

# HB381

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Jakob Jørgensen:

*Take Root*

March 3 - April 22, 2023

Opening Reception with the artist: March 3, 6 - 8pm

HB381 is pleased to announce *Take Root*, a solo exhibition of monumental steel sculptures by Danish artist and designer Jakob Jørgensen (b. 1977). Jørgensen—well established in his home country as a furniture designer primarily working in wood—began to consider experimenting with industrial steel pipe as a medium for sculpture several years ago. In need of additional space and equipment to realize this vision, he submitted a proposal to the Danish National Workshop in 2017, allowing him access to their extensive metalworking facilities. As his investigations into the material intensified, he and his family relocated from Copenhagen to the remote island of Bornholm in 2020. In contrast to mainland Denmark, Bornholm's landscape is rugged, marked by granite formations and pine forests that meet the beaches. There, unimpeded by the constraints of the city, Jørgensen converted a barn into a studio and built a workshop outfitted with the machinery and tools required to fully explore his new chosen medium. *Take Root* is the result of his endeavors over the course of the past two years. The exhibition will be accompanied by a video installation documenting the artist's process.

Writer and sculptor Rebekah Frank has contributed an essay, *Adaptive Growth*, excerpted below:

[Jørgensen's] current sculptural exploration begins with lengths of low carbon steel pipe, a material that is the backbone of industrial applications. Within manufacturing, urban planning, and agriculture, these pipes are known for their durability against stress, fatigue, and breakage. Taken out of context, they are recognizable as an industrial material, but under the pressure he applies through torch and tooling, they transform into monolithic columns, inviting closer inspection and a rethinking of the medium.

A pipe is, by definition, hollow. Large steel pipes begin as rectangular sheets that are hot rolled; the longitudinal seams are welded using heat and force. This fabrication process embeds an extreme amount of tension into the material. Another term for the resulting form is a cylinder, a basic geometric shape that has two parallel circular bases connected by a curved surface. Cylinders are found throughout the natural as well as the man-made worlds. There is something self-satisfied about the cylinder, a rectangle that pulls its edges together, holding itself closed but still open.

Beyond space, scaling up to manipulate steel consumes a lot of fuel. In creating the work for *Take Root*, Jørgensen needed to devise efficient ways to work with the material. On a fresh, open-air, concrete slab, he experimented with an altered forge and hand-held torches to bring targeted areas of the steel pipe to forging temperature. Steel is stubborn and resilient, yet, at

temperatures between 950°C-1250°C, it becomes malleable. There is a delicate balance between controlling the heat to move the material and the pressure needed to punch through it. Applying force when the metal is too cold causes cracks and fissures, exposing the myth of steel's infallibility.

By compressing the pipe perpendicular to its vertical axis at regular intervals, Jørgensen created the segmentation for *The Bean*. The circularity of the pipe disappears in the process of crimping, resulting in pillow-like rectangle forms. For *The Beat*, he rotated the pipe ninety degrees between applying the perpendicular compression, resulting in a sequential widening and narrowing of the pipe. He applied the same method at a much larger scale for *Freedom Vessel*. The compressed pipe loses its industrial rigidity, echoing the rhythmic grace of Constantin Brancusi's *Endless Column*. Displayed horizontally, the sculpture's curves and planes gently meander, a surprisingly organic effect considering the mathematical rigor of the interventions.

It's important to note that the cylinder appears in nature, perhaps not as crisp as an industrial steel pipe, but still. In geometry and mathematics, the cylinder is an abstraction, a formula representing diameter to height—perfect lines drawn on paper. But in nature, a cylinder is the trunk of a tree, the hollow of reed, or the layered sheaths of a leek. Tubes within the membranes of trees, held in the exterior cylinder of the trunk, provide capillary action, connecting roots to leaves. As Jørgensen moved from the cultivated environment of the city to the more rugged landscape of Bornholm, the pipe started to lose its industrial association and connect more with the towering trees that now graced his vistas.

Even so, process-driven interventions compel Jørgensen more than narrative correlation as he explores the possibilities of pipe as a sculptural form. Holes drilled into a pipe act as guides, as he applies force from inside to create protruding nodules in the curved walls. The custom tools and conical jig press into a pipe's side wall causing it to stretch and deform under the pressure. Once completed, this piece—oriented vertically and appropriately named *The Tree*—maintains the structural integrity of the pipe. The open protrusions both allow the viewer to see through the pipe and project imagined limbs outward from the holes.

In two other standing sculptures, *Branch Out I* and *Branch Out II*, Jørgensen applies pressure from inside the pipe, using a spherical jig without the guiding drill holes, creating circular and diagonal patterns on the surface of the pipe. These divots distort the pipe wall, without collapsing the cylindrical form. The resulting nodes resemble the distortion that occurs on a tree trunk when a branch breaks off. The tree seals the open wound with an increase in wood production around the site; called adaptive growth, this protects the health of the tree and reduces the likelihood of failure. Seen side by side, it is difficult to ignore the connection between the forest and these sculptures.

Jørgensen attempts to synchronize the hand, the tooling, the heat, and the material while each factor exerts its own will. At this scale and temperature, failure is part of the experimental process. The inconsistent application of heat causes cracks and fissures to form, resulting in a surface texture that adds visual interest. Steel pipe exposed to the elements will develop a

uniform warm brownish-orange rust finish. During Jørgensen's process, however, the heat burns away any rust, leaving a matte gray patina as surface scale forms in the cooling process. The heat-affected zones around the forged sections create a contrast to the rusted surface, bringing additional color and a record of the labor exerted on the pipe.

Yet, in one piece—depicted in the video installation *The Tree*—Jørgensen deviates from allowing the marks of heat and labor to be the final treatment. On an overcast, snowy day, the artist and his young son moved *The Tree* to a panoramic viewpoint at their new home in Bornholm that looked out over the sea. Together, they built a bonfire within the sculpture. The blaze flickered inside the walls of the column, visible through the holes punched in the surface, while flames and embers escaped from the opening above their heads. This gesture of hope and commitment as their family and Jørgensen's creative practice take root, altered the patina of the sculpture, creating a more consistent surface treatment that will alter with time.

Jørgensen's dedication to material exploration through minimal intervention is apparent. He's in the act of doing, experimenting, solving problems as they arrive, heading towards a goal of completion. Through his process, he considers each intervening act a question: How much do you need to control? Why expect the meaning to be evident at first glance? With practice, you build new skills; with time, you settle into a new place. Over multiple attempts, you start to see the temperature, you find the rhythm; you get the necessary factors to work in concert. That his work looks like trees is coincidental, or, perhaps, subliminal. Even so, when he steps away and sees the final result, with rest and consideration, he sees the trees.