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You Are Here: The Greater Asias of Martin Puryear

Martin Puryear's worldliness is its own continuous odyssey. Not for nothing does *Guardian Stone* (2001–3; fig. 73), his first large-scale carved stone sculpture, anticipate the shape of the locational Google Maps pin designed by Jens Eilstrup Rasmussen. Situated on a crescent-shaped plot of land once home to the Mori family residence in central Tokyo's Roppongi Hills, *Guardian Stone* stands just outside the TV Asahi building (2003), headquarters of a major television network designed by the architect Fumihiko Maki (1928–2024). A proponent of what he called "collective form," in which the city figures as a dynamic of interrelated forces rather than as a single, stationary location, Maki invited Puryear to create a sculpture as part of the art program launched by the developer of Roppongi Hills, where TV Asahi would be located. Puryear designed *Guardian Stone* in response, and presented a large wooden model of the work to Maki and his associates.[1] Assisted by Masami Shiraishi (b. 1948), president of the gallery SCAI the Bathhouse, whom Puryear had met in New York City in 2000, the artist traveled to Japan and China, choosing, shaping, and assembling eighteen stone blocks into the final work on the north side of the TV Asahi building, opposite its entrance.[2]

Drawing from years of extensive looking, thinking, reading, and traveling, including time spent in Alaska, Finland, France, Japan, Morocco, Poland, Russia, Sierra Leone, and Sweden, Puryear ranks among the most cosmopolitan of American artists. By this I mean that his works occupy a position equidistant to a range of approaches to making from different places and times. I borrow the word "equidistance" from the architect Arata Isozaki (1931–2022), whose storied 1979 exhibition, *MA: Space / Time in Japan*, at the Cooper Hewitt Museum, New York, overlapped with Puryear's participation at the Whitney Biennial that same year.[3] Realizing that "two types of architecture from different places (spatiality) and times (temporality) can be equidistant from my position," Isozaki saw architecture as a cartographic problem.[4] But it is Puryear's long-standing engagement with Asian techniques of working with spaces and shapes that suggests how allusion and influence manifest kinship beyond inherited ties.

Assisted by a Guggenheim Foundation grant, Puryear embarked on a month of self-directed travel in Japan in the fall of 1983. Gardens figured prominently in his travels, and the impact of his close looking may be the invisible hand behind *Guardian Stone*. Although Puryear titled the work after completing the sculpture, *Guardian Stone* had always been destined to preside over the Japanese garden facing the huge, curving glass atrium of TV Asahi.[5] Responsible for cohering a garden's ecology of forms, a guardian stone in Japanese landscape architecture traditionally serves as an anchoring presence, as in the manner outlined by the British architect Josiah Conder (1852–1920) in his copiously illustrated treatise of 1893.[6] A case in point is *Stone no. 41* in the Meiji-era Kiyosumi Garden, which was among the sites Puryear visited (fig. 74). There, the guardian stone energizes the space without dominating it, an apt metaphor for how influence operates throughout Puryear's oeuvre.

Figure 73. Installation view of *Guardian Stone* (2001–3) outside of the TV Asahi headquarters, Tokyo. Martin Puryear. Black granite; 550 x 370 x 300 cm. Photo: Shigeo Anzai

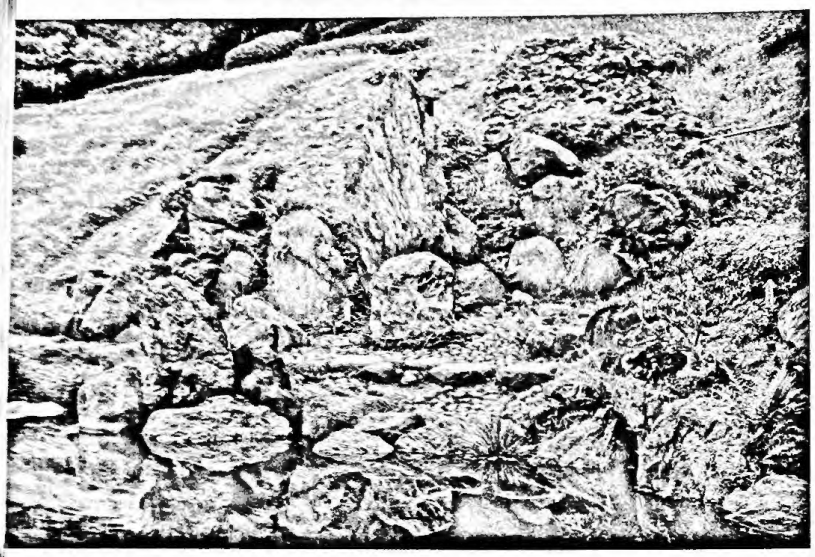

Figure 74. ***Stone no. 41,*** **Kiyosumi Garden, Tokyo, Meiji era, 1868–1912. Photo: Thomas S. Elias**

