

Mary Kim's exhibition at Paramount Gallery, Ferndale, Michigan, USA, June, 2007

By Frederick A. Horowitz

Using multiples of a standard unit of obliquely-cut wood, Mary Kim creates fascinating modular constructions that draw the eye back again and again to resolve their deceptively simple structures. Most of these constructions stand on the floor, and as you walk around them, the configurations that you perceive give way to others. Some of the views you get are quite orderly, even balanced, but a slight shift to one side or another can destabilize everything, and you experience the tensions and pleasures of disorder, like a shift to a minor key in music. Another shift, and you're back to order again, but your view has changed, and you're looking at a new configuration. All of this prompts you to ponder: There's an underlying logic in this structure, but what is it? Where is it? And how has it been subverted? It's this stealthy subversion of simplicity and order that make these ostensibly simple pieces so complex, so human, and so intriguing.

The addition of color to the modules contributes to the formal games. The several different colors used for each piece are typically distributed throughout the piece, which gives an effect of unity while, at the same time, allowing quieter interior configurations to occur as like colors echo one another. With their matte surfaces, the colors are lush and lovely, and their mild contrasts allow them to remain subordinate to the bolder play of the solid forms. Still, the rhythms and patterns created by the interplay of the colors offer secondary, two-dimensional readings that are there when you look for them. These other readings—near-random patterns of colors darting into an out of shadows—present a second, and very rich, theater of experience in every piece.

These constructions call to mind the "less is more" principle famously espoused at the Bauhaus and articulated in the courses taught by Josef Albers, who urged his students to "do little and get much." Each construction explores what can be done with a single, simple module. As Kim's experiments with a table saw in the carpentry shop revealed, it's a module that can carry you far. Each construction has many faces; in a sense, you get many constructions in one. And Kim doesn't rework her ideas: Each piece represents a new problem that Kim has set for herself. Most pieces are based on four sections; one piece is based on three. Most pieces rise straight up from the floor; one piece slants. Most pieces are floor pieces; one hangs on the wall and two lean against the wall. Most pieces use several colors; one piece has a strong pattern of black and white.

Gathered together for exhibition at the Paramount Gallery, the pieces are clean cut, planar entities; they like space, and they get plenty of it here. You see a cerebral, methodical approach to the work, although it's one in which risk taking, curiosity, whim, and whimsy are part of the process. Kim works

within restrictions, yet pushes the results so far that you forget them. There's an organic quality to these abstract, geometrical pieces that make you think of plants, or even of people. Each piece is characterized by purity, simplicity, clarity, and order, but it's the complexity, mystery, restlessness, and imbalance that like human quirks, catch your attention, hold you, offer wonder and delight.