

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

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AD Chats With Alma Allen About His First Solo Gallery Show

by Rob Haskell

A Master Manipulator of stone, wood, and metal, Alma Allen sculpts natural materials into works of bewitching beauty

Even if Alma Allen had a calculating bone in his body—and there’s no reason to believe he does—he could hardly have plotted a less conventional ascent to art stardom. Though Allen has made his living as a sculptor for the past 20 years, creating beguiling abstract forms out of hunks of metal, wood, and stone, he is only now having his first solo gallery show, at Blum & Poe in Los Angeles through February 28.

“I’ve always existed in a private world, not in public exhibitions,” reflects the self-taught artist, who is based at a remote home studio in Joshua Tree, California. “It’s like I’ve been a secret.” He’s been an open one, at least, among art-world bigwigs such as Dominique Lévy, Tobias Meyer, and Lisa Eisner, all of whom have acquired pieces by Allen. Last year he finally stepped into the spotlight when his work appeared in the Whitney Biennial.

Growing up in a deeply Mormon Utah family, Allen was forbidden to watch television or read secular books. His imagination, however, was sparked by Ute Indian petroglyphs, which lined the local caves where he would go to whittle sticks. He left



Artist Alma Allen with a recent stone sculpture outside his home studio in Joshua Tree, California. He is represented by Blum & Poe, whose Los Angeles gallery is hosting his first solo show, running through February 28.

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home when he was a teenager, eventually landing in New York City. But it wasn't until a severe bicycle accident rendered him unable to work and nearly destitute that he began to sell his stone and wood carvings on the streets. The pieces grabbed the attention of jeweler Ted Muehling—who helped place some of them with collectors—as well as design impresario Murray Moss.

“My artwork is the same now as when I was ten,” says Allen, whose mysterious, painstakingly executed sculptures draw comparisons to those of Constantin Brancusi and Isamu Noguchi. He still hikes into the wilderness to find volcanic rocks, gnarled burls, and the like. But whereas he was once limited by what he could lug back to his studio, he now has a crane that can lift giant boulders and—in a concession to his carpal tunnel syndrome—a robot to do the carving. This has permitted him to produce on a monumental scale, though certain materials come with restrictions. “Somebody once asked, ‘Will you make me something in a big ruby?’ I said, ‘Sure, if you buy the ruby.’”

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