By alluding so strongly to Japanese gardens, *Guardian Stone* declares itself cultural kin to a long history of placemaking. In the process, it defies myopic readings of artistic possibility that entertain the question of influence only when it appears to confirm preconceptions arising from cursory attention to an artist's cultural, national, and racial heritages. Indeed, *Guardian Stone* demonstrates the relevance of Black intellectual vitality for audiences invested in what the art historian Toshio Watanabe implies is a critical question embodied by the Japanese garden: how to balance a sense of uniqueness primarily ascribed to Japanese culture with a belief in the "universality of Japanese civilization."[7] Irreducible to representation affirmed through physical resemblance, influence in Puryear's hands is a tool of social possibility. The forms to which he commits connect him, in turn, with audiences not expecting someone like him to produce work so deeply empathetic to their most cherished histories.

The poet John Yau (b. 1950) writes that "it is not an 'I' using the form to speak, but a diverse and complex 'we' speaking through the form" of Puryear's works.[8] But where Yau suggests that "we" encompasses "anonymous workers and history" who made possible certain ways of seeing and making, Puryear carefully notes how the refinement of technique—what he terms "reverence"—must often yield to an entire regime of specialization.[9] Long acquainted with Japanese landscapes and woodworking approaches furthered by his visits to Bay Area woodworkers specializing in temple carving and other related techniques, the artist admires the difficulty of lengthening wood he characterizes as "not wanting to be interrupted."[10] In a 2018 conversation, he spoke feelingly about the patience needed to develop what he called a "system" of strengthening an "inherently weak connection" between two pieces of fibrous wood.[11]

Yet, Puryear has long resisted converting his interest into a single-minded pursuit of expertise. Although he learned woodworking in Sierra Leone and Sweden, early on the artist recognized the risks of perfection partly through the extent to which technique in Japan approached a "devotional practice" of sorts.[12] Of his experiences creating *Guardian Stone*, he remarks how "the level of craft that's practiced there [in Japan] is so extraordinary that, if you have the right kind of mind, you really just get pulled along into that."[13] In many respects the pursuit of knowledge entails a loss of self or, as Puryear puts it, the "submission of one's ego."[14] At worst it devolves into "tunnel vision."[15] The dark side of expertise is its subordination to what Puryear characterizes as an "idealized view of the world" in which the rationale for action and even existence depends on their "perfectibility."[16] Powerful enough to warp artistic engagement so that the resulting work can only look residual in comparison to a more ideal referent, the enterprise of perfectible craft struck Puryear as a closed game, whereby craft was not an open-ended play but an established set of means to achieve a defined end. His encounters with Japanese carpentry and wood carving foreground the paradoxical nature of competence: as one becomes more comfortable navigating increasing levels and forms of difficulty, one must also develop vigilance against letting expertise petrify too quickly into an unyielding professionalism.

Puryear distinguishes between the unforgiving hierarchy on which many forms of expertise depend and the authority that accrues when visibly demonstrating skill. Neither amateurish nor obsessive, his works physically record intellectual and technical competence. Highly indicative of his approach to knowledge is his engagement with the yurt, the tentlike form of mobile dwelling used by nomadic communities throughout Central Asia. Assembled within days or even

