

Joe Segal
by Ted Weeks
Art Critic/Contributing Writer
Folio Weekly

The recent metal and wood sculptures by Joe Segal are visually the most economic that he has yet created, appearing at first glance as minimalist. Conceptually, however, these pieces certainly comprise more than what the viewer physically sees.

Segal projects through each of these sculptures an essential quality while also portraying the dualities that stem from his creative process. These include opposing materials of warm, organic wood and cold metal, sculpting versus industrialized fabrication and mentally contemplative versus physically active procedures. He explains:

"I think of my work as a union of rational and emotional behavior. The processes of working the wood are very active - at times violent - while the application of the metal elements is technical and almost mathematical."

One of Segal's sculptures that most exemplifies the essence of his approach to materials is the beam-like work titled "Core." Architecturally massive in character, rough in cutting and sensual in its burnt finish, the wood is juxtaposed with the shining edge of a deeply imbedded aluminum band which is the sculpture's core. Echoing the machined regularity of the metal band, Segal makes eight similar saw cuts along the work's edges that form nine evenly repeated sections, their spatial order contrasting sharply with the irregular surfaces and grain patterns of the wood.



"In contrast to man's need for order and control is nature's apparent irregularities," Segal says. "But the tree is as successful in its design as a functioning man-made structure." Joe Segal



"Sculpture is the intersection of materials and processes. Each, with their own properties, redefines the other. As a result of this interaction, the nature of the materials used may be liberated or obliterated. The exploration of this relationship between intention and repercussion defines my work." Joe Segal



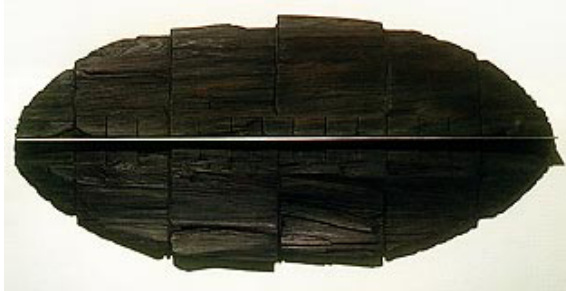
"Since material cannot be put back, as in the case with modeling, I find the results of carving to be very honest," Segal notes. "The sculptures are formed during a specific period of time, and if nothing else, they serve as evidence of that passage." Joe Segal

Geometric elements favored by the artist include the circle and the line. Segal uses the circle to symbolize introspection, completeness, and the acknowledgement of a cycle. In opposition, he employs the line to connote a noncompleting segment, or a passage.

Composed of both aspects, the ellipse particularly intrigues the artist, since it can evolve as either a line or circle in its early state. After frequent explorations



Joe Segal, , Total, 12 x 81 inches, 1996, Wood and Aluminum



Joe Segal, Time I, 23 x 52 inches, 1996, Wood and Aluminum



Joe Segal, Pitch, 9 x 60 inches, 1996, Wood and Aluminum



Joe Segal, Faith, 10 x 61 inches, 1996, Wood and Aluminum



Joe Segal, Divide, 10 x 88 inches, 1996, Wood and Aluminum

of the ellipse, when it no longer conveyed what the artist wanted, he "...started working with the circle and line in context of a wooden beam. I'm intrigued by beams because they are geometric shapes extracted from an organic form. Most people don't look at lumber that way."¹

Concerning essence, Segal observes that "materials have very specific qualities, as do the sculptural methods used to bring a work into realization." Initially the beam is cut from the tree for utilitarian purposes. As the artist works on it, he in one sense returns it back to its tree origin while obviously transforming the former beam into a metaphoric state that acknowledges the inherent nature of the material and the processes of manipulation employed.

Among his most minimal examples, "Time I" again juxtaposes certain tension-creating oppositions. The shiny edge of aluminum splits horizontally across the middle of an irregularly edged and surfaced elliptical wall piece.

Paradoxically, it separates yet magnetically pulls together the blackened rough-sided halves of the ellipse. Visually travelling along this metallic linear passage, the viewer senses the composition's six vertical sections like time zones subdivided by fourteen evenly spaced beats formed by two-inch cuts above and below the aluminum time-line.

The charred black surfaces of "Time I" reveal Japanese qualities reminiscent of raku, and imbue this piece, like others, with a nocturnal character, a sense of deep space. This work reflects Segal's admiration for the aspect of Japanese art that reduces a concept to its essence. This Japanese aesthetic is reflected in the artist's reference to joinery, where wooden sections are connected without extraneous non-wood fasteners. The addition of non-wood elements transports the ancient Eastern allusion to our post-industrial experience.

To complete the aesthetic experience, the viewer needs to contemplate the central dynamic of additive versus subtractive sculpting that underlies these works. Additive elements are the polished aluminum or steel tension cables whose machined fabrication heightens the contrasting warmth and grained richness of his subtractive carvings produced primarily by chainsaw and blunt wedge-shape chisel.

Among the most recent pieces, "Return" originally was a cypress beam. More than any other example in this series, "Return" reveals branch stubs that result from breaking away unwanted wood along the beam's grain. The appearance of knots as branches epitomizes the transformation represented by the sculpture. Although the seven segments of "Return" seem as though they might be separate pieces, they all are part of the continuous beam. At twelve-inch intervals, six steel cables encircle the column at each of its cuts. These cable elements appear to pull together the split exteriors of each section while supplying metallic contrasts to the charred wood. Their repeated twelve-inch placements produce a sense of order that juxtaposes the natural material's nonconformities.

Joe Segal's recent sculptures haunt the viewer through their psychological tension of conflicts, interaction and resolution. One reacts with projected physical and aesthetic alarm at the intrusiveness of the metal separators which paradoxically act at times as bridges or magnetic joiners. The artist through basic yet powerful geometric shapes mysteriously compels visual and tactile responses. Segal's work forces the viewer to confront the merging of materials, procedural dichotomies and their individual essences.

1 "An Interview with Joe Segal," by Paul Karabinis, Director, University of North Florida, Jacksonville, Florida, from the 1996 catalog.



Joe Segal, Equator 1, 25 x 20 inches
1996, Wood and Aluminum



Joe Segal, Tide, 14 x 114 inches
1996, Wood and Aluminum



Joe Segal, Return, 12 x 84 inches
1996, Wood and Stainless Steel