

# ARTFORUM

## Gary Kuehn



Gary Kuehn, *Saw Horse Piece*, 1967, fiberglass, wood, 24 1/2 x 120 x 26".

Despite their well-documented fascination with architecture, most Minimalists seem to have been surprisingly squeamish about what could literally be described as the nuts and bolts of construction. Even the most detail-minded viewer of the early-1960s sculptures of Donald Judd, Robert Morris, or Carl Andre would be hard-pressed to find evidence of nails or screws; everything is loose stacks or mitered corners and polished metal. Repudiating the Abstract Expressionist legacy of emphatically subjective formal composition, these artists emphasized the cohesiveness of their simple, straightforward objects, eliminating any trace of the internal divisions or part-to-part relationships that might betray a compositional intent. Yet in 1965, the same year that Judd, in his famous manifesto "Specific Objects," warned that the all-important unity of an artwork might be "diluted" by the addition of "connecting parts," his fellow New Yorker Gary Kuehn was busy with a series of "Bolt Pieces," in which he fastened together heterogeneous materials with ostentatiously hefty steel hardware. And though this series was not on view, bolts were also visible in the intimate show of Kuehn's work recently at Joe Sheftel, authoritatively securing the titular timber supports of his 1967 *Saw Horse Piece*. Despite a loose formal and material (and a clear historical) relationship to the work of Kuehn's Minimalist peers, this sculpture—in which a gently bowed plank, twelve feet long, spans two chunky braces—is representative of Kuehn's work from this period in that it looks not so much minimal as *constructed*.

In fact, Kuehn worked in the building trades for most of his first decade of artistic practice, and he is quick to acknowledge the impact of this time on his output. He emphasizes, in particular, his experience with an enormous appliance warehouse just off the New Jersey Turnpike, calling it “the most inspiring building I ever worked on.” It was a rectangular box thousands of feet long, and, viewed from a distance, its immense scale rendered it a pure geometric abstraction in the landscape. But Kuehn was on the roofing crew and spent days on top of the structure, unfurling 144-foot rolls of tar paper in overlapping strips and covering them with a sticky accretion of hot tar. As he and his fellow workers struggled to keep the large rolls unfurling in parallel and watched the viscous tar oozing forward into every dip and hollow, he realized that “you think the roof is flat, but nothing’s really flat.” In other words, while Minimalism looked at architecture as a model of formal organization, Kuehn experienced construction as a process through which an ideal, designed geometry meets the messy and contingent realities of material.

And it is this collision, continually restaged in various media, that animates Kuehn’s work. The noticeable droop in *Saw Horse Piece* is the result of a working process shared with *Plank Piece*, 1967, also exhibited in this show, in which another large board leans against the gallery wall and similarly sags toward the floor. To make each piece, Kuehn placed a piece of Masonite in the position of the finished sculpture (spanning the sawhorses or standing in the corner, respectively) until it achieved the desired shape, at which point he traced its curve and reconstructed it as a plywood and fiberglass assembly fixed into an ambiguous precarity, half-resisting and half-succumbing to gravity’s effects.

This equivocality is precisely what most distinguishes Kuehn’s work from that of the majority of his contemporaries. If the inflection of gravity was anathema to the rigid and uniform objects of Minimalism, it was integral to post-Minimalist efforts to escape the dominance of geometric form, as in Robert Smithson’s pours or Richard Serra’s early experiments with rubber and lead. But in their emphasis on materials in a state of full surrender to gravity, such pieces tend to play down the subjectivity of both artist and viewer (as did, in a different way, the pure geometry of Minimalism). Through the muddled and unstable process of construction, Kuehn asserts his own idiosyncratic sensibility, recasting the subject as something to be engaged in all its fragility and contingency.

—*Julian Rose*