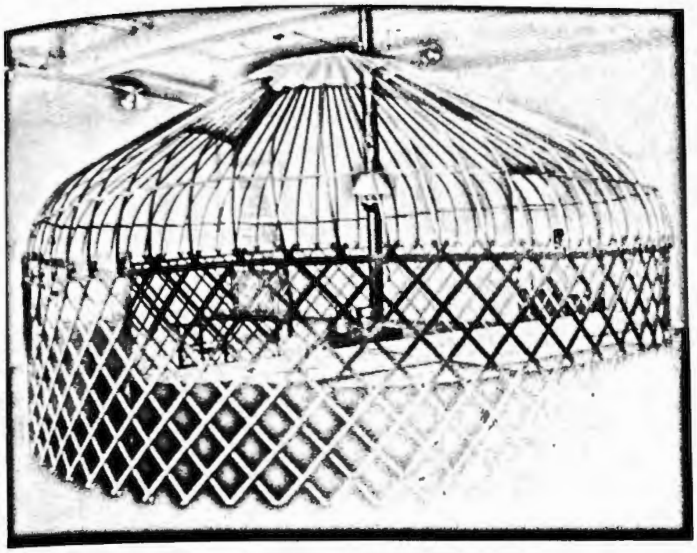

Figure 75. Installation view of *Martin Puryear*, and/or gallery, Seattle, 1981. Pictured: *Where the Heart Is* (1981). Yurt, mixed media; 548.6 cm (diameter), no longer extant

hours, a yurt consists of a portable wooden-and-bamboo frame in a lattice pattern to ensure even weight distribution; animal skins or cloth traditionally insulated the wooden frame. The yurt captured the artist's attention from a very young age, and Puryear revisited the form after a devastating fire in his Brooklyn studio in 1977. Puryear made a yurt-like sculpture in 1981, displaying it for the first time that year in Seattle (fig. 75), and later in 1990 for the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (see fig. 37), in 1992 for that year's edition of Documenta, and in 2018 for an exhibition at the Museum Voorlinden in the Netherlands.[17] Compelling visual resemblance between the functioning yurt and Puryear's 1981 take, *Where the Heart Is*, compresses the geographical—and to a lesser degree—chronological distance separating the two. Whereas the lattice of a functional yurt is intended as a scaffold awaiting final cover, the artist typically leaves his uncovered. We see its fragility and its collapsibility.

There is also buoyancy in Puryear's yurt sculpture. At first glance, the wooden lattice in *Where the Heart Is* tapers to sharp points that only kiss the gallery floor. Stay a while longer, however, and the entire assembly appears on the verge of levitation, its attachment to the ground noncommittal at best. Puryear suggests as much in his 1990 presentation of the yurt at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.[18] There, guided by a rendering of a falcon by the legendary Mughal painter and naturalist Mansur (active c. 1590–1630; see fig. 36), the yurt escapes the load-bearing implications of the word "influence." Puryear's commitment to the yurt bridges multiple parallel histories of making ordinarily separated from one another because of geography and time period. What initially reads as unilateral influence is but a symptom of the work's transversal force cutting across both a relatively brief history of modern sculpture configured through US and European Minimalisms and a history of housing architecture in Central Asia spanning thousands of years. More a dynamic companion than a placid source, the yurt surfaces as an instance of how traditions read more strongly as endurances.

Something of this endurance resounds even more forcefully when considering *Guardian Stone* alongside the obelisk designed by Isamu Noguchi (1904–1988), an artist whose protean movement across sculpture, public art, furniture, and craft has long appealed to Puryear (fig. 76).[19] Channeling the flow of pedestrian traffic through the Japanese American Cultural and Community Center Plaza

Figure 76. Installation view of *To The Issei*, 1980–83, Japanese American Cultural and Community Center Plaza, Los Angeles. Isamu Noguchi (American, 1904–1988; sculptor). Exterior design with basalt sculptural elements and water; horizontal sculpture: 121.9 x 355.6 x 137.2 cm; vertical sculpture: 365.8 x 152.4 x 96.5 cm. © 2025 The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Courtesy of Esoteric Survey

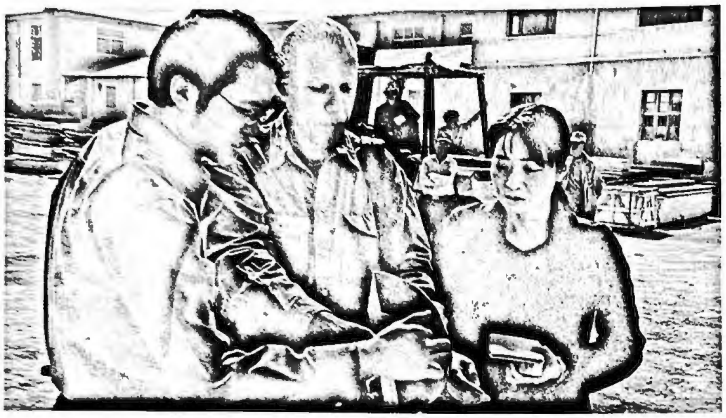

Figure 77. Martin Puryear working in a stone yard in Xiamen, China, 2002. Production still from the Art21 television series *Art in the Twenty-First Century*, season 2, "Time." © Art21, Inc. 2003.

