

Robert Kinmont:

Trying to Understand Where I Grew Up



October 31, 2015–January 24, 2016
DI ROSA, NAPA

Robert Kinmont:

"My work is evidence of who I am, what I have discovered, what I have experienced."¹

Robert Kinmont (b. 1937) is no stranger to solitude. The artist grew up in the Owens Valley five miles outside of Bishop, a small desert town of 3,000 people in the Eastern Sierra region of California. Just north of Independence and Big Pine and nestled between mountain ranges towering 14,000 feet, Kinmont's hometown is located in an unusual convergence of topography—snow-capped peaks met by pine forests and high desert terrain—that easily dwarfs the human scale but emboldens the human spirit. It's the kind of stunning environment that prompts an enduring obsession with the land, enough to fuel a lifetime of work.

This exhibition, *Trying to understand where I grew up*, takes its title from a 1975 Kinmont work by the same name: three well-worn photographs meticulously gridded, lined up, and taped together by hand to form a panoramic view of a breathtaking landscape. The scene, of course, is the Owens Valley, and depicts a sight of two extremes: the vastness of the natural world and the expanse of the human-made, open road. Frayed and torn edges indicate that the artist has fervently returned to this series of images over and over, trying to make sense of such wild, unruly, and overwhelming surroundings. Just as Kinmont's hands have shaped these photographs, so too has the depicted landscape deeply shaped Kinmont. But for the artist, the work has a more universal meaning; in his own words, it "applies to a person's attempt to understand his source."² We can imagine the meditative, orderly grid—a pattern that emerges in almost every aspect of our daily lives—extending beyond the confines of Kinmont's images to any environment one might call home. The work then acts as a conceptual tool: a compass for navigating the

tricky terrain of life, but more importantly for attempting to locate the quiet source of creativity that resides in each of us. To examine this work and its inherent tensions, is to peer into the very essence of what inspires the artist's practice.

Kinmont came to prominence in the late 1960s and '70s, before stepping away from the art world for over three decades. In the long interval between artistic careers, Kinmont devoted himself to the study of Zen Buddhism and meditation and earned a living through teaching and carpentry. Over thirty years ago, he settled on the west side of Sonoma where he still resides today. While Kinmont continues to make work largely inspired by the desert landscapes of his youth, his current surroundings are equally important to his process. In a rural backyard, covered by oak trees bordering an arroyo, stands his studio filled with several works in various states of completion. Perhaps most striking is the visual evidence of the artist's thoughts and ideas covering most of the surrounding walls and surfaces.

The steady stream of consciousness that populates Kinmont's studio operates as his primary medium. This approach is illustrated no more clearly than in *Listen* (2013), one of the artist's most significant works to date: a large, wall-length installation, comprised of three 4 x 8 foot sheets of plywood and seven white archival glass-shielded boxes—their lids leaning against the wall behind—resting on a low plinth-like shelf. The wooden backdrop in this iteration of the work at di Rosa is comprised of plywood sheets pulled directly off the wall of the artist's studio. Replete with faded evidence of past and future works in pencil notes

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and markings etched directly onto the surface, the wooden sheets function as a temporary home for ideas, housing a variety of pinned-up photographs, texts, and random objects. Each of the boxes contain fragments of the artist's unresolved, evolving thoughts recorded in writing on an array of surfaces—restaurant napkins, store receipts, driving maps. As such, the piece literally brings the studio space into the gallery. Of his process, Kinmont has said, "I have learned to listen for ideas that appear in an ongoing random way...The origination and evolution of some of my recent pieces is documented in many fragmented notes and more refined subsequent sketches."³ The modesty of his materials paired with his direct aesthetic highlight his commitment to the prominence of thought and method before all else.

In 2004, Kinmont's work captured the attention of artist, curator, and scholar Julie Ault as she leafed through Lucy Lippard's seminal text *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*. Ault noted, "I paused with fresh interest on the photograph of a man doing a handstand atop a rocky peak in a big-skied landscape. His straight graceful form appears effortless, despite being inches away from a substantial plunge. The image filled me with exhilarating tension and elicited contradictory impressions of gravity and airiness, serenity and adventure, audacity and fright."⁴ She is describing the first pose in Kinmont's early photographic series *8 Natural Handstands* (1969), which chronicles the artist teetering on his hands in a variety of outdoor environments, descending progressively in their palpable danger until the inverted artist is nestled deeply in a serene grove of pine trees. With an approach reminiscent of a Zen master, Kinmont started with the most challenging of a chosen, isolated action, which, in his words, "goes from being conspicuous to being inconspicuous but doing the same thing the whole time." His thought was: "what's the difference?"⁵ This question can be applied to Kinmont's overarching oeuvre;



8 Natural Handstands (detail), 1969/2005

the distinctions between art and life, and, conversely, their entanglement, provide the foundation of his work.

