairing of the Super 8 film and the boxes of gliders—two works made more than four decades apart that refer to the same afternoon—there's a light pathos, legible in the mutual forbearance with which a younger Kinmont and his older self coexist.

16 Dirt Roads, 2014, looks like Land art: copper boxes filled with dirt from the California desert. It's a kind of remake of *My Favorite Dirt Roads*, 1969, in which Kinmont photographed the dirt roads that he liked best in a gently humorous homage to Ruscha. The boxes play on the line between priceless and worthless. Their nostalgic contents are presented meticulously, even reverentially, but are just dirt. This dirt is a microcosm—of geological time, personal time: the entire desert in a box.

Forks, 2015, consists of four wooden boxes. Three are filled with forked twigs from willow trees, while the fourth contains copper tubing, soldered carefully into branching shapes resembling the kindling in the neighboring containers. The overt explanation is that Kinmont is presenting the usual dichotomy between the natural and the artificial: demonstrating our impotence when crafting anything like nature. As with the balsa-wood gliders, however, there's a deeper narrative. The dirt roads of Northern California are the outermost limbs of a network of circulation that converges on the great cities of the West Coast. As above, so below: Under the ground, aqueducts pipe clear water thousands of miles through the High Sierra to a town best known for manufacturing dreams. Willows are trees that line waterways; they are as much conduits of water as copper piping is, and the willow fork is the emblem of the water diviner, twisting in the hands to indicate the presence of water below. The city functions here as the desert's imaginary horizon, rather than the other way around, and if there is a subterranean allusion, it is as much to Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* as to the West Coast Conceptualists of the 1960s and '70s.

—Adam Jasper