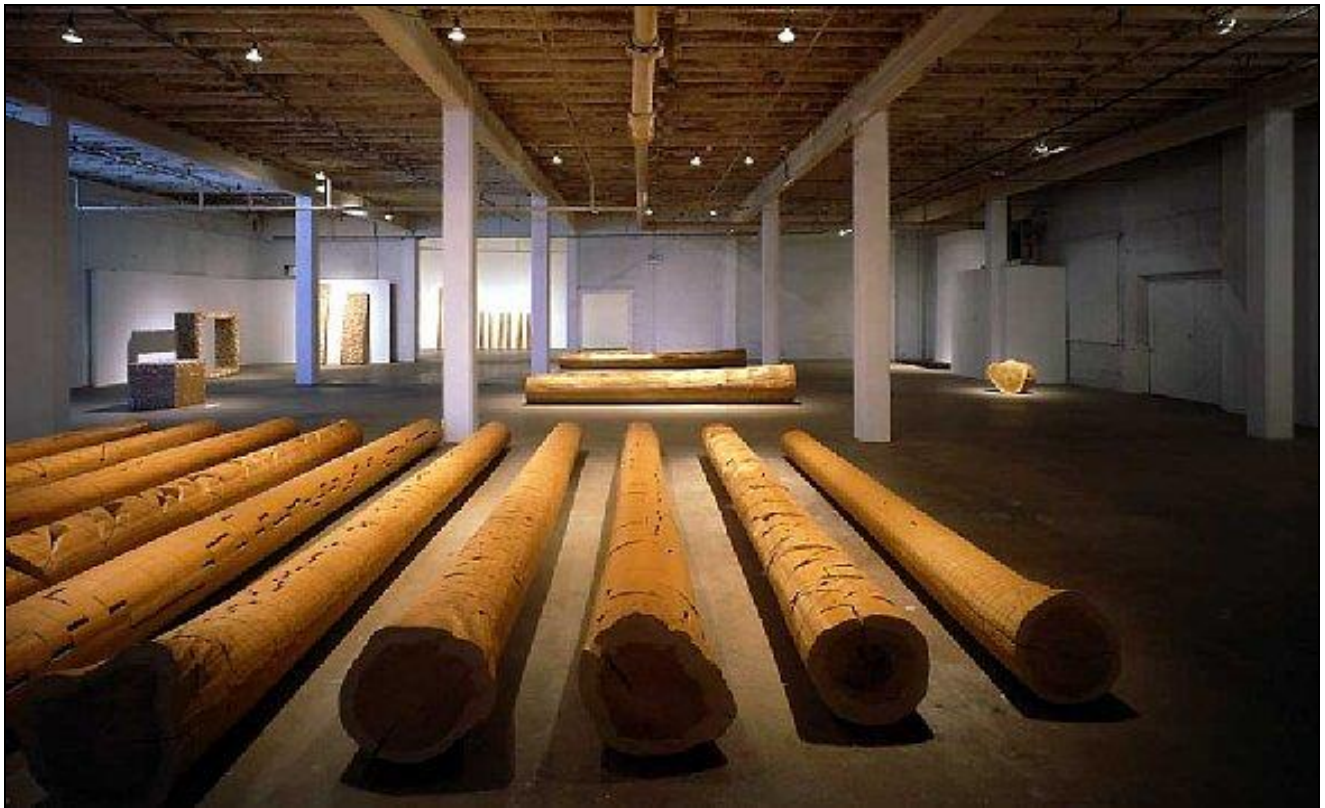


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KAZUO KADONAGA

By Dan R. Goddard, ARTSPACE

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Kazuo Kadonaga installation at Blue Star Art Space, San Antonio, Texas. Photo; Robert Chalk.

Kazuo Kadonaga brought the silence and serenity of the primordial forest to San Antonio's Blue Star Art Space in an exhibit that originated at the Art Museum of South Texas in Corpus Christi. Minimalism meets the Japanese concepts of Zen and *shibui* in his wood, paper, bamboo and silk sculptures. Striving to reveal the inner essence of nature, he makes only slight changes in the natural materials. But the results are magically meditative, radiating peace, harmony and

tranquility into a contentious, cynical world.

He lives and works in Ishikawa-ken, Japan, where his family owns a cedar forest and lumber mill. In work which first brought him international attention, Kadonaga used a veneer slicer to cut cedar logs (with the bark removed) into long strips not much thicker than a piece of paper. Then the fragile strips were glued back together in the form of the original log, a subtle comment on the fragility of trees. The tree is acted upon, and continues to

respond according to its inner structure. Yet, despite the intervention, the log retains its composure, like a lake whose bottom remains calm though its surface is rippled by wind. Instead of approaching wood from a Western aesthetic, as raw material to be shaped to suit the artist's desires, Kadonaga makes stately, elegant works that reflect the Japanese desire to express the experience of being in harmony with nature's essential conditions.

Wood has been Kadonaga's most extensively used material. He has said his purpose was "to explore different ways of looking at a tree, not to take a tree for granted" Although it is often linked with the reductive aesthetics of minimal art, Kadonaga's work is a contemporary expression of the medieval Japanese concept, *shibui*. Sometimes defined as "a taste for the astringent:" *shibui* emerged at a time of great poverty and is also the aesthetic foundation for *haiku* poetry, *No* plays, and *shakuhachi* (music of the bamboo flute). According to the catalogue essay by Michael Laurence, Kadonaga's attitudes can also be related to two recent art movements in Japan, the *Gutai* or "concrete" movement of the 1950s and, later, the *Mono-ha* or "object" group which operates in a manner similar to the Western "process" artists.

Kadonaga also acknowledges the influence of the American artist Sol LeWitt, who has observed: "Conceptual artists are mystics rather than rationalists."

Besides his reassembled logs, Kadonaga has carved geometric shapes into logs stripped of bark and he also splits logs to reveal the grain. In cutting logs, he often follows the natural lines of the wood, such as growth rings, letting the wood's inherent properties determine the sculpture's final form. He considers the trees "wet" when cut, and

attempts to enhance the effects of drying. Like a master potter, he wants to leave no trace of his own personality, instead allowing the wood to dry, expand and split to reveal its own inner form. He knows how to hit one end of a scored log to cause it to crack at the opposite end. Sometimes he aligns logs that have been charred in a kiln into parallel series. Wood is also the source material for handmade paper (*washi*) which Kadonaga shapes into large, geometric, sculptural objects by compressing stacked, wet sheets into a solid block. Then partly peeling back each delicate sheet, he reintroduces the material's opposing possibilities of hardness and softness, strength and fragility

But it is his recent work with sericulture, the production of raw silk and the raising of silkworms, that has attracted the most attention. Providing the traditional diet of mulberry leaves, he releases as many as 100,000 silkworms into his specially constructed, gridlike cedar frames which he manipulates so the worms will fill up each empty square with their white cocoons. Their spinning is stopped by steam, as in silk manufacture, so that the fibers of the cocoons will not be broken by emerging moths. Kadonaga's sericulture pieces freeze time, revealing the complexity and wonder not only of a natural material, but a natural process. His subtle manipulations enhance the patterns and lyricism of natural objects in ways that gently force the viewer into a direct and harmonizing confrontation with the natural world.

Kazuo Kadonaga is represented by Space Gallery in Los Angeles.

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