

THADDEUS  
MOSLEY



Photograph by Brett Littman

## *Animated Abstractions*

### Brett Littman

In early January 2020, on an unseasonably warm Saturday morning, I hop on a plane from New York to Pittsburgh to spend the day with the 93-year-old sculptor, Thaddeus Mosley. I haven't met him or seen his work in person before, but have viewed on many colleagues' Instagrams his installation of outdoor wooden sculptures and benches from Ingrid Schaffner's 2019 Carnegie International—which, by all accounts, was one of the best and biggest surprises of the show. I was intrigued, particularly by the images of the installation dusted by Pittsburgh's harsh winter snow: they were abstract, architectonic, tactile, human, and absolutely beautiful. I had also heard that Thad was a big Isamu Noguchi fan, had visited our museum in New York often, and even had met Isamu once at a talk he gave at the Carnegie Museum in 1970—so I was excited to hear about his interest in Noguchi, and to learn more about how that might have affected his own approach to sculpture.

At 11am, I arrive at his studio, which is located in a nondescript building in an industrial park in the Manchester area of Pittsburgh, near the Ohio River. Outside on the door I spot an old weathered poster advertising a studio sale of Thad's wooden stools—the proceeds of which would benefit a local Pittsburgh organization—so I know I am in the right place. Thad had told me to walk downstairs to the basement. There I see several walls covered by posters of art exhibitions, jazz

concerts, and ephemera, hear some jazz music in the distance, and find an open wooden door leading to his workspace.

The anteroom is filled with wooden sculptures—and directly in front of me I can see another room, also filled with wooden and assemblage sculptures. To my left, through a slit in the wall, I see a bunch of logs, haphazardly stacked. I yell hello a couple of times, hear some footsteps in the distance, and am warmly greeted by Thad himself. There is no one else in the studio except for us.

Thad is a compact, athletic man. He is very alert, very active, and to be honest, he doesn't look a day over 60 years old. We make some small talk, and then I ask him if I could walk around the studio on my own. He says that would be fine, as he wants to continue carving a large log he has set up on a bench. He promptly goes back to work.

I start by looking at a small log, which is surrounded by wood chips and shavings near where he is carving. On top of the log are a rubber mallet and hand chisels. I then walk over to a nearby work table on which lay a whole phalanx of chisels, many with handles wrapped in well-worn duct tape. I love seeing artists' tools; and these, with their patina and subtle abrasions, give me a sense of the physical nature of Thad's work.

I wander over to see the forest of sculptures and assemblages that populate the main studio room. There are a variety of shapes and forms, some low to the ground, some so tall that they almost touch the ceiling. Many of the works have wooden Japanese butterfly joints holding together fissures and cracks: this means that the wood is still "alive" and reacting to its environment, rather than air-dried and "stabilized" in advance.

As I move around each work, I begin to see how Thad constructs each piece, sometimes precariously balancing one carved log fragment on top of another in a poetic dance that defies physics and gravity. These kinds of works particularly resonate for me: every day I see Noguchi's sculptures in our garden and galleries, and I am always in awe of his effortless ability to use gravity to express the dichotomies between mass/volume and weight/weightlessness.



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I also start to think about Enku, the 17<sup>th</sup> century Japanese monk, medicinal plant doctor, poet, and philosopher who made simple hand-carved wooden works of the Buddha and Buddhist icons that morphed from semi-realistic to almost totally abstract at the end of his life. Enku famously walked across Japan, and during his peregrinations he left or gave away more than 120,000 sculptures. Thad's sculptures, like Enku's, use the language of basic geometry, simple forms, and rough hand carving to express ideas and emotion. I wondered what it would be like to randomly come across Thad's sculptures in the woods—like a long ago-left Enku in a Japanese grove of trees—and how that would make one feel, finding this work surrounded by its natural ancestors. I look carefully at several works that include found objects like a metal globe fan blower, discarded chairs, hooks, and winches, and begin to make connections in my mind to assemblage artists like John Outterbridge and Mel Edwards. In the back room of the studio, where a small BMX bike is propped against the wall, I find more assemblage works. These are smaller scale and are made with inclusions of metal grating, tubes, and wires. They feel rawer and less formal than the works in the main studio room.

After about an hour, Thad suggests we take a quick drive over to his house to talk more in quiet without the din of his chiseling. Along the way, Thad points out a couple of important local historical landmarks and drives slowly around the Emmanuel Episcopal Church designed by Henry Hobson Richardson so I can fully appreciate the patterning of the brickwork.

