



Charles Ray

Hinoki, Japanese cypress wood, 2007

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Dieci anni fa, mentre guidavo lungo la costa della California centrale, in un prato ai margini della Highway 101 ho scorto un albero caduto. Immediatamente ho sentito un forte richiamo. Non solo il tronco era bellissimo, ma, ai miei occhi, si fondeva perfettamente col prato su cui era disteso. Giaceva al suolo da almeno venti o trent'anni, e gli effetti del tempo, degli insetti, delle radiazioni solari e della forza di gravità erano evidenti. Il tracollo finale sembrava, se non imminente, molto vicino. Le estremità del tronco erano perfettamente dettagliate e mi hanno guidato verso l'incavo che, in luogo del midollo, percorreva questa forma in tutta la sua lunghezza. La parte centrale del fusto era

molto semplice, in quanto la corteccia si era staccata ed era tornata nel terreno da molto tempo. Mentre il lento processo di disfacimento dell'albero avanzava, erbacce e frammenti di corteccia marcescente formavano un soffice letto che lo sosteneva e sosteneva il peso e la lunghezza dell'albero. Le crepe e le fenditure che percorrevano la sua superficie in senso trasversale erano l'effetto visibile dell'acqua ancora al lavoro all'interno del tronco stesso. Il tronco, rapito, non solo dall'albero e dal suo lento ritorno alla terra, ma anche dal prato come spazio per il legno che incorniciava lo svolgersi di questa vicenda. La trattava della prima di molte visite che, negli anni seguenti, avrei effettuato a quel luogo. Mi

● Ten years ago, while driving up the central coast of California, I spotted a fallen tree in a meadow just off Highway 101. I was instantly drawn to it.

It was not only a beautiful log but to my eyes it was perfectly embedded in the meadow where it had fallen. It had been on the ground perhaps 20 or 30 years. Pressure from the weather, insects, ultraviolet radiation and gravity were evident. If not imminent, total collapse appeared to be no more than a handful of years away.

The ends of the log were beautifully detailed and drew me into the hollowed-out core that ran through the entire length of the form. The middle of the log was simple as the bark had long fallen

away and returned to the ground. As the tree slowly decayed, dirt, grass and rotting bits of bark formed a soft bed cradling and supporting the weight and length of the tree. The cracks and splits that ran transversely through the form were visualisations of the forces at work within the log. I was mesmerised not only by the log and its slow return to the earth but also by the meadow as a pictorial space for this natural drama to unfold. This was the first of many visits I made to the meadow in the following few years. I was inspired to make a sculpture, but while I was taken by what was before my eyes I had no idea what I was observing. How could one begin such a project?



The tree was perfect where it was. To remove it would physically destroy it. Removal would also sever its relationship with the location, which was the source of its visual power. What material would one use to make a sculpture of this log? Where would the armature or core of the sculpture be? Was it located in the tree's relationship with the meadow and the ground to which it was returning? While taking trips to visit the meadow I also hiked around the backcountry of the central coast and studied many other logs. But with time I realised that I was only interested in this particular log and the visualised forces that ran through its topology. At one point I determined that its armature

could be its pneuma, the Greek word for breath, wind or life. I would make a great pneumatic structure. An inflatable sculpture of the log. The pressures that were bringing the log towards collapse would be countered by the optimism of air pressure. After visiting companies that specialise in large-scale inflatables, I realised that the tailoring of the form would bring an unwanted complexity to the surface. It then struck me that the breath or life of the sculpture could be manifested in the very act of sculpting. Making a wood carving of the log by starting from the inside and working my way out would bring a trajectory of life and intentionality to this great fallen tree. With several friends, a few

trucks and a good chainsaw I returned to the meadow and removed the log bit by bit over a two-week period. I brought the log's broken and cut-up parts back to my studio 150 miles to the south in Los Angeles. Once in the studio the log and my original vision of its embedment in the meadow were totally scrambled as it was in hundreds of pieces on my concrete floor. With a team of assistants I began making moulds from all the pieces of wood. From the moulds I made fibreglass positives. Eventually I had a huge fibreglass jigsaw puzzle of the original log. As the parts could only fit together in one way, it was a matter of careful assembly and time to create a 1:1 scale

fibreglass replica of the original log complete with both the interior and exterior topology. This fibreglass log served as a three-dimensional drawing that I sent to Osaka, Japan, where master woodworker Yaboku Mukoyoshi and his apprentices carved my vision into reality using Japanese cypress. I was drawn to Japanese wood workers because in Japan there is a tradition of copying work that is beyond restoration. When an old temple or Buddha can no longer be maintained it is remade. Mr Mukoyoshi and his team displayed great skill and patience in their involvement in this project. I visited often and as the years went by the project became a way of life for me. I had a difficult time

bringing the work to completion and allowing it to go out into the world. When I asked Mr Mukoyoshi about the wood and how it would behave over time, he told me that the wood would be fine for 400 years and then it would go into a crisis; after two hundred years of splitting and cracking it would then go into slow decline for another 400 years. I realised then that the wood, like the original log, had a life of its own and I was finally able to let my project go and hopefully breathe life into the world that surrounds it.