

Yechel Gagnon *Core*

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Number 52, Summer 2000

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/9591ac>

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Publisher(s)

Le Centre de diffusion 3D

ISSN

0821-9222 (print)

1923-2551 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Kulenovic, M. (2000). Yechel Gagnon: *Core*. *Espace Sculpture*, (52), 47–48.

Yechel Gagnon, *Core*, 1999. Installation view at Galerie Clark. Photo: Richard-Max Tremblay.



Core

MAJA KULENOVIC

The need to unravel, expose and turn inside out, as a manifestation of a desire to escape back to the primordial, organic Paradise, has been vastly present in art in the past couple of decades. Life-supporting structure of technology has become an armour which protects us as well as isolates us from our biological essence; an attempt to understand the core of our humanness seems as hopeless as trying to scratch oneself wearing an astronaut's suit.

Yechel Gagnon's *Core* is a story of evolution. Using a simple, natural material — wood — which has undergone a series of transformations caused by mechanical forces induced by the process of production and the artist's own technique, Gagnon reflects on the art process as the missing link in the nature-society chain. The work *Core* is the documentation of a process of interaction between nature, technology and art in which creation and destruction simultaneously affect the matter, transforming its form and function.

Core is an installation of three sculptural pieces made of plywood. Gagnon examines three levels of the nature-

culture relationship within the context of a continual circle of creation and destruction. *Canply, August 1899* is created through the destruction of man-made order and utilitarian aesthetics, in favor of reviving the beauty of the essentially chaotic irregularity of natural forms. *Petrified Substance* is the opposite: the natural loose form of sawdust is solidified into a quasi-natural form reminiscent of a tree-trunk. *Dune* — a heap of loose sawdust — is the missing link in the chain: wood as pure matter, in its most natural form, ready to be used as a base for the new growth.

Although highly conceptual, Gagnon's process is also very organic and physical; it is a search for beauty and the pleasure of creating. Gagnon's interest in plywood is closer to the fascination of a craftsman with his material than to a conceptual artist trying to convey an idea.

Gagnon's medium is the message. Cheap, affordable and available, plywood is a debased contemporary version of wood, which is a traditional and noble material. Developed as one of the first arts, woodworking was also the essential craft that led to the development of design, architecture and technology. Using an industrial product originating from this ancient material to make art is bound to be interpreted as a bold statement about

the nature-culture relationship.

A base utilitarian product used as a construction material, one sheet of plywood is made of material originating from several different trees. The round irregular form of the tree trunks are debarked, sliced into long and thin planks, then glued together in a hot press. Plywood is meant to be used in the support structure, on the inside. It is not meant to be seen, but only to be present as a force, rather than as an object having a certain look, hardness, smell and colour. Its aesthetics is irrelevant: as a utilitarian product, plywood is stripped of any other characteristics but the functional ones. At first glance, a sheet of plywood is as anonymous in appearance as an industrial product can be; it is flat, smooth and matte beige. However, a more careful inspection reveals an organic network of fine light brown lines, whirls and colourings innate to wood used in assembling the piece. Its side is more complex; like a Kit-Kat bar, plywood consists of six or seven layers of different colours, ranging from almost white to deep brown, suggesting different species of wood. This is the material which Gagnon uses to produce highly aesthetic «paintings» and sawdust sculptures.

Canply, August 1899, is one of Gagnon's plywood paintings. Using an

electric router and various hand tools, Gagnon digs into the plywood, revealing the inside layers, creating delicate abstract landscapes, subtly controlling the compositional arrangement of wood textures. The beauty of Gagnon's process is in the fine interplay between the existing pattern within the material, and



her compositional ideas; it is a struggle for harmony between the material, the artist, and the tool. There is an element of unpredictability and excitement in the process, which Gagnon calls "excavations": what patterns, what colours, what traces of the tree's life will she find under the surface? Confronted with the artist's idea and the powerful electric tool, which has a potential to change and transform the material, the sheet of plywood suddenly stops looking like a generic industrial product. It becomes raw material again: it becomes the colour, smell and density of wood. Like Rorschach's ink blots, the wood patterns

shining through the smooth surface suggest unknown spaces, landscapes and aerial views. Gagnon follows these signs, exposing surprising textures and colours with each stroke of her router, struggling for control over them, yet obeying their nature. A completely new aesthetics emerge as the synthesis of the human mind and Nature's unpredictability. The artist simultaneously controls her material and yields to it, and the pleasure resulting from this process is liberating.

