

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

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Alma Allen's abstract sculptures channel nature's power at Blum & Poe

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Sculptor Alma Allen's pieces, in wood, marble, stone and bronze, are as much about shape and color as they are about visceral feel. The untitled sculpture above is made from the root system of a Claro walnut tree. (Blum & Poe)

A bulbous piece of wood bears a series of nubby nodules that feel just a little bit sci-fi. A gourd-like shape carved out of black and red marble features a curious nose-like appendage that springs out to greet the viewer. And a piece of Yule marble is transformed into a ring so imperfectly supple it looks as if it were formed by hand.

Anyone who says the craft in art has been lost to conceptual over-thinking and industrial fabrication might want to take a stroll through the exhibition of sculptures by Alma Allen that is currently on view at Blum & Poe in Culver City — the artist's first solo show at a major gallery.

The asteroid-ish chunks of Allen's Claro walnut sculptures play with the wood's unusual grain and shape. A vaguely trapezoidal piece carved out of red travertine employs the stone's striped striations in the form. Everywhere,

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objects rest on pedestals made of raw cedar that has been sanded to the texture of velvet.

If there were ever an exhibition I'd want to grope, this one would be it.



Allen's pieces can take whimsical shapes, such as this bronze. While his work reads as abstraction, he says the shapes often mean something to him -- though he coyly declines to say what those meanings may be. (Blum & Poe)

In other words, the photos don't do Allen's work justice, since it's all about the inherent power of the materials: wood, marble, bronze, travertine and the smoky singed hunk of ponderosa pine that now resides in the garden outdoors.

For the low-key Allen, it's part of a long-running interest in working with natural materials.

"There's fissures, cracks and porosity," he says. "Stone is pretty fragile. It's full of cracks and breaks. That you can't go backwards is fascinating. It forces you down a certain path."

Certainly, it's been an interesting path for the artist, who hasn't exactly followed the art school-to-gallery road map that has become so commonplace these days.

Allen grew up in a devout Mormon family outside of Heber City in Utah and it was that upbringing that led to his interest in nature.

"They wouldn't let me watch TV or read outside books," he recalls. "So all there was to do was walk around."

He would go on hunts for petroglyphs and took to carving small sculptures out of wood. But a poor home environment led him to drop out of school and leave home at the age of 16. He landed first in San Francisco, then

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moved on to places like Portland and New Orleans, where he survived by working in restaurants or construction.

During a stint in Chicago, at the age of 18, he apprenticed for a stone mason and learned how to use the tools of the trade. "I also learned when it was OK to take breaks and how many cigarettes you could smoke during that break," he jokes. "It was a union job."



Alma Allen, a sculptor who is based in Joshua Tree, makes work that highlights the shape, form and feel of natural materials such as stone and wood. (Blum & Poe)

For much of his adult life — Allen is now 44 and based in Joshua Tree — he has survived by making things, including meticulously crafted wood furnishings of all kinds. In fact, it's the furniture for which he is best known. He has made side tables for the Ace Hotel in Palm Springs and stools for the Oliver Peoples store in Malibu. (The Times reported on his furniture back in 2009.)

But even as he's gotten attention for his home designs, art has always been a constant. When he lived in Chicago, he would make his way to the Art Institute of Chicago once a week. He is a fan of encyclopedic institutions such as the Art Institute, as well as the L.A. County Museum of Art.

"I like the fact that they have art from all of human existence," he says, adding with a chuckle: "It's a continuum of what humans have been making that's not useful."

Likewise, making sculpture has also been key — whether it was the whittled, hand-sized pieces he sold from an ironing board on the street in New York, or the larger-scale pieces that are now on view at Blum & Poe.

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"I've made the furniture to support myself, he explains. "But with the furniture there is a client and that can be frustrating. The sculpture is different. The sculpture is really freeing."

As is fitting of his freewheeling career, Allen's artwork came to the attention of Blum & Poe quite organically. Partner Tim Blum spied his pieces in the homes of collectors and friends. He also had seen some of the pottery that Allen had made for Heath Ceramics. After seeing the artist's sculptures at the 2014 Whitney Biennial, Blum followed up with a studio visit.

Gallery director Michael Smoler says the plan had originally been to do a smaller show of pieces in the upstairs gallery.

"But we decided to move the schedule around to accommodate his work," he explains, occupying the larger downstairs space. "This has allowed him to increase his scale. It's really remarkable. He's really moved from artisan to artist."

The pieces are thoughtful and demure — devoted to the high art of craft. (These harken back to work by figures such as wood sculptor J.B. Blunk, 1926-2002, whose work was shown at Blum & Poe back in 2010.)

The pieces are also very much about material. The marble — called Yule marble — hails from the same quarry in Colorado from which the Lincoln Memorial and the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier were made.



Allen plays with the natural form of the wood in his carvings. The walnut he uses comes from salvage he picks up at orchards. (Blum & Poe)

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The travertine Allen finds in the abandoned quarries that litter the desert between Joshua Tree and Las Vegas. And the wood is salvage from orchards — old trees that have been uprooted and are destined for the wood chipper.

He is particularly fond of Claro walnut, a species that is endemic to Northern California. It's bulbous root system doesn't make for good furniture. But its odd shapes and strange patterns offer an interesting material with which to make art.

"The more stress a tree goes through, the more pattern it has," he explains. "I love that. It's like stone. It reveals itself."

Many of Allen's works begin life as a clay model. "I think better with my hands," he explains. But he isn't averse to letting the material dictate the course a work takes.

"It's fluid," he says. "Some of the shapes are from the stone. Some are worked out in clay. Some I work out on the computer. And sometimes," he adds, "I've had a piece completely disappear because I just keep working down."

But that's not what you'll find on the gallery floor. Instead, expect to find a series of objects shaped by the artist and the limitless power of nature.

"Alma Allen" is on view at Blum & Poe through Feb. 28. 2727 S. La Cienega Blvd., Culver City, blumandpoe.com.

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