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- [Perry, Sam: A Patient Man](#)



[Sam Perry](#) “New Works,” [Rena Bransten Gallery](#), 77 Geary Street, 2nd floor, October 28-December 4, opening reception November 4 5:30-7:30

Sam Perry is a patient man. Three years may pass before the logs he carves dry out and cure so he can transform them into the curvilinear, abstract, geometric forms he imagined when he first saw them on the ground.

“The rings tell a story; looking at a fallen tree is like observing a person and wondering about their past,” says Perry. Titles like “Drifting Apart,” “Swallowed,” and “Vacant” reference human relationships and emotions.

But Perry’s chosen material is merely a vehicle to carry his highly formal compositions. Extremely smooth and highly polished surfaces in his new work on display at Rena Bransten Gallery emphasize shape and boggle the imagination: each work was carved into one whole finished piece from a *single* log or branch- there are no seams or joinery.

Perry finds most of the raw materials for his art at [Runnymede Farm](#), the

Woodside, CA, private sculpture park where he’s worked for over 20 years as Director of Conservation. Other logs have come from municipal parks after violent rainstorms in Oakland and San Francisco. Chainsaws, burr grinders, chisels and files are just some of the tools he uses to discard the pulp and create his vision back in his West Oakland studio.



But Perry hasn't always worked with wood. He began his career as a ceramic sculptor, studying at CCAC (BFA '86, MFA '90) under masters of clay, Art Nelson, [Dennis Gallagher](#), and [Viola Frey](#). Right out of college Perry took a job as studio assistant to Frey. He worked for her almost 20 years, up until the time of her death. His role included setting up the sculpture, firing her work, installing and sometimes repairing pieces. (He still consults for the [Artists' Legacy Foundation](#), the nonprofit that manages her estate.) After 15 years of working for Frey, he felt he had hit a dead end with the medium and was ready for a new challenge. He began to experiment with the fallen trees he saw on the ground at his other day job. In fact, the shapes he makes now from wood are strongly reminiscent of the shapes he used to make with clay.

Taking up wood as his primary medium was like coming home. Perry grew up working weekends in his father's woodworking shop, in Honolulu, Hawaii; first sweeping the floors then helping restore authentic koa racing canoes alongside his dad. Right out of college he took a job making wooden toys for ABZ toy company, and further advanced his skills.

When asked what he learned from his famous boss and mentor, Perry says there were two things he admired most about Frey. The first was her strong work ethic: "She went to the studio every day, 8am to 5pm. She never had a dry spell or an artistic block, even in her final years when illness was taking its toll." And the second thing was her ability to hold her own amongst a peer group of famous male ceramicists (including [Bob Arneson](#) and [Peter Volkous](#)) at a time when there wasn't an even playing field.

Word to the wise: Don't ask Perry what kind of wood he's used in a piece. He purposefully doesn't list the type of wood he uses, because he doesn't want you to get hung up on whether it's oak, madrone, or elm; the form is the most important thing. Though Perry does admit, "You have to be careful not to be seduced by the beauty of the wood."