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Jim Osman's Off-Kilter Arcadia

Osman's suite of new sculptures might look like buildings, or the things within buildings: furniture, toyish tools, and strange-ified objects of interior design.

Paul D'Agostino
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Jim Osman: The Walnut Series at Lesley Heller Gallery, New York: installation view, Peter Gynd (all images courtesy the artist and Lesley Heller Gallery, New York)

Jim Osman's suite of new sculptures in *The Walnut Series*, the artist's sixth solo show at Lesley Heller Gallery, lures viewers into a charmed pathway of house-like, stack-like, friendly-like, even rather unlikely-

like wooden constructions that invite interaction and visual deconstruction, dismounting, repositioning, and intermixing.

And they do so individually as well as collectively.

And they all derive from plentiful tinkering.

Osman's sculptures are generally autonomous and individually considered, but the artist tends to produce them as series of works conceptually or materially tethered in various ways. On the conceptual end, he has made and presented his very selectively, softly colorful, and rarely very large pieces in ways that imply neighborhoods or other gatherings of buildings — rather joyfully hyper-geometric buildings, that is, that happen to be composed of pleasantly mixed proportions of circles, triangles, and rectangles, mostly, with plentiful irregular forms cut into the mix as well.



Jim Osman, "Random Ashlar" (2018), wood, paint, 55 x 17 1/4 x 14 3/8 inches (photo by Jeffrey Sturges)

We're talking about intimations of architecture here, of course, but the overall aesthetic of Osman's work is so pacific that 'architecture' almost seems too harsh a term. This is even the case with individual pieces that readily appear to harbor multiple such architectural structures atop architectural foundations.

Rather than architectural phenomena that were prototyped, blueprinted, scheduled and constructed, the works seem like buildings that whimsically happened themselves into existence, the playful concoctions of creatively willful trees and blossoms.

If not buildings, they might suggest decks, patios, balconies, partitions, or other parts of buildings. Or they might look like the things within buildings, like pieces of furniture, toyish tools, strange-ified objects of interior design, or similar domestic implements. Several of Osman's sculptures even hint at the presence of an abstract painting on a wall. In Osman's works, formal winks and witticisms are never lacking.

For certain viewers, and perhaps for this one in particular, Osman also crafts something along the lines of idyllic playgrounds, if not because of the happy harmonies and chromatic fun of his palette, and if not due to the relatively soft visual feel of most things made of wood, then certainly thanks to the sense of active mirth that seems to reside within his works — as if even his constituent squares and triangles might cast shadows of smiles.



Jim Osman: The Walnut Series at Lesley Heller Gallery, New York, installation view (photo by Peter Gynd)

That said, this viewer would also prefer to live on a playground, and to be able to play on all pieces of furniture, and to use anything found in the cupboards or shed to further the game.

Treehouse living in Arcadia? Maybe that's what his work conjures for me.

Which is to say, Osman provides viewers with ostensibly simple compositions and gatherings of shapes and materials, then leaves it up to them to enjoy the process of playing with, reimagining, or even complicating the works in their minds. For in truth, the works aren't facile at all. Osman is as much a master craftsman as an expert colorist. When he leaves a certain sculptural component or pedestal-like support looking off-kilter, you'd never wonder just how it's still standing. Osman distributes weights and counters balances in his works with a

supreme sense of harmony. You might wonder, rather, why legs beneath normal tables and supports are usually so boringly logical.

As you chart a path through *The Walnut Series*, you'll also start to notice how and why apparently wacky supports cleverly complement certain pieces. You'll start to note how one piece seems to 'fit with' another, and how peering properly at yet another provides a window onto another yet. You'll see how shadows cast on walls and around the space aren't merely matters of felicitous happenstance.



Jim Osman, "Still" (2018), wood, 29 1/2 x 40 x 93 inches (photo by Peter Gynd)

Osman's works harbor many treasures of prepositional complexity as well. You look at, around, into, through, between, among, and about them. And if you're especially clever, or if you're visiting the show for

a second or third time, you'll start to do all of that looking from the exhibition's first visual steps — that is, from a few paces away from the gallery's front window, approaching from outside.

From there, you'll initially see by far the show's largest sculpture, "Still" (2018). It operates as a kind of frontispiece and, if you will, window-rific viewfinder for all the other works standing, 'residing,' or even 'playing' behind it. It is loaded with readily differentiable components piled up the way you might stack a bunch of small tables, pedestals, and step-stools — if you had to get them out of the way quickly or clumsily to barricade a door, or to create a veritable Arcadian playground for a cat.

And so, when you visit, remember to climb your eyes all through and around that.



Jim Osman, "Start-07" (2018), wood, paint, 3 1/4 x 4 1/4 x 3/4 inches (photo by Valeria Mancera)

Osman won't mind, because modes of fun and discovery are where his works are born. This incubatory part of his process is on full display in a series of small pieces called *Starts* (2018). Sketching, for this sculptor, has nothing to do with drawing or planning, properly-so-called.

Rather, it has to do with toying around with cuts and types of wood he happens to locate or rediscover in his studio, or maybe chance across out in the yard or down the block. He'll then put one piece on another, then in another, then cut something, make some stacks, think of colors, think of veins, mix grits or match grains, nix one symmetry to strike a stranger balance, and so on. He's casually cross-hatching or scribbling his way into some kind of form, but with objects.

It's perhaps the doodling of a carpenter or machinist: it's tinkering. Osman tinkers his way into the works, then into so many suggestions of buildings, windows, tables, chairs, communities, playgrounds, what have you.

But above all, have fun — tinkering with the works, using your eyes.

Jim Osman: The Walnut Series continues at Lesley Heller Gallery (54 Orchard Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through February 17th.

An artist talk will be held today, February 9th, at 2:30pm.

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