in Los Angeles's Japantown, Noguchi's obelisk acts as a pivot point much like *Guardian Stone* does for the Roppongi Hills complex. Realized between 1980 and 1983, the obelisk and its loyal companion draw on Noguchi's interest in veneration structures in ways that both anticipate and follow Puryear's extended visual engagement with the temples of Nara and the seventeenth-century Katsura Imperial Villa. Standing upright like a sentry, it casts shadow onto the orange-brick plaza like a gnomon does onto a sundial. The Shanxi black granite used for *Guardian Stone* absorbs sunlight while also reflecting light particles so that the work appears to shimmer like a beacon from a distance. The subdued gleam of the highly durable granite from north China, known for its deep-black hue with minimal veining, counters the transparency of Maki's enormous glass atrium as well as the shiny reflective surfaces of the neighboring fifty-four-story Mori Tower.

Whereas Noguchi's basalt elements emerge from monolithic, independent stone forms, *Guardian Stone* is a composite produced from numerous blocks manually aggregated into a single shape. The work posed significant challenges for Puryear. Despite Puryear having provided a maquette to Chinese fabricators in Xiamen (fig. 77), manual labor could not precisely translate the artist's vision at the scale desired. *Guardian Stone* arose from a succession of balancing acts such that to behold the work is also to participate in the process of its continuous realization. By way of comparison, consider *Untitled* from 1997 [34]. Shown indoors, *Untitled* discloses the inadequacy of the museum gallery as its proper dwelling even as its apparent mass enhances the perception of institutional gravity. Puryear revels in the conflicting impressions his sense of scale produces; one could even claim that these impressions are exactly what enables his works to model forbearance and generosity toward viewers eager to "read into" what it is they see.

A favorite curatorial game is to collect the references Puryear's work seems to so easily accrue. Treating his sculptures as if they were lost ships in need of interpretive rescue, some authors mistake allusion in his work for an act of citation or as a residual visual echo. Think, for instance, of how *Pavilion in the Trees* (1993; fig. 78), Puryear's model for an outdoor project proposed in 1981, was, in one writer's description, conflated with a Sámi storehouse and a *honden*, the most sacred structure in a Shinto temple.[20] But contrary to both the storehouse and the *honden*, whose very existence as a sanctuary for divine spirits depends on barring public access, Puryear's work maximizes the everyday pleasures of egress. Intended to dissolve into the wooded surroundings, the visible structure is only one part of a multisensorial passage. While a surveyor understands the land using geodetic calculations and meridian designations, Puryear trails the logic of the Japanese garden in which space is not a pictorial depiction but an irreproducible passage through time.

Puryear constantly revisits allusion and influence, two of the most common strategies for understanding the presence of art in the world. When *Guardian Stone* was first installed, Puryear was relatively unknown in Japan despite having participated in the group exhibition *Weaving the World: Contemporary Art of Linear Construction* at the Yokohama Museum of Art in 1999. But as Shiraishi observed, *Guardian Stone* quickly became its own center of gravity.[21] Part of its pull owes much to what it so forcefully says and does not say about influence. Just as allusion becomes more fathomable as a sign of kinship, influence cannot be explained only through identifiable resemblances. Rather, it concerns the interdependence of admission and denial. We hear