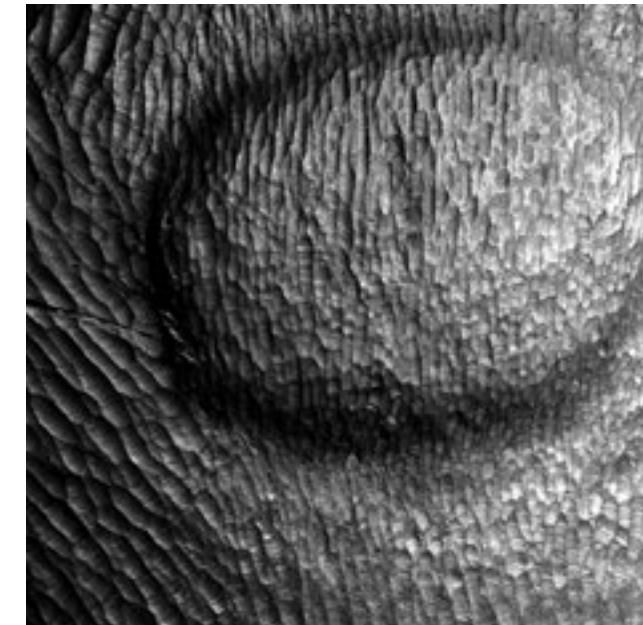
We arrive at his four-story wooden house in the Allegheny West neighborhood of Pittsburgh. Walking into the door, one is immediately confronted by a lifetime of accumulation. African masks and figures, paintings and drawings, black and white photos of jazz musicians and family members, books, records, CDs, found objets d'art and works by other artist friends, like Sam Gilliam, take up every square inch of wall space. I make a joke that Marie Kondo might have a heart attack here and Thad laughs.

We sit down at his handmade wooden dining table and Thad leans over to turn on his stereo. More jazz. We start talking about music, as I am also a jazz freak and have been lucky to see and hear many of the

greats over the years. I tell Thad that I saw in his studio a poster from an Ornette Coleman concert and that on the plane, by coincidence, I was watching Shirley Clarke's experimental documentary about Ornette called *Made in America*. We talk about the great musicians that hailed from Pittsburgh like Art Blakey, Errol Garner, Paul Chambers, and Kenny Clarke. He reminisces about meeting John Coltrane, Miles Davis, and others in the '50s and '60s when they toured through town.

I ask Thad why he has worked with wood for more than 60 years. What is it about this material that is special to him? He asks me if I know that Pittsburgh is surrounded by trees. This is news to me. I guess that my impression of the local ecosystem and geography of Pittsburgh has been formed by photos from the 1920s of smoke-belching steel mills on the Ohio River, which didn't have any trees visible in them at all. He tells me that he started thinking about wood when he saw a carved wooden fish, or bird, by a Scandinavian craftsperson in a department store show in the 1950s and had the simple thought: "I could do that." This leads to a funny sidebar about his second wife, who commented that when they met, she brought her sister to see his clean modernist Bohemian apartment in Pittsburgh, with his Scandinavian wood living room set. He tells me that in the '50s and '60s, large logs were left on the side of the road in Pennsylvania by park rangers when they cleared the forests of dead trees. He would get tipped off when the rangers were planning to lay them out so that he could scavenge them with his pickup for the cost of gas. Since wood was basically free, it gradually became his go-to material. He points out to me that there is no elevator in his studio, and at his age he can no longer carry 250-pound logs down the stairs himself. The maximum for him now is about 125 pounds (which is astounding in and of itself). He waxes about the beauty of the natural forms of trees in the woods; how wood has many visual facets in its bark, tone, and grain patterns; and how, for him, it has become a supple and rewarding material from which he can begin new explorations each time he begins a new piece. He notes that wood is a material that just needs the artist to "bring just a little something" to it.

Thad tells me about his background: going to Pitt, ending up as a postman and a writer. He worked at the United States Postal Service until he retired because, with six children dependent on him, he couldn't rely on income from his art to pay his bills. He was a part-time sports and



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music writer for the local paper in the '50s and '60s. He also protested and worked within the civil rights movement but is clear to make a distinction for me about why he doesn't see his art as political or tied to identity or race. I ask him to tell me how he would describe what he does and he responds, "I make animate abstractions."

I ask Thad what interests him about Noguchi's work. He tells me he loves the way that Noguchi understood how to build things; the way he could reveal the inner nature of any material he worked with. He deeply respects Noguchi's knowledge of form. When Thad goes to a museum to look at sculptures, he says, he often lies on the floor to try and see how things are constructed. As one can imagine, this strategy has led to interesting conversations with various gallery attendants and guards over the years. I ask if there is a sculptor that, for him, unlocked the secrets of construction, and he rattles off Brancusi, Rodin, Michelangelo. Before I leave Thad's house, we enter into a conversation about what gives a sculpture "presence." He says, "I try to make things that generate their own spirituality so that people might feel something about it. What presence is to make something have a life of its own—the alchemy of turning something natural into something alive."

Later that night I attend a wonderful dinner party hosted by Thad and his girlfriend Terrie. It is populated by an intergenerational group that includes local artists, curators, architects, collectors, philanthropists, and even one of Thad's daughters. We drink and eat and talk about politics, shows we have seen, how to make great sushi rice (Terrie, who is Japanese, has cooked the whole meal and served homemade sushi rolls), and vintage cars. I feel very much at home here in Thad's world: it is an honest, humble, heartfelt community he has built here in Pittsburgh—something that any artist would envy. At 10pm I decide to take a ride back to my hotel with some guests who are leaving. Thad walks us out and bids us goodbye, but he has no intention of ending the party early. While the car pulls away, my last view of Thad is him returning to the house to enjoy the glass of wine he left on the table.



Installation view, *Thaddeus Mosley: Sculpture (Studio/Home)*  
Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh, PA