

# A minimalist gets meditative

Aspiring and failing, sublimely

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Christopher McNulty was in his first year as a doctoral student in intellectual history at the University of Michigan when he decided that he wanted more than mental engagement in his vocation. He abandoned his studies to become a furniture maker, but after six years, he became, as he says, "bored with craft."

The Wisconsin native decided he needed an endeavor that satisfied both his brain and his hands. He found it in art.



[\(ENLARGE\)](#)

Alabama artist Christopher McNulty used green wood for the 49 columns in his installation "Replication Field." The wood cracked as it dried, leaving random fissures in the columns.



[\(ENLARGE\)](#)

Auburn University's Christopher McNulty finds in art an endeavor that satisfies both brain and hands.

McNulty, who earned an MFA at the University of Wisconsin before accepting a position at Auburn University three years ago, found himself attracted to the spare vocabulary — he calls it "efficiency" — and the philosophical side of minimalism. To a point.

"I found it intellectually interesting but emotionally dead," he says in a phone conversation from his Alabama office. "I wanted to take that efficiency and inject some life into it."

Life, as in the human condition. The theme linking the sculptures, works on paper and animated video in his show at Saltworks is man's aspiration for perfection and the impossibility of his achieving it.

McNulty creates several of the pieces through tasks that he dooms to failure. For instance, in "Replication II," he sets out to make copies of a 6-foot-tall black column of wood using only his eye as a measure. He complicates the task by successively copying the previous copy rather than the original. Like the game of telephone, the further you go down the line of 30 copies, which are hung on the wall, the further removed you get from the original. By the time the artist gets to the last one, the originally straight lines of the first column have morphed into bulges and curves.

In a similar vein, McNulty made one drawing a day for a year in which he tried to draw a perfect circle freehand. Needless to say, each is different and none is perfect. Then he compiled them all in a five-minute video that looks like a succession of quivering lassos.

These futile endeavors bring to mind Sisyphus, the greedy king of Greek myth condemned for all eternity to roll a boulder up a hill only to have it roll back down when he hit the top. The difference is that McNulty does not see his boulder-rolling as a punishment of the damned. To him the will to keep trying, to aim for perfection, is a trait to celebrate. He also feels that his art brings honor to the repetitive, mundane activities that are part of life.

Besides, he finds the repetition a pleasurable activity. "It's very meditative," he says.

Making "Cube II" must have given him plenty of time to think. For this piece, he cut a 5-foot-tall chunk of wood into 24,576 teeny cubes and then glued them back together. Each of the 96 rows of cubes took three hours to lay, so that gave him 12 days' worth of cogitation.

And here's what was on his mind.

"I was thinking about the way we structure knowledge," he explains. "How we break it into small parts or reassemble them to make sense of them. As we do that, what are we learning and what are we missing?"

McNulty also finds that failure has its own rewards. For instance, he used green wood for the 49 columns in his installation "Replication Field." The wood cracked as it dried, leaving random fissures in the columns.

"I didn't intend the cracks, but I was struck by their beauty," he says. "The material had the final say."

This quirkiness is what distinguishes the piece from the outdoor sculpture down the street by his minimalist forebear Sol LeWitt. "Cube II" is so endearingly messy that it stands apart from first-generation minimalism.

For every viewer who makes the historical connection, there is another who will find the work hard to accept.

"People get terribly upset by the work," says McNulty. "Someone once said it was an insult to his intelligence.

"I think they want a kind of entertainment or a show of evident skill. They are not willing to think of art as the beginning of a thought."

Through May 22. Saltworks Gallery. 635 Angier Ave., Atlanta. 404-876-8000.

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