

ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

JASON MIDDLEBROOK'S CAPTIVATING WOOD PAINTINGS

Inspired by the natural splendor of upstate New York, the artist forges a fresh creative path

Text by Rachel Wolff

Portrait by William Waldron

Seven years ago artist Jason Middlebrook decamped from Brooklyn's fast-gentrifying Williamsburg neighborhood for the rustic terrain of Columbia County, New York, a couple of hours north of the city. It was a practical decision first and foremost: Space upstate was cheap, and he needed lots of it. "I'm a big guy, and I like making big art," he says. Ultimately, though, the forested environs also fundamentally reshaped his work.



In Brooklyn, Middlebrook explored urban life in a diverse body of paintings and sculptures that included models of iconic institutions (London's Tate Modern, the Guggenheim Bilbao) as they might look postapocalypse. Since his move, nature has prevailed. Fascinated by how trees are records of history, he started painting on knobby pieces of timber, sliced (mostly lengthwise) from locally sourced trunks. These planks each serve as a sculptural canvas with unique patterns, knots, and borders—all of which, Middlebrook felt, seemed to initiate a conversation. He began layering the surfaces with dense assemblages of orderly pin-thin lines, undulating swirls, and abstract forms that work sometimes with and sometimes against the grain of the wood. The results, Middlebrook notes, "create a tension between something organic and something man-made."

Collectors and museums alike have responded enthusiastically. New York's Dodge Gallery, which represents Middlebrook, sold out its booth of his work at Miami's Untitled fair in December, and Boston's Museum of Fine Arts and Institute of Contemporary Art both recently acquired pieces by him.

On May 26 the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in North Adams will unveil a nearly yearlong solo exhibition of Middlebrook's work, featuring towering new plank paintings— one about 20 feet tall—in addition to a cascading fountain made of found Styrofoam blocks. And for a show this fall at Dodge, the artist is casting his signature wood forms in bronze, then engraving lines into the metal surfaces—a twist on his original process. "I'm trying to push the boundaries of it," he says. "Refine it." Middlebrook especially loves the ways the lost-wax casting technique captures and preserves even the tiniest imperfections in the wood, allowing him to discover the material's qualities anew. "It's really seductive," he says. "It's beautiful."