

Austin American-Statesman

Jason Middlebrook explores our relationship with the natural world

June 20, 2014

Jeanne Claire van Ryzin



When the Congress Avenue contemporary art center then known as Arthouse reopened in 2010 after a sweeping architectural overhaul, artist Jason Middlebrook used several tons of the construction detritus to craft furniture.

Middlebrook used vintage steel joists, lumber and glass (the building at 700 Congress Ave. is multi-layered with parts of it dating back to the 19th century) to make benches and dining tables that became a rough-hewn yet welcoming meeting place for an extended series of public events. (The institution has since become the Contemporary Austin.)

“You can change the path of history for the object, for the materials, when you alter and reuse it,” Middlebrook said at the time.

With “Line Over Matter,” Middlebrook’s second solo exhibit at Lora Reynolds Gallery through July 5, the New York-based artist continues his exploration of our complex and contradictory relationship with the natural world.

He uses planks of live-edge hardwood lumber as blank canvases of sorts, painting patterns of precisely straight lines and neat angles on the gorgeous natural wood. Middlebrook renders his sharp geometric designs in black or bright colors.

He covers one long maple plank entirely with shiny black automotive paint and trimmed with neatly cut wood strips forming an abstracted wood grain.

Entitled “Inspired by the Shape, the Grain, and History,” the piece could be considered the lodestar of the exhibit, which also includes works on paper.

Then again so could “Finding What’s Left,” a redwood plank covered with a pattern of neat white chevrons, its edges spray-painted black to look charred.

But it’s ersatz charring Middlebrook presents us with, not the real visual vestiges of a forest fire that are proof of a redwood’s enduring strength. Just where is that line between what’s artificial and what’s natural, between what’s made and designed by human beings and what’s a creation of nature? Hard to tell with Middlebrook’s greatly modified wood planks that either lean against or hang on the gallery walls.

And Middlebrook’s muddledness is deliberate. But it’s not wholly cynical. Instead it’s a frank acknowledgement that it’s not always clear whether the materials we consume and use in various ways these days can be considered truly natural or not. Our ecological handprints are, after all, everywhere.