There is a painstaking quality to the sculpture of Nao Matsunaga. The insistent and pervasive mark-making that characterises the works produces a rich array of subtly textured surfaces, but also provides a way of intentionally slowing down the process of making. Such repetitive action, it seems, allows room for creative space in the artist’s mind. It is a controlled and deliberate phase in the making of the works, one that balances intention and intuition, the conscious and subconscious, as the component parts of sculptures are slowly and methodically brought into being. This meticulous process of fabrication then opens up an arena of play in which the final structures of the works are determined. For while Matsunaga may have a pre-conceived idea of how a sculpture might take shape, there remains the possibility of unexpected outcomes as dialogues emerge between artist and work. As Matsunaga states, “I have one idea and it [the work] has another idea, and I’m just assisting in what it wants to do”.

Matsunaga’s primary materials – wood and clay – deliver particular visual and symbolic qualities that the artist values. Their potential equivalence with the natural world is significant, though this is as much about appearance and suggestion as it is about materiality. Unglazed fired clay offers the characteristics of stone, while carved sticks take on a skeletal quality: stones and bones, as the title of his new show indicates.

Matsunaga’s handling of wood is not, however, simply about imitation, but reflects a keen awareness of its own inherent qualities. The structures most redolent of bone are carved from lengths of 2x2, the stock-in-trade of the timber merchant, an apparently unremarkable material, as close to an industrial product as solid wood can be. Chipping freely at these lengths with a machete, Matsunaga cuts more deeply into the softer areas of wood, while the knots – denser and more resistant to the blade – gradually form protrusions. This re-animation of the wood from its machined state exposes its internal structure, revealing the patterns of growth, reminding us that this was once something living. That the resulting forms are also reminiscent of bones seems both apt and somewhat contradictory, and exemplifies the duality that runs throughout Matsunaga’s work. Every element is subject to multiple readings. The sense of what something is, is always heightened by the possibility that it might also be something else.

A more deliberate form of carving, though one equally responsive to the material, can be witnessed in the deep, narrow channels cut repeatedly into the surface of trimmed branches collected by the artist. It is a treatment that gives these seemingly more natural lengths of wood an apparently heightened degree of realism. Richly textured, the surfaces become bark-like, hyper-natural, and somehow more like branches than the original branches themselves. This is not an exercise in deception or trickery, but a way exploring the nature of things, of extracting their essence.

In the new series of sculptures that comprise Stones and Bones, Matsunaga has – for the time-being at least – abandoned the cut rectangular openings that characterised many of his earlier ceramic forms. The removal of these features – readable as doorways or sometimes mouths – shifts the emphasis to the exterior of the works. They become less like models for imaginary architecture and more like pure sculpture. Rather than imagining ourselves within the forms, we must explore them in our own three-dimensional world. This is compounded by the siting of the sculptures on the gallery floor, where they share the same physical space as the viewer. In this respect, Matsunaga is pursuing something of a formalist sculptural agenda, exploring the relationship of forms in three-dimensional space, and subject to the natural laws of physics. In particular, his use of linear structures – usually of wood – provides a way of demarcating space without necessarily occupying it with solid mass. Yet this formalism is only part of the story, as the sculptures – or sometimes objects within them – resonate with a kind of totemic or fetishistic significance. These are objects of symbolic value, standing for special things or places, or acting as obscure signs. Often, the linear structures...
serve to define the position of these objects in space, isolating them, protecting them, or possibly even threatening them. In Busy Signal, for example, a perimeter of upright branches is suggestive both of a fence and a ring of fire.

Looking around the exhibition, as well as stones and bones, we might see clouds, flames, limbs, masks, land forms and probably many things besides. There is no single way to interpret any of the works. Yet two seem more direct in their narrative. They could be termed cloud studies though such a description might seem inappropriately benign. Titled F-312 and F-315, they refer to explosions at the Fukushima nuclear power station in Japan on 12 and 15 March 2011. Their floating forms possess both beauty and menace, our appreciation of one heightened acutely by the suggestion of the other. Landscape sculptures. Warning signs. Memorials. Forms in space. These works are all of these things. Indeed, it is Matsunaga’s ability to create work that is both one thing and simultaneously another that makes it so compelling, offering as it does an unexpected view of the world that might just change our perceptions of it.

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