

# Sitting with Works in Progress III



Works in Progress III Exhibition Opening. Photography courtesy of Nicholas Lea Bruno

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**By**  
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In a city infamous for a homelessness crisis, we were in a gallery full of public benches too beautiful to sit on.

On January 22nd, a bouncer named Princess scanned tickets outside the CCA Campus Gallery. A line snaked around the block as more than 500 people tried to enter to view WIP III, an exhibition featuring 8 different artist interpretations of the public bench.

I snuck in early, before it became impossible to get in.

Kate Greenberg and Kelley Perumbeti flitted around the space, directing traffic and graciously welcoming visitors with equal verve and gravitas. Each bench served as a platform for uplifting artist voices, and of the eight artists featured, six were present, and all were abuzz. Many knew each other and it felt like a reunion of old friends. Children more or less ran amok, playing and climbing all over the artworks. Ordinarily this would be frowned upon, but since the entire show was about exploring the notion of a public bench, everyone smiled warmly as the kids activated the space in a way only those with no experience in a gallery could comfortably do. As the night progressed, adults grew in courage, breaking rules of decorum and actually touching the works. Can you imagine, stroking a series of lithographs or watercolors? But that's the difference I guess with a discipline like furniture - the works are meant to be used, even worn.

In his artist statement Ben Peterson addresses the notion of wear, age, and patina in furniture, asking the question: "What the hell is "honest wear?" His ceramic piece titled Ghoul or you say butter I say Parque was the only bench without a wooden facade, and it was one of the first that



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people were willing to sit upon. There is a void space in the base of the bench and kids crawled through it, knobby knees sliding along the ceramic. I'd consider any subsequent scuffs well-earned "honest wear."

Michael Mellon's Trumpet Seat made of Douglas Fir feels even more like a piece of playground equipment than the last. (Except that it's made of solid Douglas Fir and is precisely lathe turned, and playground equipment tends to be mass produced extruded plastic and metal.) Its two trumpeted ends slope together in the middle almost like a slide or a see-saw. The flat ends at either side reveal stacked laminated wood which the artist sourced from Treasure Island.

A man lounged on Leftover Bench by Hanneke Lourens, perfectly modeling how the salvaged old-growth redwood bench could be a chaise-lounge for one person or a bench for a few. Mortise and tenon joinery reveal Lourens's exactitude, which any woodworker worth their sandpaper would admire.

Mac McComb is easy to pick out of a crowd, looking just the part of the artist-eccentric. He was warm, and happy to talk about sourcing the solid chunk of salvaged redwood he worked into the monolithic Focal Point. This bench and several others are made of a solid, singular piece of timber and there was a fair bit of chatter about whether or not the works would crack in the sun over the course of the show. They did, of course, but that's the challenge an artist takes on when working with wood. It's alive still, in a sense.



A crowd returned again on February 5th as Greenberg and Perumbeti gathered with a number of the featured artists for an Artist Discussion. Kelley opened the conversation by sharing about the beginning of their collaboration known as Works in Progress one year ago during the FOG art fair. She and Kate wanted “more dialogue about furniture and craft” in the SF art scene, and in the year since have worked tirelessly. If you’ve been following the duo over the past year, the overwhelming support and popularity of WIP III wasn’t a surprise considering the previous triumphs of WIP I & II. Greenberg said that a year ago, it didn’t feel like there was much buzz or community in the Bay Area furniture scene. WIP I was the attempt to get the ball rolling. WIP II connected makers by pairing them together, and with WIP III, Greenberg and Perumbeti set out to “connect artists with the community via the public bench.”

Kate described the public bench as a communal intervention; the bench is communal, and represents so many sectors of society and environment. Yet the public bench is “dying.” In a piece published in the New York Times, Jonathan Lee wrote: “public seating is becoming an endangered species. If a park bench is not being removed, the backup plan is often to make it uncomfortable.” According to Perumbeti, WIP III seeks to counteract that by “using the public bench as a lens to understand the person making it,” and in turn, that lens refracts back, relating to the people that utilize it. (Perumbeti)

Kathy Lam spoke a bit at the artist discussion too, and was dubbed an “unofficial part” of WIP. If you haven’t met Kathy,



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CCA Furniture Department Chair, I highly recommend changing that. Lam said that “a big reason why I invited Kate & Kelley to do this show was because of the alignment between the furniture program’s educational goals and the WIP design + craft scene.” Kathy herself has built a series of benches for the CCA community, and when one wandered off, she shrugged, commenting that it must have found its best home.



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Alex Schofield, Brooke Inchatrat, Nick Polansky, and Adrien Segal were all able to speak at the artist discussion, and I saw Mac McComb sneak in the back towards the end as well.

