

Meet Hugh: Hugh Hayden Adam Carr

Hugh Hayden deploys natural materials such as feathers and wood in sculptures that seemingly camouflage themselves. Often they appear to be something that they are in fact not, and in this subtle yet profound way they grapple with issues of race, class, and identity. And there is a clear link between the work Hayden makes and his own personality. When you meet the artist, his charisma is immediately striking, perhaps partly thanks to his Texas accent. He has a knack for linking people together effortlessly, to make any social situation feel easy.

Consider for example Hayden's pieces from earlier in the decade that seem to conceal yet assimilate to various contexts and situations, positioning these aspects in a larger conversation linked to the human condition. *Zelig* (2013) might be quickly dismissed as a couple of logs, one stacked on the other—perhaps intended as an act of displacement, an invocation of the natural world and our ability to reflect upon it in the apparently safe confines of the gallery space. Yet closer inspection unearths a whole other web of interpretive possibilities: the “bark” is composed of grouse feathers that surreally mimic the surface of a log. Likewise disguised is *Armor* (2014), in which bark from a cherry tree is applied to a Burberry coat, a brand synonymous with British heritage and outdoor lifestyles as well as class aspirations. Hayden invokes these by no means accidentally; they are amplified further in other pieces such as the film *Hugh the Hunter* (2015). Here, Hayden assumes the role of a hunter stalking the woodlands and hills of Cairnie, Scotland, wearing a classic hunter's tweed jacket and breeches—yet the story is a cautionary tale of the hunter becoming the hunted. All of these works bring together quite disparate social realities, distilled through the lens of the artist's biography and lived experience—connecting for instance Dallas, Texas, where he was born and raised, and the remote highlands of Scotland, where he was residing during much of the works' making.

Wood has become more and more central for artist. While one could think of its use in relation to, say, Giuseppe Penone's sculpting of wood to reveal trees within trees, or Oscar Tuazon's taking of the material to its breaking point, and of course Land art and its many proponents, Hayden's use attests much more to social concerns. *America* (2018), *The Jones Part 3* (2018), and *Oreo* (2018) adopt types of trees indigenous to the Mexico–U.S. border, not far from his hometown of Dallas. Each was handpicked by the artist for its particular characteristics—for instance its grain or odd growth patterns. Rigorously sculpted through hand carving and sanding, in the artist's hands the wood morphs into corrupted and subverted signifiers of the American dream. In *Oreo* a child's crib appears to turn in on itself with menacing thorns, denying any implication of safety and care and instead delighting in their opposites—imprisonment and torture. *America* is modeled on the artist's childhood kitchen table, yet it is hardly a place for conversation, for family gathering and bonding; its spikes and thorns make it instead a site for risk, for grave danger to oneself and the family unit.

That Hayden's work suggests a position of extremity, his layering of contexts, social circles, and diverging

identities is reflexive and often poetic. For instance the three 2018 works discussed just previously are made from mesquite trees, which are native to his childhood home but also invoke a region with a fraught political context in the present. Mesquite trees have long been associated with trash, additionally respected for their capacity to grow in harsh, seemingly unfavorable terrain. Such a condition suggests a profound analogy not only to this particular constellation of works but to Hayden's entire working practice, which is a testament to the perseverance of disparaged people inhabiting a land that is likewise becoming ever more adverse and unpropitious.



153 Hugh Hayden, *America* (detail), 2018. © Hugh Hayden. Courtesy: Lisson Gallery

154 Hugh Hayden, *Armor*, 2014. Courtesy: the artist

155 Hugh Hayden, *The Jones Part 3* (detail), 2018. © Hugh Hayden. Courtesy: Lisson Gallery