His early experiments in 8mm film, several of which have been transferred to video and are shown here for the first time, capture intimate moments of daily life. The split screen *Artist's Life* (1971/2013) juxtaposes Kinmont's act of picking the feathers of a duck alongside the disembodied arms and hands of Kinmont and his artist friend Tom Dan tuning radios at the same time. Of the work, Kinmont states, "It is a conceptual model...to illustrate that you can't listen to two concepts simultaneously. You have to choose...This relationship has implications for making art."⁶ The work can perhaps be seen as foreshadowing the artist's own eventual but temporary decision to abandon art making to focus on his family and studies. Similarly, *I Finally Got the Kids' Room Fixed Up* (1971) is a moving color snapshot of the attic space Kinmont set up for his children in a San Anselmo rental he was living in while commuting to graduate school at UC Davis. As the camera traces the outline of the room, we see modest emblems of childhood—books, records, toys, and musical instruments—lining the walls encased in furniture the artist built by hand. The work functions as a living abstraction of place and highlights the act of making something out of nothing. In *Anna is Afraid of Tommy Skinner* (1971), Kinmont creates a black-and-white filmic portrait of a young classmate of his daughter Anna. As we watch Skinner, standing alone against a backdrop of shrubs, tension and anticipation build as he

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fidgets and aggressively tugs leaves from the branches dangling above him. His volatile, restless characteristics begin to emerge unprompted. *Without Harm* (1971) records an inverted shot of San Quentin State Prison, a meditation on the upended lives of those held inside. Collectively, Kinmont's films mirror aspects of his early performative works and black-and-white photographic series in their isolation of specific actions or subjects. Taken together, the films elevate daily observations, gestures, and rituals to the status of works of art.

Kinmont's work, in large part, unpacks his lived experience of the desert terrain as both a physical and abstracted locale. While the artist has never aligned himself with any one tribe or artistic movement, his studies at San Francisco Art Institute and the University of California, Davis, in the early '70s, alongside the likes of Bruce Nauman and William T. Wiley, clearly provided a foundational context for the development of his unique practice. While Nauman conducted his early experimental works in the confines of the studio, Kinmont could be found on the edges of the landscape. However, the affinities between the two artists existed in a shared respect of creative action in and of itself, which they both valued above objects created for gallery display. Kinmont has also often been aligned with other key contemporary California conceptual artists of the time, such as Ed Ruscha and John Baldessari in their use of supplemental modes of documentation through text, serial photography, and video, and David Ireland in his melding of art and life,⁷ but Kinmont's work stands apart in its inextricable bond with the raw California landscape, evident in his recurrent and ongoing use of natural elements.⁸ For example, *Source Support* (1970–1973), a precarious minimal sculpture made of wood, copper, and water, relies on the mindfulness of consistent daily care to maintain its structural integrity. This work perhaps



Source Support, 1970–1973

most clearly manifests the artist's formal and ideological underpinnings. A simple cube structure, whose primary elements consist of four vertical wooden legs conjoined by two tiers of horizontal cross bars, support four copper water sources which sit atop each of the structure's corners. Copper tubing extends from the vessels, running down each leg and entering into the structure's eight joints. The work stands erect, without any hint of hardware, by requiring someone to pour water into each of the vessels every day to expand the wood and secure the structure, ensuring that the sculpture doesn't come tumbling down.

