

Kadonaga: A different look at nature

By **DAN R. GODDARD**

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Minimalism meets the Japanese concepts of Zen and "shibui" in the sculpture of Kazuo Kadonaga, who will have two shows opening Friday at the Southwest Craft Center and the Blue Star Art Space. Using natural materials such as wood, paper, bamboo and silk, Kadonaga makes only slight changes to bring out the beauty of nature. But his simple objects of contemplation are deceptively complex. For example, a piece called "Wood No. 57," on display in the SWCC's Emily Edwards Gallery, appears to be a log, stripped of bark, lying on the gallery floor. Closer examination, however, reveals something much more complicated. Kadonaga lives in Ishikawa-ken, Japan, where his family owns a cedar forest and lumber mill. Using a piece of machinery called a veneer slicer, he cut the cedar log into long strips not much thicker than a piece of paper. Then the fragile strips were glued back together in the form of the log, a subtle comment on the fragility of trees.

Natural materials

In an informative catalog from the Art Museum of South Texas in Corpus Christi, Kadonaga notes: "I am not interested in creating beautiful objects. What is of interest to me is discovering and disclosing the natural beauty of natural materials. I had taken trees for granted. When I began to study them in paintings, I decided I should work directly with the material of the trees, to explore different ways of looking at a tree, not to take a tree for granted." His subtle yet radical transformations of natural materials have won him an international reputation with numerous shows in Mexico, Europe and the United States. His work is most often associated with minimal or reductive art, which grew out of the conceptual movement in New York in the 1970s. But it is actually the product of an ancient Japanese concept, shibui, which arose during the Japanese medieval civil wars, a time of great poverty. According to curator Michael Laurence: "(Shibui) could be defined as a taste for astringent." This astringency implies the austere without being severe. Zen Buddhism and shibui produced the wellknown sand stone garden of

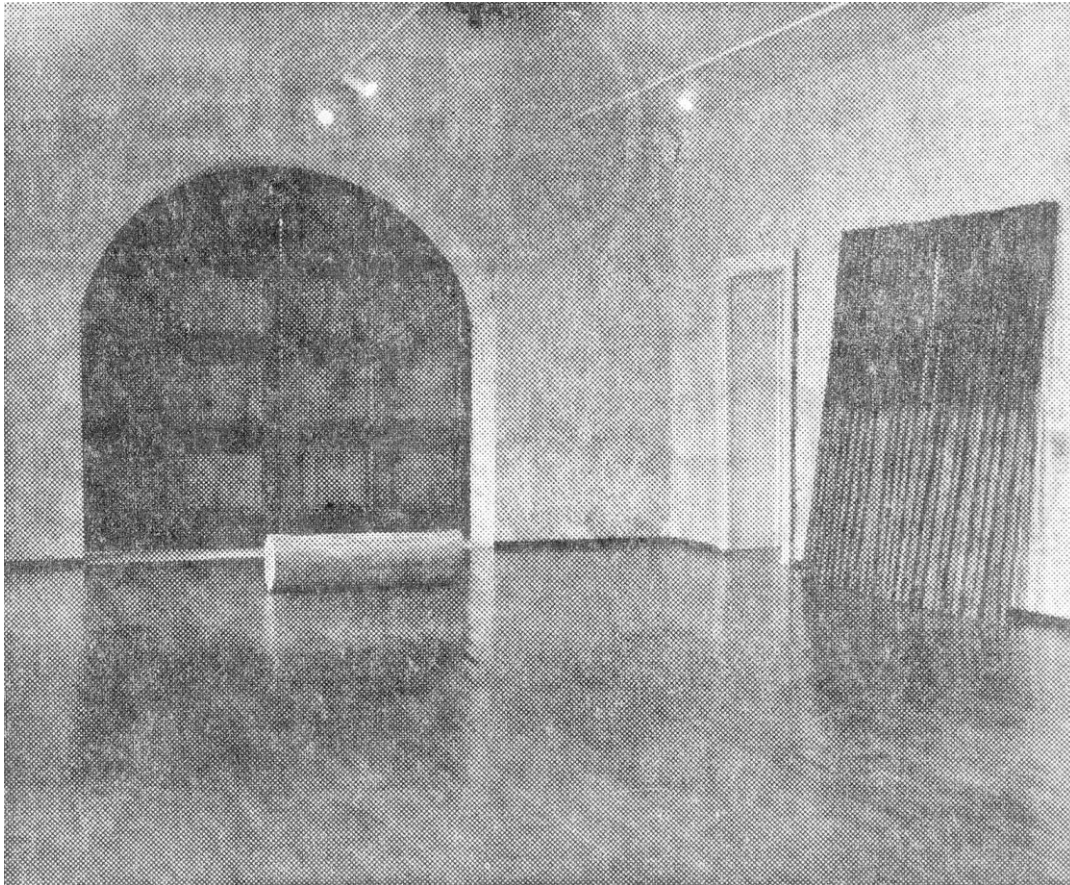
Ryoan-ji, No plays, shakuhachi (music of the bamboo flute) and the poetry form of haiku. In shibui landscape painting, for instance, the representation of a leaf or single branch suggested the entire tree.

