



GWYNN MURRILL

EARLY WOOD SCULPTURES, 1968-1985



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Now an internationally recognized sculptor celebrated for her works in bronze, marble, and wood, Gwynn Murrill first came to sculpture by chance. At the University of California in Los Angeles, where she earned an M.F.A., her primary focus was painting. But after a class required working three-dimensionally, she realized that both her abilities and enthusiasm lay in that direction.

The pieces featured in *Early Wood Sculptures, 1968-1985*, represent the genesis of Murrill's work, and detail her original inspirations and first ventures into the unconventional process she devised. Attracted primarily to animal subjects, these early cats and coyotes, along with a few human figures, become the conduit for her exploration of surface, line, and form through a continually evolving and expressive relationship with wood.

Murrill's first attempt at sculpture materialized as a large rocking horse, followed soon after by *Lion*, 1969. Because of limited resources, she fabricated both of these works out of 2 x 4 and 4 x 4 inch pieces of wood, scrounged from construction sites around Los Angeles. Apparently fearless, Murrill took on large, complex rocking animals from the beginning. At five feet in both length and height, her *Lion* makes an impressive statement. The roughly joined sections and blocky overall form shows Murrill feeling her way, relying primarily, as she has said, on intuition. Nevertheless, with glue and power tools she assembled and shaped a great quantity of disparate chunks of



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wood into a monumental form that emanates a kind of prehistoric, mythological presence.

After *Lion*, came *Giraffe*, 1970, and *Horse II*, 1971, also attached to rockers. Murrill had visibly progressed, and much of the rawness of *Lion* is absent from these pieces. Again she chose complicated animals to construct, but with improving technique each became a more unified whole. In two subsequent works, *Impala* and *Rhinoceros Head*, both from 1972, she moves away from the complete creature to focus her attention more closely on individual characteristics and surface finish. The *Impala*'s long swooping horns, and both animals' expressive ears, reveal a growing adventurousness and a developing eye. She begins to attend more carefully to the shape and color of her components, arranging them to accentuate the subject. An example of this increasing awareness is the unusual sculpture *Clam I*, 1973, in which the sophisticated placement of individual

curved cuts enhances a deceptively simple form. But with *Cheetah*, also from 1973, Murrill returns to full-size animals and steps into a new domain. This cat is sleek and imposing, each sinuous curve flowing seamlessly into the next. The attentive lift of its head and poised tail makes its watchful stance clear, and—belying its multiple components—transforms it into a graceful, fully realized being. Murrill's inspired use of the wood's undulating grain draws the eye from the cat's shoulder upwards and around its haunches to further reinforce the dynamism of its form. A tour de force, *Cheetah* affirms Murrill's increasing capability and confidence.

Although primarily drawn to the animal kingdom, Murrill also sculpts human figures. In 1977 she broke from her usual composite method to tackle carving from a single piece of wood. *Standing Woman* materializes from a length of ash—its eye-catching unworked section acts as her pedestal. Literally emerging from the confines of a



foot and a half diameter log, the precisely proportioned nude rises six and a half feet. Despite a complex arrangement of crossed arms and legs, she is perfectly balanced in a relaxed, casual stance, with swirling wood grain harmoniously accentuating the curves of her body. With this accomplished sculpture, completed not too many years after she first glued odds and ends of wood together to create her rudimentary rocking horse, Murrill further cements her sculptural status.

Over the next eight years Murrill comes to master her medium, as the koa wood sculptures of the mid-1980s—the superb series of coyotes (*Coyote I, III, IV*, 1983), *Hawk on a Branch*, 1984, and *Bobcat*, 1985—clearly demonstrate. Contour, color, surface, and grain are all harnessed to serve structure, accentuate form, and enhance expression in every instance. Murrill is not interested in, nor does she require, additional descriptive detail to articulate her work. Her creatures

are in fact more powerful for their graceful minimalism. Defined by their beautifully observed and delineated form, each one seems to embody the spirit of its own wildness. These animals feel instinctive: in the next breath *Coyote I* will lift its head to sniff the air; *Coyote IV* will begin digging for the rodent it senses beneath its feet. Their impact is visceral; we recognize their authenticity at once.

Soon after the last of these sculptures were completed, Murrill began to investigate additional options. She ultimately added bronze and marble to her repertoire and significantly broadened her audience. But these early pieces, particularly the koa wood series, still hold their own with the best of her work. In *Early Wood Sculptures*, we have the rare opportunity to see where it all began.

Helaine Glick, Independent Curator



Cover:

Coyote III, 1983, wood, 31 x 38 x 13 inches

Inside Flap:

Cheetah, 1973, wood, 46 x 82 x 10 inches

Inside Panels:

Standing Woman, 1977, single ash log, 78.5 x 16 x 16 inches

Garaffe, 1970, laminated wood, 84 x 48 x 18 inches

Lion, 1969, laminated wood, 60 x 60 x 24 inches

Coyote IV, 1983, wood, 23 x 50 x 11 inches

Back Cover:

Impala, 1972, wood, 36 x 24 x 20 inches

Bakersfield Museum of Art

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