

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

Art in America
February 6, 2017

Alma Allen

CHICAGO,
at Shane Campbell
by [Lauren DeLand](#)



Alma Allen: *Not Yet Titled*, 2016, bronze and claro walnut, 9 by 26 by 10 inches; at Shane Campbell.

Alma Allen's semiabstract sculptures provoke an irresistible urge to identify familiar formal corollaries. The self-taught, Joshua Tree–based artist encouraged this impulse by giving the name *Not Yet Titled* to all the new works in his exhibition at Shane Campbell's South Loop location. As a gallery employee told me, Allen reasoned that this would allow viewers to select their own titles for the works. And so they did, as I learned by eavesdropping on conversations of visitors and staff: here, perhaps, is *Hershey's Kisses* (a pair of intertwined bronzes), and there is *Stomach* (a pink organlike form made of Persian travertine).

Most sculptures sat alone or in small groups on the floor of the cavernous gallery space. With a few exceptions, they were shorter than waist-height. Certain pieces were paired as if in dialogue. A bronze orb bedecked with two flat disks seemed to stare goggle-eyed at a fat sea creature–type figure hewn from black Italian marble. Smoky silver and bronze veins ripple through the latter, amplifying the form's bulges.

Such lumpy opulence appears throughout Allen's work, with irregular forms consistently rendered in richly beautiful materials. A craggy hunk of deep brown claro walnut, which seems to gaze into the distance through sockets whorled into it, is burnished to a high sheen. A piece suggesting a human head with a comical yet inscrutable face and exaggerated bumps on top—as if the head belonged to a cartoon character that had been whacked with a hammer—is rendered in bronze.

Allen's bronzes begin as miniatures made with modeling clay. These are scanned so that a 3D printer can produce enlarged versions in polylactic acid, which are cast in bronze and polished to create the final objects. When working with wood and marble, Allen and his assistants chisel the materials with a computerized mechanical arm that

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was previously used in manufacturing cars in Spain. (In an odd and pleasing bit of symmetry, the building housing the gallery formerly served as an ambulance company's garage.)

The sculptures betray no trace of the digitized industrial processes that gave them form. Indeed, Allen is able to coax a biomorphic squishiness from even the most rigid materials. A tall piece in Persian travertine that loomed in the gallery's far right corner like a mushroom cloud offers a compelling example. The surface of the coral-colored stone is ulcerated with dark crevices populated by nubby, crystalline pink papillae. Coral—which confused early modern Europeans who could not decide if it were animal, vegetable, or mineral—provides an apt material parallel for the elegant muddle of Allen's sculptures.

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