

Robert Kinmont

ALEXANDER AND BONIN

For those who arrived in the art world during the past three decades, Robert Kinmont was known, if at all, through the photograph of him performing a cliff's-edge handstand reproduced in Lucy Lippard's 1973 book *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*. That picture is part of Kinmont's *8 Natural Handstands*, 1969, which also finds him upended in desert grasslands and in a shallow river. The work is emblematic of the small but potent body of sculptures, photographs, and performances Kinmont created in the late 1960s and early '70s, many of which were also on view in this exhibition, his first solo show in thirty-eight years. He stopped making art in 1975, initially taking care of his children so that his wife could finish a cookbook, and later studying Buddhism and working as a carpenter. In 2005 he picked up where he had left off. Sculptures of hollowed-out logs, one filled with peacock feathers, made in 1973, and one, from 2007, filled with dirt and children's toys, point to continuity. But two other recent log sculptures—filled, respectively, with “fear” and the “sound of sawing”—suggest a change took place after all during his Zen-inflected intermission.

In both a literal and an abstract sense, an intimate connection to the northern California landscape marks Kinmont's practice. Besides the hollowed-out logs, the show included *Weed Container*, 1964, a

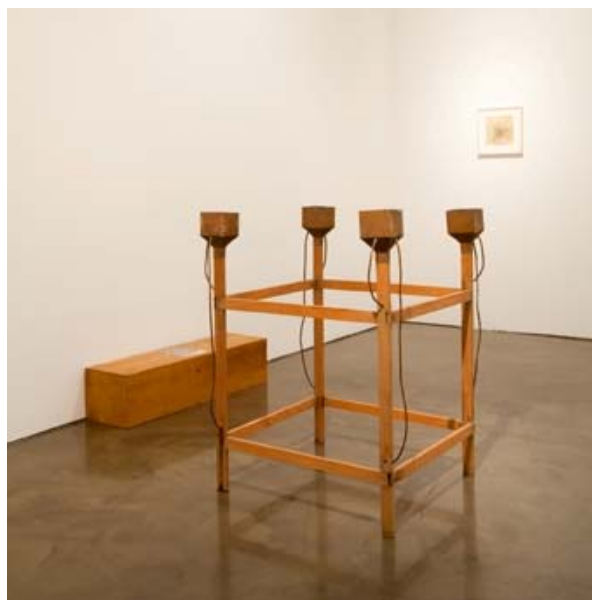
small, glass-fronted box holding a collection of weeds; *Wait, Wait, Wait, Grasp*, 2008, a round cake made of walnut husks that was formed by their decomposition after they were collected in a plastic bucket; *Hidden Meaning*, 2006, a piece of willow that Kinmont whittled so that its two forked forms are joined only at their end points; and *Willow Loop*, 1972/2005, a delicate willow rod that Kinmont has formed into a circle by inserting one end into the other. *My Favorite Dirt Roads*, 1969/2009, a suite of sixteen deadpan black-and-white photographs and a framed text piece bearing the title, contains no organic material but nonetheless

discloses an easy familiarity with a region that, without markers, might be impenetrable to outsiders. (In a recent interview, Kinmont speaks fondly and at length of the memories associated with just one of these roads.)

The amateurish aesthetic, the serial presentation, and especially the subtle traces of absurdist humor in works like *My Favorite Dirt Roads* and *8 Natural Handstands* bring to mind roughly contemporaneous camera-based explorations by Ed Ruscha and Bruce Nauman. Similarly, some of Kinmont's sculptures suggest the work of post-Minimalist or process-oriented artists. *Source Support*, 1970–73, in which four wooden legs each support two crossbeams, would collapse were it not for the joints swelling with water seeping into the wood from copper funnels. In a roundabout way this structural clarity and precariousness evokes Richard Serra's “prop” sculptures while simultaneously prompting a unique kind of mindfulness—one must, after all, keep the work hydrated.

Corollaries for Kinmont's recent output in today's art world may be harder to find. Yet the artist's infusion of late-'60s and early-'70s artistic strategies with a Buddhist concentration on the fullness of immediate experience seems more promising than most of today's aesthetic and political rehashing of that earlier era. And, of course, unlike many of those now trading in nostalgia, Kinmont was actually there.

—Brian Sholis



View of “Robert Kinmont,” 2009.
Foreground: *Source Support*, 1970–73.
Background: *Sage*, 1973.