

# HYPERALLERGIC

## The Unearthed Wood Carvings of a Part-Time Gravedigger

Andrew Edlin Gallery is exhibiting the wood carvings of the late John Byam, a self-taught artist who transformed his daydreams into sculpture.

Allison Meier January 26, 2017



Installation view of John Byam's work at Andrew Edlin Gallery (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

Dusted with sawdust, John Byam's sculptures appear as if they've just been carved, the shavings attached with glue binder giving a rawness to the miniature spacecrafts, airplanes, houses, helicopters, cameras, and coffins. Andrew Edlin Gallery in Manhattan is displaying an assembly of these pocket-sized pieces by the late Byam in *Unearthed*.

Byam passed away in 2013, just after his first public exhibitions in 2012 at SUNY Oneonta, followed by a two-person show at Parker's Box. Andrew Edlin Gallery gave him his debut New York solo show in February 2013 before his death that March, although according to the gallery he was too sick to attend. *Unearthed* thus echoes the recent discovery of his work, as well as one of his jobs as a part-time gravedigger.



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Born in 1929 in Oneonta, New York, Byam mostly lived a local life, working at his family's trailer court, with a two-year stint in the military taking him to Japan during the Korean War. Later, he had odd jobs with the Delaware and Hudson Railway and as a gravedigger at the local cemetery. The wood carvings, arranged by theme at Andrew Edlin with no label text, have traces of this autobiographical narrative, with a platoon of tanks and heavy artillery, or an open coffin, colored black, on a rolling gurney. Yet others, like spaceships and rockets, one with "Moon or Bust" scrawled in red, herald dreams of exploration. Recognizable pop culture forms, including the U.S.S. Enterprise from *Star Trek*, suggest these ambitions were limited to vicarious experiences through television, magazines, and movies.

While that gives the toy-like objects a melancholy edge, they have a lot of joy in their detailed shapes. Byam seemed to delight in making even a simple chair on such a small-scale, with annotations in pencil indicating details like "door front" on a tiny house. An array of human hands chiseled into various poses, one holding a coin, another with the words "2 close hands" folded in prayer, shows a similar enchantment with the shape of things.

With self-taught artists like Byam, who worked in rural obscurity and was discovered late in life, it's easy to make their creations more about a novel story than their skill. Byam was a deft craftsman in the tradition of American vernacular woodcarving, and his roughly hewn art is haunted by 20th-century culture, both its wars and fantasies.

John Byam: *Unearthed continues at Andrew Edlin Gallery (212 Bowery, Nolita, Manhattan) through February 26.*



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