

Artist Interview:

A dialogue with Alison Moritsugu

For those who are seeing Alison Moritsugu's painting, "Wilderness," in Uncertain Terrain for the first time you may have the same reaction of awe that I did upon my first encounter with the mesmerizing piece. "How did she do that?" - I remember thinking. And of course that initial question prompted many more. So, I thought I'd ask.

Via email, Ms. Moritsugu generously gave her time to answer some of the questions that commonly come up on tours and of course, those of this curious viewer.

Naomi: Every time I look at *Wilderness* I wonder what you did to keep the composition in order. Can you share a bit about the process you use to create your work?

Alison: *I first cut, prepare and position the logs. This part of the process can take up to a month. I then do an actual size, unfragmented drawing of the landscape on paper. After finishing the drawing, I then transfer sections of the landscape onto the logs. I make adjustments to the drawing at this point since I want important visual information to fall on the areas where there is a log, rather than the space in between them.*

N: Do you refer to your work as a painting, sculpture, both, or do you prefer not to categorize in such ways?

A: *I think of these pieces as paintings since much of the time goes into creating the painting. But I do like that they are hard to categorize. With all my paintings, I try to challenge the viewer, making them have to view the painting in a different way than they are used to. I've always liked paintings that have an object quality, or paintings that can be objects as well.*

Although I am a landscape painter, I have always been drawn to the decorative arts. My log paintings also explore this concept of decoration. By painting directly on log slices, my landscapes now serve a decorative function.

N: I am often asked why you choose to use cut branches as your painting surface?

A: *I like the juxtaposition and tension created by having an image of nature on a section or sample of real nature.*

N: Out of curiosity, what type of tree(s) do you use and where do you get the wood you use for your art?

A: *I prefer to use hardwood trees. Most of the wood comes*

from the Northeast. I gather wood from trees that come down in storms or that people have cut down and are going to chip. I also get some dried wood from a woodworker in Georgia.

N: Are there certain things you have to take into consideration when working with oil on wood to insure that your work is preserved for years to come?

A: *Yes, this is actually one of the more challenging parts of the whole process. I let the wood dry completely in my studio, usually 5-10 years. During this time, I make sure to use only the wood that is stable. I also have the wood treated in an anaerobic chamber to prevent bug damage. This is the same treatment that is used at museums, such as New York's Natural History Museum.*

N: Your landscapes resemble the work of Thomas Cole and the Hudson River School. I did wonder if the landscape in *Wilderness* was taken from a Hudson River School painting and if that movement had a great influence on you?

A: *I love the Hudson River School paintings and they have been an influence on my work. "Wilderness" is the first painting in a series of three paintings. The other paintings are called "Arcady" and "Conquest." This series was inspired by Thomas Cole's "The Course of Empire." "Wilderness" shows the*

landscape in a pristine, natural state. "Arcady" depicts the land in an idealized agrarian state, and in "Conquest," trees are cut down and the land plundered as sunset approaches.

N: It is often pointed out that the way the logs are arranged in *Wilderness* looks like a footprint or an aerial view of a forest that has been cut down. Is there intentionally an environmental subtlety in your work?

A: *I like that observation, though that was not my original intention. The shape of "Wilderness" is very organic. It almost looks like a continent or a land mass. The next painting in the series, "Arcady," has a shape that is less organic, more compact. And the final painting in this series, "Conquest," is in the shape of a perfect oval. I wanted the shapes of these paintings to move from a very organic, natural shape to a more geometric, concise one. This reinforced the idea that the land was moving from a natural state to a man-made one.*

N: As viewers of art, we all are interested in what influences the artist while they are working. What influences you (be it music, nature, other peoples art, etc.)?

A: *I am inspired by pretty much everything and anything that comes my way. The natural world, different cultures, art history, the decorative arts and even football have been sources of inspiration for my work.*

