Heartwood

Curated by Joséphine May Bailey, presented by gallery rosenfeld

Artists
Herbert Golser
Leonardo Drew
Olivia England
Franklin Collins
Mario Sergio Alvarez González

Historic works from private collections
Headrest (*kali*), Fiji, 19th century
Elder's stool, Kamba, Kenya, 19th century
Ceremonial pipe, Akan, Ghana, mid 19th century
Board, Japan, Edo period, 19th century
Musical bear chair, Brienz, Switzerland, c. 1920

At the centre of every tree lies its heartwood. As the trunk widens, year upon year, the oldest rings stop carrying water and begin instead to darken and harden, drawing in resins and minerals until they become the densest and most enduring part of the whole. It no longer lives, and yet it is what holds the tree upright. Cabinetmakers have always prized it for exactly this reason: it is the wood that lasts.

Heartwood gathers contemporary sculpture alongside historic objects carved across two centuries and five continents. Wood has borne the weight of European devotion since the limewood altarpieces of Tilman Riemenschneider, worked in the late fifteenth century so finely that the grain seems to breathe beneath the drapery. It was pared back to the root by Brâncuși and hewn from the standing trunk by Baselitz. Long before any of them, and far beyond Europe, it was the material of the seat, the pillow and the pipe: the things that touch the body every day. Every work in this room has travelled, by sea, by trade, by empire or by migration, and each arrives carrying the question of who now decides what it means.

Herbert Golser stands at the heart of the exhibition. Born in Austria in 1960 and trained in Vienna under Bruno Gironcoli, he has worked for decades from Lower Austria, and has been represented by gallery rosenfeld for more than ten years. In the past year alone his sculpture has filled the vaults of the Rocca Paolina in Perugia and the Renaissance rooms of the Palazzo della Corgna in Città della Pieve, where the exhibition's title, *Il Respiro del Legno*, or ‘the breath of wood’, named precisely what he does. Golser reduces wood to the very edge of its fragility, until it appears less worked than uncovered. In *gangwerde* (2021), a slab of walnut opens into three vertical channels, each split into hundreds of fine leaves that sway and part like reeds in a current. *I began 173 years ago* (2025) turns a single block of pale ash into something closer to a well-loved book taken on holiday, its pages curling outward in long liquid waves while its spine holds firm. In *ohne titel* (2022), slender lengths of holly, the whitest of European woods, rise almost two metres inside a narrow frame of steel. His titles

speak of time rather than labour: a hundred and seventy-three years is the life of the tree, not the hours spent by the artist, allowing us to consider his chosen material as something that existed long before us, and will continue to exist long after us.

Leonardo Drew, born in Tallahassee in 1961, grew up in public housing in Bridgeport, Connecticut, within sight of the city dump, where as a boy he went looking for things to make art from. As an artist he does not use found objects, instead, he starts from raw timber and ages it himself- charring and oxidising it by hand until months in the studio read as decades in the open. Where Golser pares wood down until it almost disappears, Drew masses it. *119L* (2013) is a horizontal band more than a metre and a half long, made of splintered sticks packed end-on and bristling out from the wall. For most of its length the wood stays a honeyed brown. Towards the right it turns black, charred until the grain is lost. Set in a room of objects whose wear was earned over generations, it asks how far a surface can be trusted to tell us how old a thing is, and whose hands it has passed through.

Around these two, and alongside three younger artists, gather five historic works, also made from wood and drawn from private collections. These are objects made long before anyone looked at them as sculpture, and carry with them vast and varying histories. A nineteenth-century Fijian *kali*, its long bar resting on two horseshoe legs, once held a chief's neck above the ground as he slept. The head was the most sacred part of the body, and through years of nightly contact the headrest took on that weight, bowing slightly under the pressure and recording its purpose long after the chief left. A Kamba elder's stool from Kenya, low and round on three carved legs, was made for one man and carried by him for the rest of his life, its seat worn smooth by a single body over decades. A ceremonial pipe of the Akan of Ghana, its stem worked into an openwork architecture of figures and ornament, belonged to the theatre of office. A board from Edo-period Japan, rich and with a surface that ripples like water under wind, bearing a single square opening cut into one corner. And from the Bernese Oberland comes a musical bear chair, carved around 1920 and sold by Ed Jobin & Co of Brienz, where whole villages carved for the travellers of the Grand Tour and the railway age.