Other early pieces, which were also made with the intention of viewer interaction, cement Kinmont's conceptual interests with his expertise in woodworking. *Sweet heart chair* (1971), is a simple, straight-back, wooden chair whose seat is engraved with hearts so that their impression is left on the backside of the participant, and *Sit on the Floor* (1971) an old fashioned flip-top wooden school desk with its legs removed, is filled with sagebrush and engraved with the instructions "Sit on the Floor." Both works were initially presented in a four-person show at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (with John C. Fernie, Tony May, and Jim Melchert) as part of the "Arts of San Francisco 1971" series within the confines of their own separate rooms constructed by the artist. The room for *Sweet heart chair* featured a placard on the door

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that stated: "Come in—lock the door, undress, and sit down."⁹ The three-seat school desk *I'm Not Going to Tell You All My Secrets* (1971), along with *Sit on the Floor*, nod to the artist's interests in learning and education (Kinmont founded his own art school, Coyote, in Bishop in the mid-'70's), as well as reference his recurrent use of the wooden container. This material exploration continues in a number of recent works such as *127 Willow Forks (This is Who I Am)* (2010) and *False Security 1* (2010), both of which are comprised of wooden crates and serve as receptacles for preserving Bishop-sourced materials such as willow branches and stone. Taken as a whole, the four elements Kinmont considers essential to his artistic language—the conceptual, structural, natural, and civic—remain common threads throughout the artist's work.

Kinmont's pieces from the past year highlight copper as their primary medium, a material that the artist has described as "warm and friendly" and "malleable in a way that is physical and approachable for the viewer."¹⁰ In these sculptures, his containers have grown substantially in size, a fitting match to the continuing swell of ideas that flow forth from the artist's mind. *Want* and *no shelter for the artist* (both 2015) act as two sides of the same coin: the former is a sealed copper cube topped with repeating script of the word "wait," sitting in a tray of dirt as though it has sprouted, and the latter is a triangular prism-shaped vessel filled with the snow white plumage of a goose, revealing the possibilities of what lies within. Kinmont's words most eloquently elucidate the relationship between the two structures, "If you want to be an artist, you have to learn how to wait. Your only shelter is your art."¹¹

Kinmont describes art as something that represents footprints of existence. While Bishop remains the artist's most important muse both materially and conceptually, it is clear that Kinmont's inspiration has been and continues to be informed by his own journey through

life. Like the open road illustrated in *Trying to understand where I grew up* that extends into the great unknown, and the grid that attempts to contain it, his work persists in provoking the tensions between the natural world and the human-made, the definite and the infinite, the interior and the exterior, art and life. Kinmont's work approaches universal themes by addressing timeless existential questions—just as we continue to probe, to question, and to try to understand our own place in the world.

—Amy Owen, Curator

Notes

1. "A Conversation between Robert Kinmont and Aoife Rosenmeyer," in *Robert Kinmont* (Milano, Mousse Publishing, 2013), 13.
2. Robert Kinmont, e-mail to the author, October 14, 2015.
3. *Ibid.*, 14.
4. Julie Ault, *In Step With the Desert: The Morphology of Robert Kinmont* (New York: Alexander and Bonin, 2009), 1.
5. Kinmont and Rosenmeyer, 12.
6. Kinmont, e-mail to the author, October 11, 2015.
7. See Connie Lewallen and Karen Moss, *State of Mind: New California Art Circa 1970* (London: University of California Press, Ltd., 2011).
8. Kinmont has also been affiliated with the Land Art Movement per his inclusion in the exhibition *Ends of the Earth: Land Art to 1974*.
9. Tanya Zimbardo, October 2, 2009 (12:46 p.m.), comment on Joseph del Pesco, "California Lacuna: Robert Kinmont," *SFMOMA Open Space*, October 2009, <http://openspace.sfmoma.org/2009/10/robert-kinmont/>.
10. Ault, 5.
11. Kinmont, e-mail to the author October 16, 2016.

Exhibition Checklist:

In the listing of dimensions, height precedes width precedes depth.

26 Dead Animals, 1967–1970/2011

Set of 16 silver gelatin prints
8 x 8 in. each

8 Natural Handstands, 1969/2005

Set of 9 silver gelatin prints
8 x 8 in. each

My Favorite Dirt Roads, 1969/2008

Set of 17 silver gelatin prints
11½ x 10⅞ in. each



Just about the right size, 1970
Set of 9 silver gelatin prints
12⅞ x 10 in. each

Source Support, 1970–1973
Wood, copper, and water
42 x 32½ x 30½ in.

This is my Hand, 1970
Set of 10 vintage prints
8 x 8 in. each

Anna is Afraid of Tommy Skinner, 1971
Single-channel video
projection, looping
1 min. 10 sec.

Artist's Life, 1971/2013
Single-channel video
projection, looping
2 min. 40 sec.

I Finally Got the Kids' Room Fixed Up, 1971

Single-channel video
projection, looping
3 min.

