

## When Ordinary is Extraordinary

Conrad Wilde Gallery celebrates new space with exhilarating new show

By Margaret Regan

French-Canadian artist

Yechel Gagnon makes landscapes that have all the delicacy of Asian art.

Mountains reach for the sky in "Captant nuages et vents" (Capturing Clouds and Winds). The work is so spare it's almost abstract: simple brown lines trace out the ridgeline and amber shadows suggest the mountain's heft.

You could be forgiven for thinking that Gagnon has used ink and washes or diluted watercolors. After all, this gorgeous work at the newly reopened Conrad Wilde Gallery hangs on the wall like a painting. But it is not a watercolor, nor an ink drawing, nor even a woodblock print- all media familiar in Chinese and Japanese art.

What it is is a carving, and it's made of nothing but hollowed-out plywood.

Gagnon uses wood-working tools to cut into plywood. The wood is custom-made of about 20 layers of impossibly thin sheets, colored in dark veneers and tans. She knows which layers have which colors, and she cuts down until she gets to them: to the browns for her lines, to the ambers for shadows, to the tans for neutral space.

If the wood's natural shades become the pigments of her "painting," its textures turn the piece into a sculpture as well. But this sculpture is the opposite of bas-relief. Instead of adding material above the surface, Gagnon turns her art inward. She takes away to create the shapes she wants.

"It's a subtractive project," says gallery proprietor Miles Conrad. "It's topographical. She responds to the wood in the moment."



COURTESY CONRAD WILDE GALLERY - "Captant nuages et vents," by Yechel Gagnon, carved custom-made plywood

"Ivresse de brumes, griseries de nuages" (Intoxication of mists, grays and clouds) another carved plywood work, is even more complex. The "drawing" is more elaborate, the colors are more varied, and the cuts Gagnon has made into the wood are as variegated as the ones you'd see in an artist's woodblock.

These exhilarating works fulfill the mandate of the title of this group show: "Extra Ordinary: A Collection of Extraordinary Works Made from Ordinary Materials." It's a pleasure to see Conrad Wilde back in action with this ravishing show. On hiatus for months after leaving its last space at Sixth and Sixth, it has finally re-opened in a lovely new rehabbed space in Steinfeld Warehouse.

The gallery has long distinguished itself by showing beautiful works, mostly abstract, made out of lowly, unexpected materials. This show, the first full-fledged exhibition in Wilde's new space in the Steinfeld warehouse follows that tradition.

It exhibits 27 works by six artists. And besides Gagnon's transcendent plywood, it has toilet paper and PVC pipe (Jessica Drenk), rough burlap cloth (Victoria May), scorched newspapers (Marvin Shaver), shelving brackets (David Zaslow), and cut and sanded books (Pamela Paulsrud).

Like Gagnon, May creates abstracted art that suggests the earth. In her installation piece "Filtration-8 Panels," consisting of 14-inch squares, brown burlap is gently arranged in loose hillocks and slopes. Tufted cloth above becomes a sky and whitish string cloth below adds dimensions to the contours of her rolling hills.

But this not an ideal landscape like Gagnon's; it's suffered from the indignities industry has imposed upon its earthy soil. It's choked by wire girds and its sooty tones testify to pollution.

Shaver's newspaper Armageddons illustrate the struggles of print journalism. Using a fierce and complicated process, Shaver pours wet plaster through a screen onto real-life newspaper pages, allows the pages to harden into the plaster and then torches the whole thing.

Scorched, broken and blackened, these fragments are hung on the wall, looking like artifacts from a lost civilization.