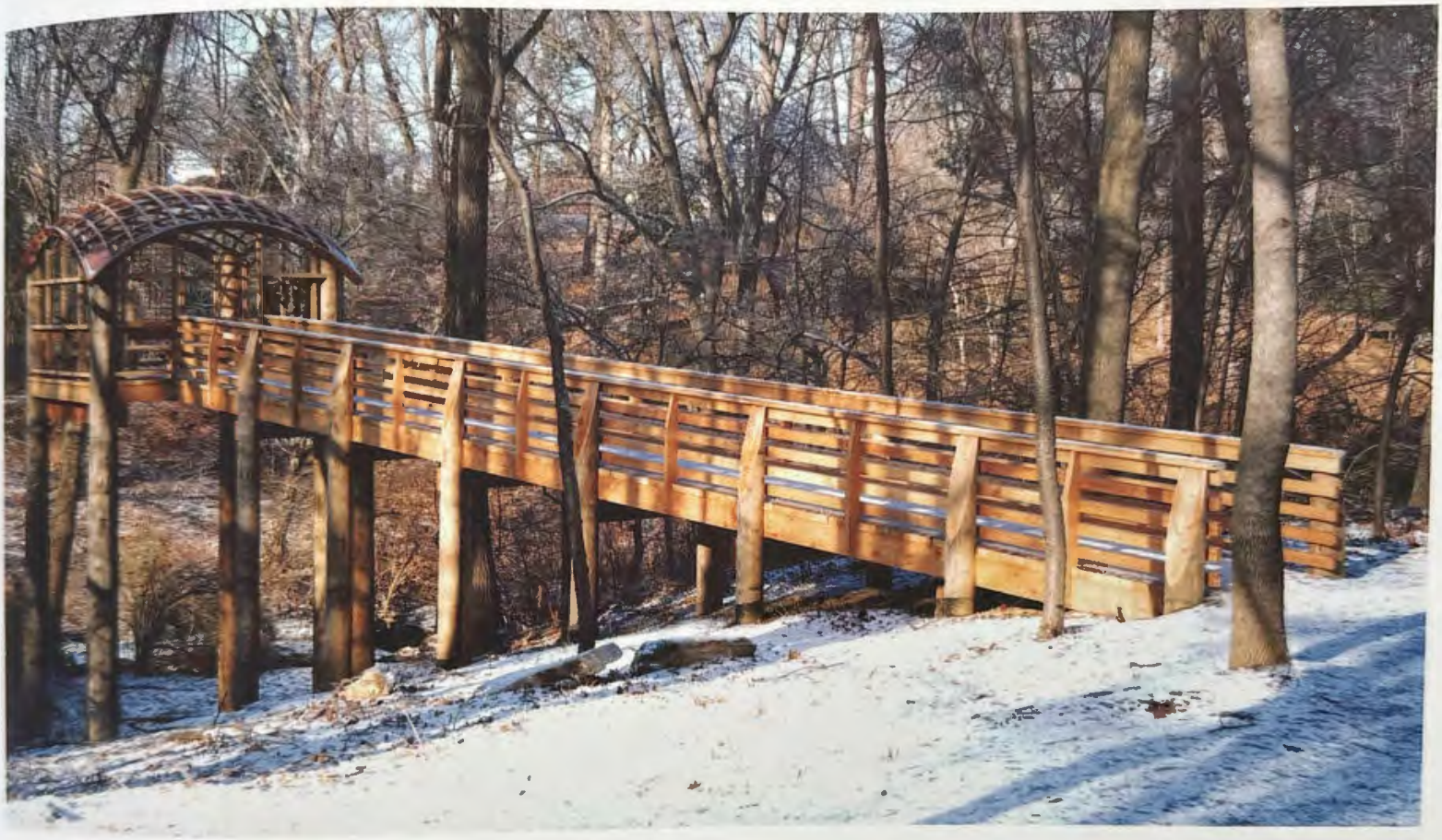

Figure 78. Installation view of *Pavilion in the Trees* (1983) at Fairmount Park, Philadelphia, 1994. Martin Puryear. Debarked western red cedar, white oak, heart redwood, and chain-link fencing; walkway: 152.4 cm (width), 1828.8 cm (length); deck: 34.3 x 34.3 cm; 731.5 cm (aboveground); latticed canopy: 335.3 x 487.7 x 487.7 cm; overall: approximately 1066.8 cm (height). Photo © Wayne Cozzolino, 1994, courtesy of the Association for Public Art

