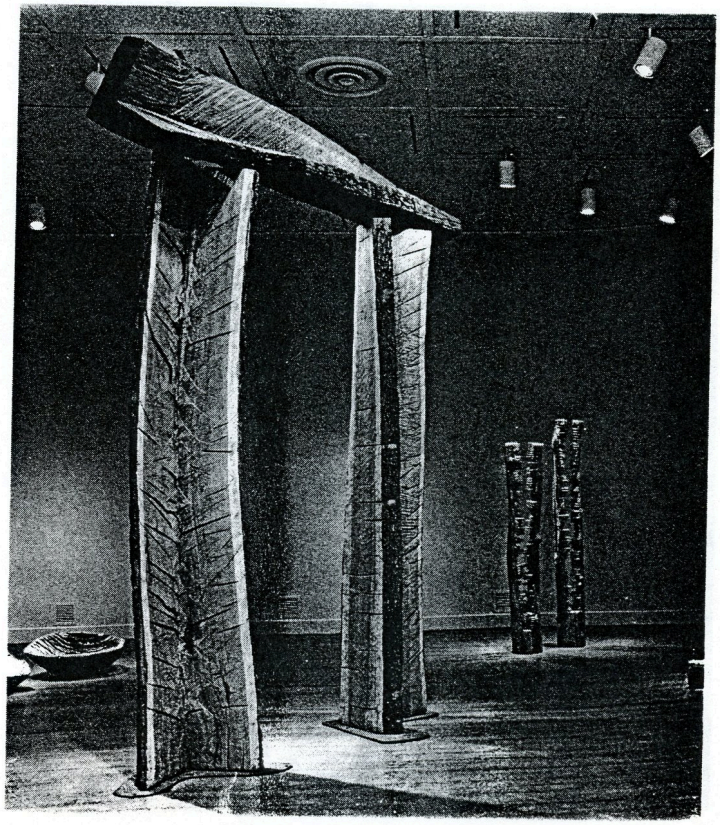
PHILIPPE
STAIB
GALLERY

CONTEMPORARY SCULPTURE

Emilie Benes Brzezinski: *Arch in Flight*, 1989, cherry; at Philippe Staib.



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Emilie Benes Brzezinski at Philippe Staib

Like forests of the same species that appear on separate continents, coincident art forms spring up as well. Emilie Benes Brzezinski, who works in Washington, D.C., is described in this exhibition's catalogue essay as being "shocked" when she discovered how much her recent wood sculpture was like that of the British sculptor David Nash. Other sculptors, too, have taken trees as a source for their "material truths"—notably Magdalena Jetelová and Ursula von Rydingsvard—but it was Nash's work that seemed overwhelmingly present in Brzezinski's solo exhibition this past season.

Brzezinski has been exhibiting throughout the '80s. Her early, cast-resin objects were based on segments of tree trunks. Subsequent molded latex sculptures, also deriving from tree forms, expanded to monumental scale, and in 1988 she adopted her current mode and methods. She credits Nash as having been an inspiration to her, once she discovered his work. Like Nash, she uses the chain saw to "liberate" certain forms within the tree. In most of her pieces, there is ample evidence of the saw blade, and human intervention is strongly, even brutally evident. Her work suggests a clash between artistic intervention and nature. Nash's forms seem more gently born, for the most part, and his charred volumes are left relatively intact.

Brzezinski's surfaces are rougher, as though hacked. The interiors of her large wood masses are routed or striated. Her forms are often blackened and decayed looking, and the effect can be both primitive and fetishistic. In certain works she uses the cross section of large tree trunks to arrive at shapes that resemble giant disks or bowls. *Blocked Out Bowl* (1990) is a slice of poplar trunk, its exterior beveled into a hemisphere, its interior gouged with a chainsaw blade and left in jagged chunks. It seems to have been abandoned in mid-transformation, thus conveying an air of poignancy.

Many of the most powerful works in the exhibition were architectural in implication—large, rather irregular post-and-lintel constructions. *Arbor* (1990) is somewhat more complex: three tall tree segments stand vertically, with two more supported horizontally across their tops. In this piece, cherry trunks are cut into deep V-shaped troughs that gently twist or ripple with the grain along their lengths. The structure is imposing, inviting and slightly ominous.

—Ann Wilson Lloyd

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