"This minimalism, as we might call it today, is exactly what has been said of the work of the imminent artist Isamu Noguchi: '... following the natural inclinations of the material, adding only the minimum of finishing touches to bring out latent shapes and qualities.'"

Kadonaga is often associated with three other artists using natural materials, Mineko Grimmer and Seiji Kunishima of Japan and American-born Ann Takayoshi Page. They share a sense of intimacy with their materials and a sense of connection to the richness found in natural phenomena. Their views are related to two earlier movements in Japan, the *gutai* or "concrete" movement of the 1950s and, later, the *mono-ha* or "object" group. Kadonaga also acknowledges the influence of the American artist Sol LeWitt, who has observed: "Conceptual artists are mystics rather than rationalists." Wood has been Kadonaga's most extensively used material, generally cedar from his family's mountain forests and also oak and pine. Besides his reassembled logs, Kadonaga is known for other works with wood that has been charred, split to reveal the grain or made into handmade paper. The layered sheets of paper form sculptural objects that remind us of the source of a common, throwaway product. He attempts to draw attention to the grain of the wood rather than the mark of the artist. But it is his recent work with sericulture, the production of raw silk and the raising of silkworms, that has attracted the most attention, including a lengthy article in *The New Yorker* last year. He builds complicated frames for the silkworms and then controls the patterns of their cocoons. Sericulture became absorbed into Japanese culture from China as far back as the 4th century. Providing the silkworms with their traditional diet of mulberry leaves, Kadonaga releases as many as 100,000 into his specially constructed, gridlike cedar frames.

Since they tend to travel toward the top, in the 48 hours it takes them to settle in, Kadonaga and his assistants have to frequently turn the frames to trick the worms into filling up all the empty spaces. Their spinning is stopped by steam, just as in silk manufacture, so that the long silk threads of the cocoons will not be broken by emerging moths.

A true miracle of nature, Kadonaga's



Kazuo Kadonaga uses natural materials for his sculpture, such as 'Wood No. 57' (left) and 'Bamboo No 1A.'

Sericulture sculptures freeze time, revealing the complexity and wonder of not only a natural material, but a natural process. In other works with wood and bamboo, Kadonaga's subtle manipulations enhance the patterns and lyricism of natural objects in ways that gently force the viewer into a direct confrontation with the natural world.

Because Kadonaga speaks little English, he will be accompanied by his wife, Yumiko, who translates for him. The openings will be held 6-8 p.m. Friday at the SWCC and 8-10 p.m. at the Blue Star Art Space, which will feature 42 of Kadonaga's works. For more information, call 224-1848.

Montana artist Theodore Waddell has returned to the Read Stremmel Gallery for a show through Nov. 3 of his "trophies," grotesque and often hilarious constructions of skulls, hides and thick globs of oil paint. Waddell has built a national reputation on the strength of his richly painted, expressionistic cows and horses. Combining two careers as a full-time rancher and artist, Waddell is also using animal hides, snakeskins and bird corpses in an unusual series of shocking sculptures.

Besides animal figures, the trophies also come in human shapes, such as the farmer in his gimme cap mounted on the wall like a stuffed buck.

Easy to identify

My favorite, however, is the "Writer Trophy," the head of a man with the chest of an IBM Selectric typewriter. Yes, I know how this guy feels.

Rabbit and coyote hides figure in some of Waddell's recent paintings, while "Bullsnake" is loaded with menacing Western charm. Hay and tumbleweeds are used in unusual ways in "Dryland Trout No. 1" and a "Tumbleweed Ladder."

Besides his wonderfully lush paintings of American farm animals, Waddell has also added more exotic wildlife to his work after a recent trip to Africa. Elephants and zebras are given Waddell's distinctive, emotional renderings full of energy and life. It's easy to understand why Waddell's work has been recently acquired by the Marriott Corp. and the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters.

Located at 100 W. Olmos Drive, the Read Stremmel Gallery is open 9:30 a.m.-6:30 p.m. Mondays-Saturdays. For more information, call 828-7454.