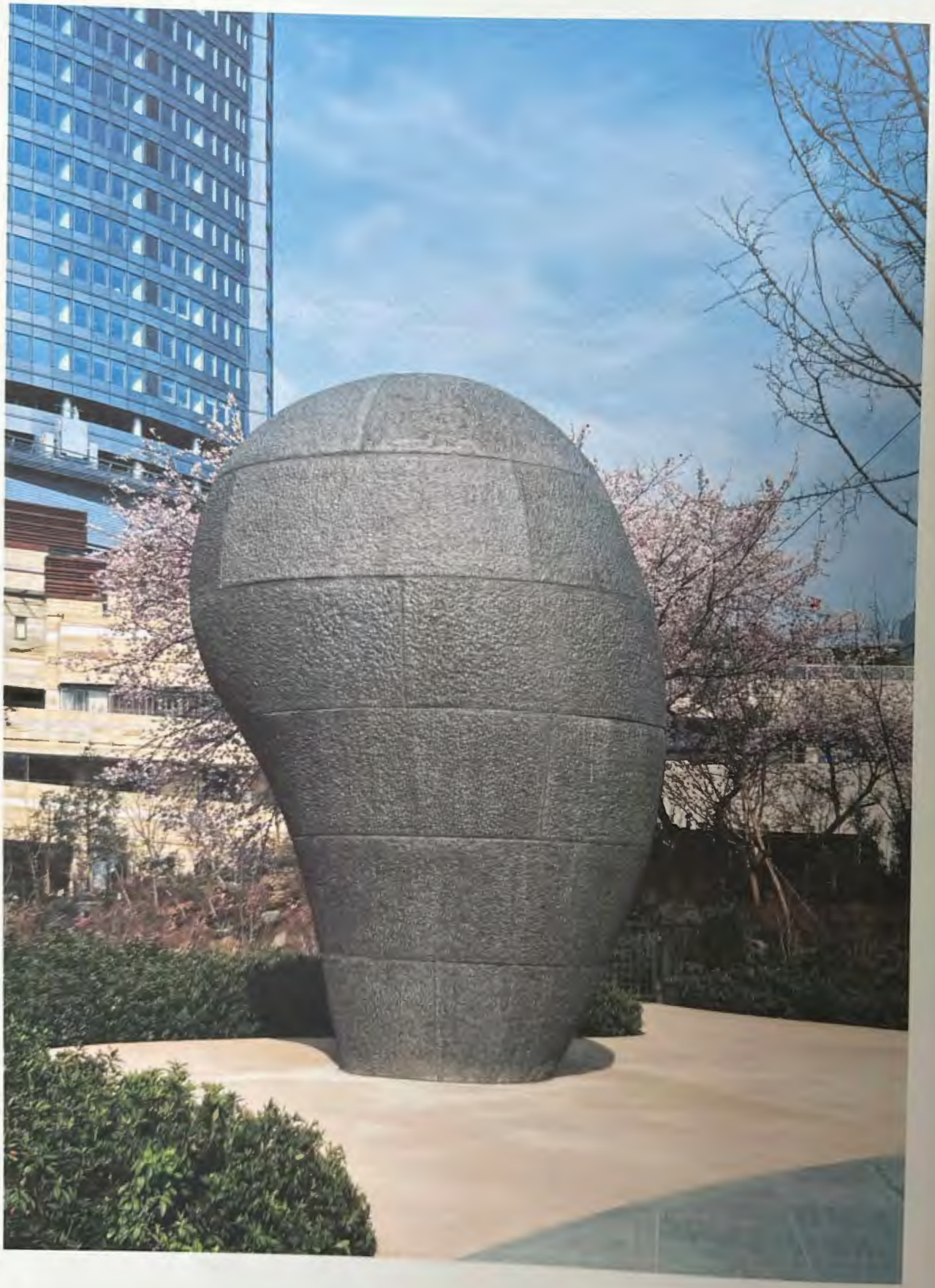

Figure 79. Installation view of *Guardian Stone* (2001–3) outside of the TV Asahi headquarters, Tokyo. Photo: Shigeo Anzai

Figure 80. Detail view of the chair in *Bodark Arc* (1982) at the Nathan Manilow Sculpture Park, Governors State University, University Park, Illinois. Martin Puryear. Cast bronze; 64.8 x 64.8 x 38.1 cm. Photo: Courtesy of Nathan Manilow Sculpture Park

this in Puryear's incisive observations on the outsize impact of Minimalism on histories of modern and contemporary art that are given precedence in museum collections and university syllabi. When Puryear first saw the work of Donald Judd (1928–1994), "it cleared the air" for him to pursue "purity and simplicity" in his work.[22] Yet purity qua Minimalism read increasingly as a system of disqualifications, banishments, and exclusions. Puryear states, "you can only rarify something so much before you have nothing left. And I'm really committed to objects, not to dogma."[23]

He accordingly works with a much broader time frame than can be comfortably inferred from Minimalism or the art histories it serves. *Guardian Stone* looks as if it is locked in ceaseless internal debate with itself and its own shadow as to what form it should finally take. Is it a tilted sphere elongating into a column, or is it an upright columnar shape bulging at one end? Puryear recounts long discussions during the work's assembly in China over how the contours did not sufficiently bulge in certain places while being too straight in others.[24] All of Puryear's works are treasuries of allusion. But the artist sternly guards against the possibility of their becoming diffuse; hence, the deliberation over whether a voluminous shape should be more globular or whether an edge is too straight.

