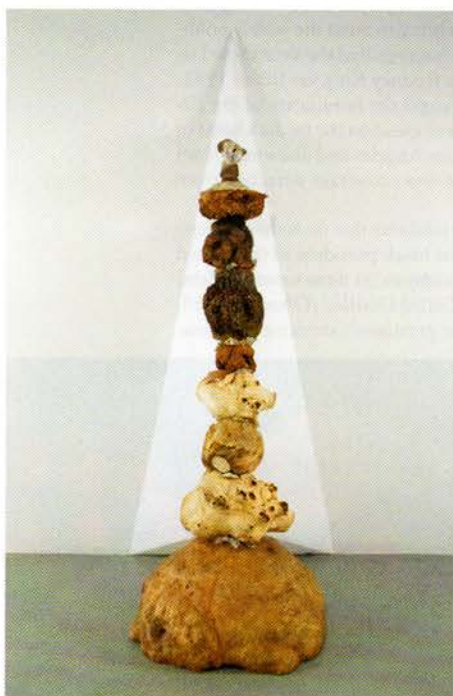


ARTFORUM

SUMMER 2013 I N T E R N A T I O N A L

Larry Bamburg SIMONE SUBAL GALLERY

At the edges of Larry Bamburg's recent show of works made this year were two sculptures composed of the rounded deformations that sometimes appear on tree trunks—burls. Having sawed the burls from their tree host, Bamburg has stacked them, one by one, to form slender and precarious columns that reached nearly to the gallery's ceiling, and then augmented these constructions with mollusk and turtle shells and animal hooves.



Larry Bamburg, *BurlsHoovesandShells on an Acrylic Rake*, 2013, wood burls, animal hooves, turtle shells, mollusk shells, acrylic, 105 x 42 x 40 1/2".

The results are earthy edifices that recall the work of idle campers, or cairns marking a hiking path. Yet the slapdash nature of the works belies the challenges inherent to their construction: Setting out to build the structures as tall as possible using the materials at hand, Bamburg forced himself into an exercise in problem solving, into making a series of pragmatic decisions determining how the lumps of one burl could best fit together with the grooves of another, say, or how a pair of burls might be balanced to provide a foundation solid enough to support a third. The impersonal application of arbitrary rules (build as tall as possible using burls) are thus the principal determiners of the artwork's ultimate shape.

Burls are prized by woodworkers, who value these relatively rare formations for their eccentric and beautiful grain, so it seems surprising, if not perverse, for Bamburg to have used them as little more than building blocks. Yet burls have a cellular structure that makes them

uniquely suited to the artist's intentions. Essentially benign tumors, burls occur when bacteria, a fungus, or a surface injury prevents a tree's bud cells from dividing in ways required for normal growth. Rather than differentiating, the bud cells proliferate, multiplying to create a mass of tissue that is essentially homogeneous throughout. In fitting these objects together, then, Bamburg is in essence duplicating the process of self-replication on a macro scale.

This kind of self-generation also came into play in three pieces that were situated in the center of the gallery. Each features a terrarium or tank housing a sculptural log. Bamburg stripped bark from a section of a log, cast the wood in porcelain, coated it in wax, and then wrapped the porcelain in the leftover bark and seeded these logs with fungal spores before placing them in the tanks. Sitting on tall pedestals that conceal aerators and other materials (one work includes a fish tank that houses a live tilapia), the terraria maintain a high level of humidity, which enables mushrooms to sprout. Part Hans Haacke's *Condensation Cube*, 1963, part Paul Thek's "Technological Reliquaries," 1964–67, the sculptures deploy a familiar post-Minimalist visual language that today remains compelling, drawing us in for a closer look. If the burl works brought to mind John Cage (who was an avid mycologist), specifically his famous dictum that art should "imitate nature in her manner of operation," here the generative possibilities of mimesis took a backseat to the spectacle of living organism as readymade.

The show's two wall works, by contrast, simultaneously imitate nature's operations *and* its outward appearance. For *French Pollard Head* and *Cow Hide: Book-Matched, Framed*, Bamburg ran his iPhone over the surface of burls, taking photos every few inches, and assembled these into a single composite image in which the constituent photos do not seamlessly align. Bamburg then affixed this scattershot image to a backing, selecting material that matched its color and texture. The result is a satisfying compositional whole, one in which glitches and mistranslations and their cascading effects are fully traceable. The work brings full circle the message of the tree burl: One mutation begets another.

—Lloyd Wise