

ART PAPERS

ATLANTA, GEORGIA

By Lisa Kurzner

Consisting of wooden sculptures modeled after the cube and grid, **CHRISTOPHER MCNULTY'S** recent show (*Saltworks Gallery, April 3—May 22, 2004*) explored Minimalism's tenets and processes, adapting that movement's intellectual rigor to a personal quest for perfection in the everyday. *Replication Field* (2003), comprising multiple rows of blackened wooden columns, filled most of the gallery. *Replication II*, a similar piece, hung on an adjacent wall. Behind this work stood two singular carved blond wood pieces, one on the floor, the other on a low pedestal, supported by two drawings and a drawn animation. *Replication Field*, structured according to repetition and uniformity, suggests genetic cloning. Here, McNulty carved forty-nine wooden columns, using the previous one as a model for the next in an attempt to strike a "perfect" column as he challenged nature with his band saw, strength, skill and eye. Yet perfection eluded him; the uncured poplar columns bear uneven marks of the artist's hand and intermittent cracks from the drying process. The six-foot high elements, coated in graphite and hand-hewn along all edges, were anchored on the concrete floor by rust-coated steel pedestals, as thin as paper coasters, that in themselves mapped out the rational coordinates of a two-dimensional field. Placed about three feet apart, the

columns barely allowed visitors to fit between their upright sculptural elements—which present as a field of human-scale sentries—to explore the space. Such exploring caused viewers discomfort by making them wonder if the columns would move or topple.

The visual and intellectual language of McNulty's work references artistic practices of the 1960s and 70s in its vocabulary of fields, grids and repeated, reductive forms. By relying on such underlying systems and structures—language, in the drawing *Order* (2002), or the drawn grid of *Map* (2001)—McNulty recasts cerebral concerns of earlier generations of American artists. But McNulty is an object-maker. His work exudes a passion for materials that belies the Cartesian nature of his practice. The work is stubborn and quixotic; the labor of the enterprise germane to his goals. He presents an interesting case for artists working in a reductive mode today. While unthinkable without the precedent of Carl Andre's early wooden sculptures, in turn indebted to Constantin Brancusi as well as the Quincy railroad yards, McNulty nevertheless rejects that departure from the modernist lineage, retaining in his sculpture clear references to human scale, modeled sculpture on its base, and the priapic nature of traditional sculpture that Andre undermined in his additive floor pieces.

Replication Field references forests as well as Walter De Maria's *Lightning Field* or Sol LeWitt's

felled trees into sculpture speaks directly to McNulty's passion for process. An earlier outdoor piece *A Part* (2000) had McNulty combing a part through high grasses, and filming the results. Many drawings, including the animation of McNulty's hand drawing a circle shown here—a year-long daily exercise for him—measure human inexactitude against an unattainable ideal.

By infusing his work with personal anxiety and emotion, evident in the marks of his self-assigned tasks, McNulty declares himself an Expressionist, albeit one working with a stringent visual vocabulary. One wonders, however, if the vocabulary has the same weighty voice in its present renderings. Whereas process took precedence for his forerunners, McNulty seems to relish idiosyncratic results above all. For him, there's optimism in failure.



Christopher McNulty, *Replication Field*, 2003, wood, graphite, steel, 216 by 216 by 72 inches (photo by David Naugle courtesy the artist and Saltworks Gallery).

mathematical open cube sculptures of the 1960s. By moving nature into the white cube gallery space, he brings an aspect of land art with it. It's a more tempered nature than DeMaria's *Earth Room*, learned from English artists such as Andy Goldsworthy or David Nash. Nash's reworking of burned,