

Measuring the World

Christopher McNulty draws the folly of reason

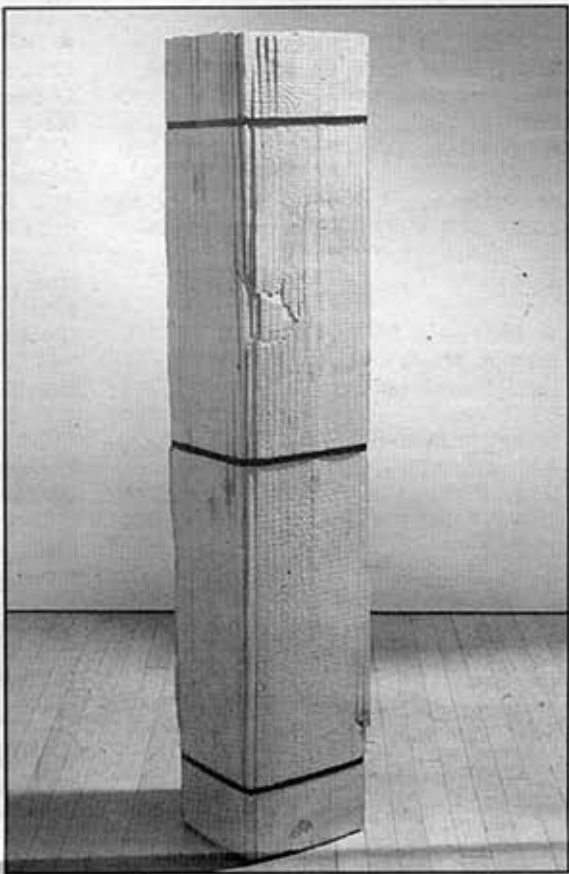
America is right to stick with the imperial system of measurement, all those clumsy feet, inches, pounds and gallons. It's not a matter of national chauvinism, it's just that there is a basic problem with the metric system. That scheme, with all its rationality and reason, posits a universe without human beings. As though, that is, the universe were measuring itself.

Christopher McNulty, in his conceptual sculptures and drawings (on view at Dean Jensen Gallery through Dec. 1), makes the case that if people are measuring the world, it is not for the world's sake, but to allow people to better understand their place in it. He takes the idiosyncratic antecedents of the imperial system to their logical extremes—that mythical thumb length that set the standard so long ago—and creates systems based on units of his own devising. In doing so, he makes artworks that are metaphors for artmaking and that reveal the folly of attempting to order the universe with reason alone.

McNulty's artworks are minimal excursions into ideal geometries. He attempts to draw, freehand, straight lines. He attempts to cut the same shape, over and over, from a piece of wood, without a template. He divides a length of paper into equal-sized units. For the most part, the works have unrefined surfaces, the pieces are stacked or simply banded together, the paper just tacked onto the wall. All the works, in some way or other, function as measuring instruments, a means of discerning (or rather imposing) order on an unruly environment. There is the hand-drawn graph paper of "Map," the edges of which mockingly curl away from the flat wall whose form they limn. In "Impotent II," several dozen nails are driven in a straight line into a long horizontal board, equidistant from one another and to the same depth.

McNulty's most basic measurement unit resembles a length of parting stop, the thin strip of wood—roughly square when viewed on end—that holds a window sash into its frame. "Replication" is comprised of 48 lengths of this strip, each painted black and affixed in a row on the wall. Each piece was cut by hand on a band saw, using the previously cut length as a pattern. Like a whispered message in the kid's game called Telephone or birds evolving from dinosaurs, the original shape mutates and morphs with each cut, becoming wider and wavy and almost unrelated to its precedents. "Measure VII" is made of a few hundred pieces of the same strip, each cut by hand from a larger board and to the length, a statement avers, of the artist's body from head to toe.

McNulty's objects are visually compelling, even beautiful in their stripped down forms and implicit repetitive actions. None of these works is true, in the engineer-



"Measure"

ing sense of that word. None is perfect. You can't divide a piece of paper exactly in half using only your eyes, hands and a pencil. The lines aren't straight, the lengths and widths and shapes vary astoundingly. The only regularity that can be expected from these measures, in fact, is their variation.

McNulty's work emerges, formally, from the tradition of minimalism. But while the minimalists wanted to reduce art to its basic and universal elements in a sort of metric system for art, McNulty invests those elements, those lines and measures, with an overwhelming humanity. His art can't be reduced; it's begging you to let it expand, explode, fill up the whole world with McNulty-sized strips of unsanded wood. They turn minimalism on its head. There is no universal system. There is only the body, the individual and his desire to relate himself, intellectually and emotionally, to his environment, to his expanding universe.

"Elusions," the show's title, is a word that would have been used by Edmund Spenser, and it means "deceptions." It seems that what's deceiving is the tension between science and art, with their apparently divergent truths. Science and engineering voice the truths to which we all agree. Art's truths are more idiosyncratic truths, truths at which each individual arrives ... well ... individually. Art succeeds when we allow ourselves to be measured by another's private system.

A former editor of Art Muscle Magazine, Nathan Guequierre's reviews have appeared in publications around this country and in Europe, including New Art Examiner, American Ceramics and Austria Kultur. He is the author of CitySmart: Milwaukee.