Schofield spoke first, and talked about how he initially recalled backpacking around the Sierras and finding a public bench seemingly in the middle of a wild space. He said, “often to get to these benches, you have to put yourself voyeuristically over the landscape. I want to be with landscape.” He went on to describe how he designed his bench with not just human sitters in mind. Schofield’s work features a 3D printed ceramic pillar with a biogenic, permeable surface that would provide a friendly spot for lichen and mosses. He spoke of making with other species, contrasting symbiosis and autosis. He referenced Donna Haraway and Henry David Thoreau as inspirations, and spoke of how Haraway in particular reframes a relationship with nature rather than one of exploitation at worst and stewardship at its best. His “real goal for the bench is for it to go into an environment and make non-human friends to sit with, not

just to look at.”

Brooke Intrachat’s birdseye maple bench practically glowed under the soft evening lights. She discussed seminal conversations that happen on public benches, describing how they can serve as neutral ground for quarreling parties or a space to share with someone you hardly know, but would like to. She used the phrase “a portal for seeing,” which is echoed in her material use; the birdseye swirls offer a macro/microscopic view of multiple portals, or perspectives. Tiered geometric structures function as legs, further carrying this notion of a portal. Intrachat spoke of the bench becoming a magical object, in which the structure itself was charged with energy. Ebony wood inlays contribute this energy. The ebony was gifted to Brooke by a loved one who can no longer work wood, and Intrachat spoke tenderly of this offering. In hearing her speak, it’s clear that the process of developing and producing this work was as much a transportative and magical experience for Intrachat as the resulting object itself is for viewers.

Nick Polansky carried the tenderness of the previous artist briefs, and gushed about Kate and Kelley’s work for



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the community of makers. He credited them with creating a platform to experiment on. As an architect and artist, this platform enabled him to explore material + meaning. Age, use, and wear kept coming up as he spoke about the ecosystems of public benches. In a residency he did years ago, he explored a process of partially splitting a segment of wood in different directions, combining kerfs to “balloon”

the wood while keeping it whole in one segment. Stones of varying sizes are used to suspend the kerfs, creating a lattice structure between the sections of wood which are held up by copper pipes. He spoke about how various forces perform against wood, and how the material responds in turn; factors like moisture, pressure, wind, rain, all influence the material once removed from its roots. Yet, the wood withstands the elements, for a while at least. Likening his process to these forces, Polansky explores the idea that the bench could perform this expansion. While he spoke, a stone became dislodged from the bench and clattered against the copper pipes as it fell to the floor. He shrugged it off, respecting the way wood moves. His work enshrines this concept. The work is alive, yet still subject to change even after he’s done with it.

Adrien Segal was of the artists the last to speak, and she spoke on exploring time as a concept. The slab of redwood she used was salvaged from an old logging road from the Humboldt Crossing, and Mac MacComb used a portion of the slab to carve his colossal “Focal Point” bench. Two pieces carved from the same ancient tree looked at each other in the gallery. Both had new ribboning cracks, as the wood still contained a lot of moisture. Prior to shaping, the material was pulled out of the old dirt road and cut onsite because the sheer scale made any other option unmanageable. Segal had a kind of reverence when talking about the massive hunk of wood. The quality of wood used a century ago for ordinary, practical uses like roads or telephone poles would be prized today because so much of the old growth forests have been decimated. While wood may be a more renewable resource than, say, petroleum, old growth forests are practically impossible to replace. Segal compared the material to nature’s form of data storage - “memory is encapsulated in the material itself.” With reverence for the original slab, she worked intuitively to carve out a soft, sumptuous form. Kate Greenberg hopped over to where Adrien sat and pulled up a video on her computer that she took of Adrien carving the bench. They work in the same studio, and it’s clear they have a warm relationship. Both women were clearly proud of the other for her contributions to the evening. As an addendum, Adrien guiltily laughed that she had tons of scrap from this monolithic tree in her car, and offered pieces to the crowd for whittling.

The audience was eager to engage with the work, and during the Q&A it was hard to get a word in edgewise

because everyone was so eager to participate. Perumbeti and Greenberg facilitated the discussion, allowing for the featured artists to handle questions from the crowd. When asked about accessibility to the works after the show, each panelist responded thoughtfully, though their answers varied. Kate was eager to mention a grant of \$3.6 million to the City of San Francisco specifically dedicated for purchase and maintenance of public benches, showing a breadth of care behind the discerning curation she and Perumbeti orchestrated. Brooke acknowledged with humor that her bench probably won't be placed in the wild to be covered in lichens alongside Alex's bench. Nick said that he'd already published his zero-waste milling process on Instructables, an open-source website hosted by AutoDesk. Adrien has been commissioned by the City of Oakland to create a larger version of the work she showed here, and was eager to imagine her work truly serving the community.

A conversation about who is allowed to sit on a public bench arose, and Polansky was the first to really address the elephant in the room. He talked about how a public bench can be a portal for connection with a loved one or a model for zero-waste milling, but also a stove or a bed or a home. In his mind, the ideal bench should be designed for a skateboarder and a homeless person, a three-year-old, and a ninety-year-old.

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I think everyone felt that sting. It was intentional. But Greenberg and Perumbeti were able to foster a community where we were encouraged to evaluate what space is "public," and what space is "comfortable," and to think about what kind of lives we prioritize.

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