

Michael O'Malley's Rhizomatic World  
By Jenni Sorkin

The root system is endemic to Michael O'Malley's sculptural works. Like the trees from which he takes his wood, his works have multiple arms and they branch. This reaching is directional, and specific, yielding sporadic and truncated growths that spread laterally across the wall. Deleuze and Guattari described the rhizome as a nomadic system of growth—a roots and tubers model that maps, cultivating multiple subjectivities with neither beginning nor end. Theirs is a rejection of the model of the tree (“arborescent” is the word they cultivate in *A Thousand Plateaus*, extolling a rejection of “trees, roots, and radicles. They’ve made us suffer too much.”) They are speaking in metaphor, but clearly have not encountered a stem and twig-like system that offers a flexible structure in wood itself.

Through woodworking, O'Malley is committed to a natural material that is both endangered and disregarded. Wood is often treated as ubiquitous: trees are cultivated, and embraced for their beauty and functionality in domestic gardens, landscapes, but they are also butchered regularly to make hardwood flooring, lumber, and raw building materials. As well, they are cleared to make space for new construction and human sprawl.

*Concrescence* (2016-2017) is a walnut armature that crawls along the wall and splays outward, splintering into a multidirectional object that enters into the viewer's space, while also offering new modalities of display. Encompassing sculpture-within-a-sculpture, the slender arms brace at odd angles, creating pockets and platforms that function as built-in supports for miniature sculptures: biomorphic solid and cratered forms made in a variety of materials, including

aluminum, unfired clay, iron, plaster, and cherry wood. At the leftmost point, iron filings are molded into a rusted funnel, the color of which nearly perfectly matches the armature itself, creating the sensation of hollowness through which a liquid might pass, but the arm jogs right, and uphill where a lattice structure appears. In the attempt to trace a linear path, the viewer is stymied: these disparate compositions instead embody a circuitry that is simultaneously mechanical and biological, conjuring handmade machines and the vascular pathways of the body.

The title itself, *concrecence* is a word that describes convergence and fusion: the growing together of parts originally separate. This idea of biological growth and union, distinct entities that join, has poetic resonance with the brackets and joints that O'Malley creates, where the sculpture itself wraps around a wall like a carapace, ending in an individual seat for one: an olive branch, as it were, to the viewer, who is invited to be seated, indeed, to touch—to rest, sit, and go skin to skin with the flesh of the wood.

O'Malley has committed to only using found wood, often rescuing trimmed trees and junked stumps from the chipper, or worse, from the garbage. As well, he draws on the detritus of older projects. Using scraps, and techniques of lamination and joinery to shape and piece together his sculptures, furniture, and installations, his work embodies an ethics of reclaim and reuse. He describes his process in rather staccato, poetic phrasing:

scraps glued together to make my own lumber  
replete with tells of a previous life –  
Cut pieces with the CNC router  
out of these Frankenstein pieces of lumber  
And then shape.

O'Malley practices a poetics of formation in which he rescues and scavenges, shapes, and rebuilds. This ethos intersects with his socially-engaged projects, which have included group furniture making with students, wheat harvesting, and brick oven building, resulting in MOMO, a mobile oven that yields pizzas and bread for targeted populations throughout the country. But he has utilized baking as a way to critique minimalism's masculinist ambitions. In collaboration with Machine Project, O'Malley staged such an event at the Walker Art Center in 2011. Titled *Andre, You Forgot About the Fire* (2011), O'Malley laid a grid of firebricks in the same simple rectangular configuration Carl Andre made famous in his work *Equivalent VIII* (1966), now in the collection of the Tate Modern. With a group of participants, he then re-configured the work into a functional brick oven, in which he baked pizzas for a raucous crowd of spectators. This community-making was a way of resuscitating the singular modernist sculpture, which, as Michael Fried famously stated, did not need an audience, and converted it into a functional object—an oven—dependent upon, indeed, in need, of an audience to complete its conversion. *Andre, You Forgot About the Fire* is both a title and an admonishment, chastising the senior minimalist for his lack of own core circuitry, the heart.