

Susana Reisman

Standardizing Nature: Trees, Wood, Lumber



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Wood culture, or the pathos of our fallacies

by Mark A. Cheetham

Search 'wood culture' and you will discover an eclectic array of engagements with this fundamental product of nature, from woodworking hobbyists to ecologists keen on establishing a World Wood Day. Susana Reisman's exhibition joins and extends the imperative to understand the social and material functions of wood in our everyday lives. She is a keen observer of the systems, habits of thought, and revealing exceptions to well-worn patterns of belief and behaviour around wood. In questioning the ubiquitous though largely unnoticed transformations from trees to wood to lumber, Reisman avoids the didactic, instead encouraging us to think differently about an element crucial to our lives.

Forests figure in the mythological and practical origins of many societies.¹ Today, their decimation is a primary ecological concern. While Reisman's drawings, photographs and sculptures can evoke the pathos of our insatiable appetite for and squandering of this diminishing resource, she works primarily on a more immediate plane to uncover what we easily ignore in the ever-present transformations of wood. If written and spoken language always simplifies differences among objects, speakers, and readers for the sake of ready communication, 'tree' and 'wood' are already cultural commodifications. 'Lumber,' as Reisman reveals, is even more overtly standardized by its industrial processing and by the increasing specifications of language. 'Dimensional lumber' is wood regularized into 'two by fours' and similar basic units. Anachronistic as the imperial measurement system's terms may sound, the synecdoche of the human body in its reference to 'feet,' for example, is key to



House Frame, 16 × 24 inch archival pigment print, 2013

Reisman's approach. She personalizes even highly processed lumber to return our thoughts to the trees within or behind these instrumental products. Ironically, it is through personification—specifically the long maligned practice of 'pathetic fallacy,' in which non-human objects are lent human qualities and emotions—that she lets trees be themselves. John Ruskin coined the term in 1856 to counter the Romantic tendency to identify reality with human emotion. Yet as he showed, this "fallacy" does validly explore human sentiment. As with the weather, when we talk about nature, we are talking about ourselves. Perhaps this realization also allows reality to be seen as separate from our experience.

"There is no obligatory starting point, no moralistic teleology as she arranges both different media and diverse takes on the roles of wood in our culture."

Reisman sets her meditations on trees, wood, and lumber into easy dialogue. There is no obligatory starting point, no moralistic teleology as she arranges both different media and diverse takes on the roles of wood in our culture. Committed to the handwork that remains a part of the lumber industry and woodworking, Reisman employs her own carpentry skills to enunciate what standardization seeks to deny, the individuality of even the most processed lumber. She creates a sculptural forest in *Dressed Lumber*, a group portrait-like stand of individual pieces. Each is marked by Reisman with the everyday tools of the construction industry—tape, graphite, household paint—to display



6"×1"×36" Rough-cut slab, 28 × 20 inch archival pigment print, 2013

peculiar, often non-standard, features. The anonymity of the lumber yard is removed. Reisman instead raises the group on a platform and in this move echoes Modernist sculptural presentations by Brancusi, Ernst, Giacometti, and Penone. While the art historical reverberations are significant, more important is her recollection of the forest, of trees in a less regimented and processed form.

Closely allied to *Dressed Lumber* are individual portrayals such as *6"×1"×36" Rough-cut slab*, which Reisman presents as photographs against a neutral backdrop to underscore their staging as portraiture. Titles in this series redeploy, against themselves, the functional, descriptive designations in the lexicon of lumber used by builders. Here Reisman singles out just one potentially useful board within the larger piece of raw wood. Like a sawyer, the highly skilled worker who can tell which sections of standardized lumber can be cut most efficiently from a log, she imagines nature metamorphosed, but now into art rather than merchandise. Where connections between trees, wood, and lumber are suppressed in the lumber industry, Reisman reinstates a sense of process and linkage.



Cords, 16 × 24 inch archival pigment print, 2013

One remarkable feature that Reisman makes visible in industrially treated lumber is the 'finger joint,' a machine-produced lock via which intercalated pieces of wood form a standardized unit. Finger joints used to be made by hand, a contrast that suggests a loose analogy between Reisman's analogue sculptural work and her equal devotion to digital photography. The diverse elements of *Standardizing Nature* converse across both formats. Reisman's digital photographs survey a range of timber practices: carefully planted tree farms, industrial harvesting, and more and less professional uses of wood products. *House Frame* displays a multivalent theme that governs the suite. We look out onto 'nature' through the partly framed—that is, constructed—wall of a house. A large opening is established by well-known players in the standardized lumber vocabulary. So immediately recognizable is this sight that we might miss how lumber unavoidably structures our view of two other dimensions of wood's past and present in nature: a forest in the background and a seemingly rejected branch in the cleared but as yet not 'landscaped' area adjacent to the house's foundation. This bough has been discarded, yet it proclaims its uncertain status in a way reminiscent of Emily Carr's painting *Scorned as Timber, Beloved of the Sky* (1935), in which a lone tree has been abandoned in a chaotic forest clear-cut.

The pathos in this and other of Reisman's images is clear, more so because it is balanced by an unapologetically beautiful image such as *Cords*. An extensive storehouse of firewood stands ready to hand, embraced, it seems, by a row of large conifers. The cut wood might seem to be the natural offspring of trees if we adopt the widespread imperialistic fallacy that takes nature as a mere resource at our disposal. But the beauty, ease, and naturalness of this photograph also make us think that even a renewable resource such as wood requires more than management to last into the future.

¹ See Robert Pogue Harrison, *Forests: the shadow of civilization*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

Cover image

Oriented strand board,
16 × 24 inch archival
pigment print, 2013

Opposite page

*1"×1"×4" Pressure Treated
Nailing Strip*, 28 × 20 inch
archival pigment print, 2013



Log pile (brow), 16 × 24 inch archival pigment print, 2013

Gallery 44 Centre for Contemporary Photography is a non-profit artist-run centre committed to photography as a multi-faceted and ever-changing artform. Founded in 1979 to establish a supportive environment for the development of photography, Gallery 44's mandate is to provide a context for reflection and dialogue on contemporary photography and its related practices. Gallery 44 offers exhibition and publication opportunities to national and international artists, award-winning education programs, and affordable production facilities for artists. Through its programs, Gallery 44 is engaged in changing conceptions of the photographic image and its modes of production.

Susana Reisman was born in Caracas, Venezuela in 1977. She received a BA in Economics from Wellesley College (Boston, 1999) and an MFA in photography from the Rochester Institute of Technology (Rochester, 2005). After teaching photography for a number of years, Susana now dedicates her time to making art and running Circuit Gallery. She lives and works in Toronto.

Mark A. Cheetham writes on art theory, art, and visual culture from c. 1700 to the present & is active as a curator of contemporary art. His co-curated exhibit *Jack Chambers: The Light From the Darkness / Silver Paintings and Film* received an OAAG 'best exhibition' award in 2011. He received the Art Journal Award from the College Art Association of America for "Matting the Monochrome: Malevich, Klein, & Now" (2006). His book *Artwriting, Nation, and Cosmopolitanism in Britain: The "Englishness" of English Art Theory*, was published in 2012. His current research, *Manipulated Landscapes*, examines the understanding of 'nature' in ecological art. Cheetham teaches art history at the University of Toronto.

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