Guardian Stone proposes we consider influence as a model of mutual intelligibility. Recalling some theories of intertextuality, such a model deemphasizes a work's relation to prior texts in favor of attending to how the work actively participates in spaces defined by other cultural priorities.[25] At stake is not how Japanese aesthetics may have shaped Puryear's thinking but, on the contrary, how his work has amplified or reframed such aesthetics so that even the most knowledgeable theorists could be reenchanted by what they might ordinarily regard as examples of routine or habit. It was hardly a coincidence that Maki was so taken by Puryear's work. For Puryear understands how placemaking exceeds the physical construction of human-made things to honor unoccupied space for its past and future potentials. Another way to think about influence, then, depends less on centering what one receives, absorbs, or takes away and more on how the resulting work replenishes the sources from which it draws.

While firmly stating that his work is not Japanese but "American," Puryear nevertheless wills into being sculptures unintentionally more faithful than many of its Japanese analogues to the Zen Buddhist concept of *yūgen*, or "mysterious profundity."[26] Curiously apropos of Puryear's work is Allen Weiss's observation of how the quality of mystery in Japanese gardens feeds on "the tension between iconography and abstraction" (fig. 79).[27] Much of *Guardian Stone*'s potency turns on how it verges on human form without demanding that human proportions determine our measure of the world. Despite towering over the average adult viewer, *Guardian Stone* remains deeply connected to human scale. Small wonder, then, that Maki should see the work as having a "human face."[28]

Puryear's sculptures toggle between referentiality as a form of disclosure and concealment that denies such referentiality full expression. When ambling through *Bodark Arc* (1982) in the Nathan Manilow Sculpture Park in University Park, Illinois, we might stumble across a low bronze chair (fig. 80). Though styled after a West African throne, the work withholds any explanation as to how or why it came to be. The chair tugs on our imagination, bringing us closer to the histories of chairs associated with the Dan people of West Africa and of *ukibori*, a Japanese relief-carving technique used to embellish wood. Here, allusion is

Figure 81. Installation view of *Meditation in a Beech Wood* (1996) at the Wanås Foundation, Knislinge, Sweden. Martin Puryear. Water reed thatched over timber frame (wood, concrete, and steel); 444.8 x 500.4 x 340.4 cm. Photo: Anders Norrsell

a two-step process. Viewers first become attuned to other histories with which the work coexists, then find themselves overwhelmed by the vast scope of these histories and what they imply. Our tongues are stilled in a manner perhaps akin to Isozaki's conception of "complete silence" as "extravagance."[29]

Arguably the most silent of Puryear's works is the enormous thatched-reed structure known as *Meditation in a Beech Wood* (1996; fig. 81).[30] Nestled in a beech forest in Knislinge, Sweden, its bell shape invokes a seated Buddha sans head or legs. Puryear never formally studied or practiced Buddhism. Yet the viewing experience *Meditation in a Beech Wood* affords is perhaps best apprehended in light of Theravada meditation techniques, based on calming the mind and seeking to know the true nature of things. Together with its distinctive form, the largeness of the work demands undistracted attention from the viewer, who develops their powers of attention by withdrawing their focus from other thoughts or objects so that the mind has a chance to slow down. To see the work, one must refrain from speaking. The Buddha-like figure fills and enlivens space otherwise mistaken for a lapse, or as simply nonexistent, by inducing viewers to dwell on its susceptibility to the vagaries of weather, time, and animal life. Prolonged viewing highlights the impermanence of the work that mechanical or digital technologies cannot properly record. Viewing thus begins to resemble the kind of training undertaken through Vipassana practice that encourages the acceptance of change, including mortality. In this way, *Meditation in a Beech Wood* turns on how scale bridges mysticism, or a state of consciousness ascribed to personal spiritual transformation, and empiricism rooted in verifiable observation and measurement.

Silence connotes evasion. Even under the brightest daylight, *Guardian Stone* possesses an opacity in the vein described by the critic Greg Tate. Writing of the unprecedented visibility of Black artists in the United States including Terry Adkins (1953–2014), who studied with Puryear at Fisk University in the early 1970s, Sanford Biggers (b. 1970), Kerry James Marshall (b. 1955), and Kara Walker (b. 1969), Tate hoped for what he called a "utopic leap forward" in which Black artistic mystery "may be so abstracted and encoded as to be invisible to the nakedly ethnographic eye."[31] The referential instability of *Guardian Stone* deflects the rapacious demands such an eye makes of anything it hopes to pillage for digestible meaning. Rejecting systems of classification and preservation that coerce assemblies of form and spirit to perform as specimens under glass, a defiance borne of reticence energizes Puryear's works. The receptivity of Puryear's oeuvre to Asian and African forms especially fly outside the purview of ethnographic insistences on fixed location. Managing multiple relationships to different scales, as well as rates, of operation, *Guardian Stone* sets its own pace. We gladly follow its lead, trusting it will bring us far beyond where we started.

