

Wonder Walls: The Sculpture of Anne Brandhøj

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Design Miami, December 2023. A wall of wonders. Nineteen shelves made in timber, variously sized though none too large, grace the booth of Hostler Burrows. They are in good company. Another wall has its own handsome arrangement of abstract forms by the German ceramist Maren Kloppmann; there are also works by Jasmin Anoschkin, Martin Bodilsen Kaldahl, Stine Bidstrup, and other admirable makers. But it is this wall of woodwork that holds me. Each form is so simple: just two or three shapes, held fast in a jointed structure. Individually and collectively, the shelves are both strange and marvelously satisfying. They are solutions to questions I'd not known to ask.

These modestly magical creations turned out to be the work of Anne Brandhøj, a Danish designer and sculptor who graduated from the Royal Danish Academy in Copenhagen, in 2017. The institution is known for its role in defining modernist furniture – Grete Jalk, Poul Kjærholm, and Hans Wegner are among the luminaries who trained there – and that tradition's focus on clarity and naturalism shines forth clearly in Brandhøj's objects. Her wall of shelves has something of the experimental logic of modernism, too. It is a combinatory lexicon, demonstrating the endless potential inherent in basic components. Yet there is also something very contemporary about Brandhøj's designs: her evident delight in variety for its own sake; a communicative speed that seems right for the age of emojis; an implication of the constant metamorphosis akin to that of the virtual.

This is by no means to diminish the primacy of materiality in her work. Toward the end of her studies in Copenhagen, having explored various conceptual design projects, Brandhøj became interested in working with thick planks and chunks of wood. She swiftly realized that monolithic timber presented significant challenges, though, as they tend to move and crack over time. After seeking out advice from a lumberjack and a woodturner – the lathe being one long-established way of shaping wood when it is still green – she eventually developed a whole material repertoire, incorporating some kiln-dried boards from sawmills, but mostly consisting of salvaged ash, oak, birch, beech, and whatever else she could get her hands on.

Depending on the dimension of these found pieces, and the purpose she plans to put them to, she may season them for weeks, months, or up to two years. Some components are roughed out on the lathe and finished much later. Others are prepared in such a way that they will decisively crack, articulating the mass without compromising its integrity. (In one of her series, *Svindrevner*, she dramatizes the effect by introducing a geometric black wedge, holding the fissure in the wood permanently open.) None of this careful time management is necessarily evident to the observer, but it is nonetheless felt; Brandhøj's work always has something of the feel of an archive, in which various temporal shapes are set out in meaningful order.

Most important of those shapes, of course, are the long lives of the trees themselves. She is their final steward, a role that has an aspect of the sacred. A sense of deep responsibility pervades her work, which she views as "the opposite of commercial furniture." Almost always at a scale she can manage by herself, each piece has received a huge amount of personal attention; sanding alone may take many hours of handwork. There is something of a paradox here: to realize the full beauty of the material, it must be transformed. Woodworkers, perhaps more than any other artisans, are familiar with that dynamic. But it is a theme that goes far beyond craft. The *Wunderkammer* or cabinet of curiosities – one of the earliest happens to have been assembled in Copenhagen, by the seventeenth-century physician Ole Worm – was a theater of knowledge in which the distinction between natural and artificial tended to blur. Taxidermied animals, polished crystals, carvings in amber and ivory: such artifacts were appreciated both aesthetically and scientifically, for those two ways of understanding the world had not yet been forcefully decoupled.

Brandhøj is a standard bearer for this holistic view of the world, as is suggested by the specimen-like arrangements in which she presents her work. (She dislikes showing her creations on their own, without the company of many others; recently, when invited to exhibit just one large sculpture at the World Expo in Osaka, she carved its four faces differently so to achieve her desired diversity.) Her *Inner Beauty* series is particularly akin to the transmutations that were central to baroque curiosity culture. It is not that difficult to work out how these pieces are made – a set of boards are individually carved, sanded to sensuous roundness, and then stacked – but the effect is beguiling, like a three-dimensional version of bookmatched marquetry. It is as if a cavern or portal has been summoned within the wooden monolith.

Ultimately, the wonder of Brandhøj's work is that its archaic, enchanted quality sits so comfortably alongside tropes taken from modernism, not only in the world of furniture, but also abstract sculpture of the idiom introduced by Constantin Brancusi. Many features of his work – the strong silhouettes, the encounter between materials, the teasing proximity to representation – can be found in hers as well, though she is apt to cast her Brancusian totems in a relatively humble role, letting them serve as vessels or as supports for seating.

A collaboration with the ceramic artist Signe Fensholt builds on this formal vocabulary, with Brandhøj's wood elements integrated seamlessly into vertical compositions with Fensholt's, some of which feature pitted volcanic glazes, while others are glossy and smooth. Both are working rotationally (the pairing is essentially a conversation between lathe and potter's wheel), and in natural materials, but the opposition nonetheless highlights the contrasting qualities of the palette: the coolness of glazed clay, the relative warmth of timber.

I didn't learn until well after I had encountered Brandhøj's shelves that she sometimes presents them under the group title *On Balance*. It is the perfect name, pointing not only to the marvelous resolution of her compositions – many of which are indeed like seesaws fixed permanently in equilibrium – but also the equal weighting that she gives to all the other attributes of her work. Stillness and dynamism; solidity and play; the material and the spiritual: Brandhøj holds all of these impulses in tension, poised like an acrobat on a bar, ready to spring. That's what wondering really means, after all. You never quite know what will happen next.