I'm Not Going to Tell You All My Secrets, 1971

Cherrywood
30 x 23 x 72 in.
Collection of Richard Reisman

Material Container, 1971/2015
Douglas fir, balsa wood
gliders, leather, feathers, and
single-channel looping video
on monitor
37½ x 17¾ x 38½ in. (with
lid open); Monitor: 12 x 15 in.



Sit on the floor, 1971
Cherrywood and sage
6¾ x 23¾ x 23½ in.

Sweet heart chair, 1971
Cherrywood
35½ x 16½ x 17 in.
Collection of di Rosa, Napa

Without Harm, 1971
Single-channel video
projection, looping
6 min. 6 sec.

Plumb Bob, 1973–2014
Silver gelatin print on Ilford
paper
14 x 10⅞ in.

Box with willow sticks hollowed out and filled with sage, 1974–1975
Pine, willow, and sage
Box: 3⅞ x 52 x 5 in.

Trying to understand where I grew up, 1975

3 color photographs, tape,
tape residue, and pencil
mounted on Fuji crystal
archive paper in 2 parts
9¼ x 19 in.
Collection of Robert Kinmont

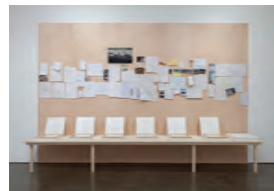
Log Hollowed Out and Filled with the Memory of the Artist, 2009

Hollow cottonwood log,
and pencil
69 x 24 x 20 in.

False Security 1, 2010
Birch plywood, granite, pine,
steel wire, aluminum wire,
brass screws, paint, and pencil
8¾ x 33⅜ x 32½ in.

127 Willow Forks (This is Who I Am), 2010

Willow, pine, birch plywood,
and maple
84 x 153 x 45 in.
Private collection



Listen, 2013
Plywood, paper, metal,
photographs, glass, and wire
96½ x 145½ x 26½ in.

thinking above the water, 2013
Copper and water
69 x 96 x 19¼ in.

WAIT (filled with 28 willows), 2013
Copper and willow
7½ x 120 x 7½ in.

About the Artist:

Robert Kinmont was born in Los Angeles in 1937 and grew up in Bishop, CA. He received his BFA from San Francisco Art Institute in 1970 and his MFA from the University of California, Davis, in 1971. From 1968 to 1981, he exhibited at the San Francisco Museum of Art; the de Young Museum, San Francisco; the Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, among others. During this time Kinmont also held teaching positions at Ontario College of Art, San Francisco Academy of Art, University of California, Berkeley, and San Francisco Art Institute. In 1976, he founded and taught at Coyote, an art school in Bishop, CA. From 1981 to 2004, Kinmont studied Buddhism and worked as a carpenter. He returned to his artistic practice in 2005, and has since exhibited in several group exhibitions including *State of Mind: New California Art Circa 1970*, co-organized by the Berkeley Art Museum and the Orange County Museum of Art; *Ends of the Earth: Art of the Land to 1974* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; and *Afterlife: A Constellation*, curated by Julie Ault as part of the 2014 Whitney Biennial. He has also had solo exhibitions at Alexander and Bonin, New York (2009, 2011) and RaebervonStenglin, Zurich (2012, 2015). He lives and works in Sonoma, CA.

JUST LISTEN, 2014
Pine, glass, copper, paper, and
snow goose feathers
13½ x 39 x 10⅞ in.

Life is full of water and mistakes, 2014
Copper and dirt
8⅞ x 89¼ x 4 in.

log covered with advice, 2014
Cottonwood and copper
12 x 60 in.



the argument, 2014
Copper, dirt, and feathers
60 x 60 x 14 in.

waiting and a broken letter, 2014
Maple, copper, paper,
polyester resin, and glass
11¼ x 25¾ x 20½ in.

no shelter for the artist, 2015
Copper and feathers
Triangular prism:
42 x 40 x 40 x 40 in.

Waiting for Duck Season, 2015
Douglas fir and hunting
clothing
Boxes: 24 x 26 x 71 in. and
10½ x 26 x 34½ in.

Want, 2015
Copper, galvanized metal,
and dirt
Cube: 44 x 35 x 35 in.
Tray: 4 x 49 x 49 in.

All works courtesy of the artist,
Alexander and Bonin, New
York, and RaebervonStenglin,
Zurich, unless otherwise
noted. Checklist as of date of
publication; some changes
may occur.

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