The debris that is left over after Gagnon has finished her work is a pile of sawdust. She uses this left-over material, this "garbage" to build her sculptures. Unlike her paintings, Gagnon's sculptures are about *forcing* the material into an artificial form rather than liberating it. *Petrified substance* is a cylindrical sculpture of sawdust, looking rather like an attempt to turn the sawdust into its original form — the form of a tree trunk. Making a thick paste and pouring it into an industrial tube, Gagnon created a heavy, solid cylinder, whose regular and geometrical form is dictated by the shape of the mold. The process is exactly the reverse of the one the artist employs in her paintings. Instead of creating art by destroying the utilitarian character of an industrial product, here Gagnon takes up the natural material in its rawest possible form — and makes it into an art object, thus disabling the material to decompose and provide sustenance to other organic forms. In this way the artist turns a potential source of energy into a useless imitation of a life form. Saturated with glue and preserving chemicals, Gagnon's petrified tree has reached a state of permanence, like an ancient column which has no other use but to witness the past.

The third piece — *Dune* — is the key to Gagnon's story. This black-stained mound of loose sawdust is the only potentially useful piece in the exhibit. Although disguised as the luscious and elegant form of a black mountain, this piece is saturated with raw energy. It has an inherent potential to be destroyed by the laws of nature, and to give life in the process. *Dune* is the base substance, the elemental source of energy which both culture and nature are built upon.

Civilization is based on the principle of imitation. Science is in constant struggle to reveal the secrets of Nature's creations in order to create counter-products, with the use of which we can direct, magnify or neutralize Natural processes in order to secure the survival of individuals and of

the entire species. Paradoxically, the dead matter brought to life through the utterly controlled process of imitation has become the ultimate vision of conquering death. Frankenstein's syndrome is overtaking modern science, which is increasingly preoccupied with creating life out of inanimate matter, thus conquering the life cycle itself: the final step in taking control over the Nature. However, even if this goal is reached, it is not very likely to mean that culture has dominated Nature; as a structure based on imitation of natural principles, culture is bound to be subordinate to them. Does the solution for our survival rest in imitation of the most powerful principles of nature, or in obeying them and subtly directing them to satisfy our needs? Gagnon's art is searching for resolution of our relation to nature, one in which the struggle for supremacy is replaced by an understanding and acceptance of natural processes as guidelines for human acts of creation.¹

Yechel Gagnon, *Core*
Galerie Clark, Montreal
November 18 - December 19, 1999

NOTE :

1. The artist is represented by Virginia MacDonnell Gallery, Toronto.

Le désir de retrouver le Paradis perdu, de dévoiler l'intérieur des choses constitue un thème récurrent en art depuis les dernières décennies. Le support technologique est devenu une barrière qui à la fois nous protège et nous isole de notre nature biologique. Tenter de comprendre l'essence de notre condition humaine semble aussi vain que d'essayer de «griffer» quelqu'un portant un habit d'astronaute ou une armure.

Core, de Yechel Gagnon, présentée à la galerie Clark en novembre et décembre derniers, propose une histoire de l'évolution. Utilisant un matériau simple et naturel, le bois, — lequel a subi plusieurs transformations causées par des forces mécaniques induites par les procédés de production aussi bien que par la propre technique de l'artiste —, Gagnon porte une réflexion sur le processus de l'art comme « chaînon manquant » dans la séquence nature-société. L'installation documente un procédé d'interaction entre la nature, la technologie et l'art dans lequel création et destruction affectent simultanément la matière, modifiant sa forme et sa fonction. L'art de Gagnon cherche à réaliser harmonieusement une relation avec la nature, où la lutte pour la suprématie est remplacée par une compréhension et une acceptation des processus naturels, perçus dès lors comme des balises dans l'acte créateur.

Yechel Gagnon,
Core, 1999. Detail.
Photo: Richard-Max Tremblay.