1. Gary Kamemoto, principal of Maki and Associates, email to the author, April 4, 2024.

2. Masami Shiraishi recalls meeting Puryear in 2000 in New York. Email to the author, December 15, 2023.

3. Puryear was aware of Isozaki but neither knew of nor attended the 1979 exhibition in New York. Martin Puryear, conversation with the author, February 21, 2024.

4. Arata Isozaki, *The Island Nation Aesthetic* (London: Wiley, 1996), 7.

5. Puryear, conversation with the author, February 21, 2024. Puryear has also stated that artwork titles are usually "afterthoughts." Richard J. Powell, "A Conversation with Martin Puryear," in *Martin Puryear*, ed. John Elderfield, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2007), 107.

6. Josiah Conder, *Landscape Gardening in Japan* (Tokyo: Kelly and Walsh, 1893).

7. Toshio Watanabe, "The Modern Japanese Garden," in *Since Meiji: Perspectives on the Japanese Visual Arts, 1868–2000*, ed. J. Thomas Rimer (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2012), 349.

8. John Yau, "Some Thoughts About Richard Serra and Martin Puryear (Part 2: Puryear)," *Hyperallergic* (November 16, 2014), https:// hyperallergic.com/162494/some-thoughts-about-richard-serra-and-martin-puryear-part-2-puryear/.

9. Puryear, conversation with the author, February 21, 2024.

10. Puryear, "A Conversation with Martin Puryear," interviewed by Billie Tsien, June 27, 2018, published on July 16, 2018, Architectural League of New York, https://vimeo.com/280212494?share=copy.

11. Puryear, "A Conversation with Martin Puryear."

12. Puryear, conversation with the author, February 21, 2024.

13. Martin Puryear, "Interview: Stone Carving," *Art 21*, September 2003, https://art21.org/read/martin-puryear-stone-carving/.

14. Puryear, conversation with the author, February 21, 2024.

15. Puryear, "Interview: Stone Carving."

16. Puryear, "Interview: Stone Carving."

17. For a chronology of Puryear's yurt installations, see Emily Liebert's essay in this volume, pp. 130–21, p. 139n24, n27. Founded in 1955, Documenta is one of the world's premier recurring showcases for contemporary art, taking place every five years in Kassel, Germany.

18. The work inaugurated *Connections*, a series hosted by the museum that invited artists to design an installation based on a historical object or image important to their work.

19. Puryear intended to visit Noguchi's studio in Shikoku, but unfortunately did not have enough time during his Japan travels. Puryear, conversation with the author, February 21, 2024.

20. Neal Benezra, "'The Thing Shines, Not the Maker': The Sculpture of Martin Puryear," in Neal Benezra and Robert Storr, *Martin Puryear*, exh. cat. (New York: Thames & Hudson; Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 1991), 34.

21. Shiraishi, email to the author, December 15, 2023.

22. Martin Puryear, quoted in Steven Henry Madoff, "Sculpture Unbound," *ARTnews* 85, no. 9 (November 1986): 104–5.

23. Martin Puryear, quoted in Madoff, "Sculpture Unbound," 105.

24. Puryear, conversation with the author, February 21, 2024.

25. Jonathan Culler, "Presupposition and Intertextuality," in *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), 103.

26. Puryear, conversation with the author, February 21, 2024.

27. Allen Weiss, *Zen Landscapes: Perspectives on Japanese Gardens and Ceramics* (London: Reaktion Books, 2013), 76.

28. Iris Brooks, "'Artelligent' Living," *Washington* 18, no. 9 (September 2003): 70, 72, 77.

29. Arata Isozaki, "Arata Isozaki—TIME SPACE EXISTENCE," 2017, published on September 23, 2024, Thisispaper, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=alr02PQrd1k.

30. For further discussion of *Meditation in a Beech Wood*, see Maya Lin in this volume, p. 74.

31. Greg Tate, "To Bid a Poet Black and Abstract," in *Flyboy 2: The Greg Tate Reader* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), 212.