Most of these were objects of rank, and almost all were made for men. They reached London along the routes of trade and empire that brought so much of the world's material culture into European rooms, and the chair along the gentler route of tourism, made from the outset to be carried away. Where they came to rest has shaped how they are seen. In the crowded cases of the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, for example, headrests, stools and pipes still stand row upon row, sorted by type as General Pitt Rivers intended in the 1880s. They were arranged to illustrate an outdated theory of human progress in which such things were early steps, a display the museum itself has begun to question. There, a *kali* is a specimen. It is one of many, and it serves as evidence of a people rather than the work of an artist. Here, however, on South Molton Street, each piece is given its own ground and the room to be looked at: its line, its balance, the patina of its use.

The difference between object and sculpture lies less in the thing, than in how we choose to look at it, and to move these works from the vitrine to the plinth is to grant their makers the regard long given to Riemenschneider or Brâncuși. Their passage here, rarely chosen by the people who made and owned them, is now part of what they are. It belongs in the room with them, as surely as the dark sheen left on the headrest by the oil of a sleeping head.

Passage is something Mario Sergio Alvarez González knows from the inside. Trained at the Instituto Superior de Arte in Havana and now resident at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam, he works from the conviction that all art

is political, questioning the strategies by which those in power shape what is remembered, in a world where, as he writes, "the very concepts of 'truth' and 'history' are constantly changing so that the established power can survive." His own experience of migration is where the work begins, and it moves outward from there, towards what is shared: how memory is kept, how identity is assembled from what remains, and how people find togetherness in places that were not built for them. Often those ideas take shape in wood, some of it salvaged from the three kitchens he dismantled in his first job in the Netherlands. The works shown here belong to *The Farm*, an ongoing series of more than thirty pieces of furniture in which he imagines the second half of Orwell's *Animal Farm*. Hunting dogs and wild birds crowd the panels of a cabinet in the dark, glossy register of the seventeenth-century Dutch hunting piece, a genre that once hung in the houses of merchants grown rich on the same trade that scattered objects like the *kali* across the world. Furniture is where a household keeps its history, and these pieces arrive in the present, by his own description, "empty, in a sense broken", carrying the marks of the systems that made and moved them. Set among the possessions of chiefs and elders, they are a reminder that every history of an object is written by someone, and that someone else is always left out of it.

Franklin Collins, a South Korean and British artist and graduate of Central Saint Martins, calls his method tactile erosion. It began with the bronze foot of St Peter in Rome, worn almost smooth by seven hundred years of hands and lips: proof, as he puts it, that something immaterial can leave a material record. It also began closer to home. Seen as Asian in Britain and as an outsider in South Korea, Collins grew up feeling, in his words, "an othered person with no home". So he took a block of wood, a material he already knew well, and carved a place for his own head and hands to rest. "I carved out a space for my belonging," he says. Alvarez González would know that feeling. Far from Cuba, he laid the floorboards of his Dutch home out to the exact size of the bedroom he grew up in, so that he could stand in it again.

The same longing runs between their work. Collins now carves into the negative space of his own body, the pressure of a forehead, the curve of a shoulder, the cradle of an open hand, and the forms he leaves behind have something of the deity about them. One does not simply look. One kneels, leans in and lets the palms find their places in the hollows, much as pilgrims have knelt for centuries to kiss the feet of the crucifix, or crept towards the cross on their knees on Good Friday. *Penance* (2026) joins limewood, the material of Riemenschneider's altarpieces, with sapele, oak and a length of driftwood that the Thames has already carried and smoothed, so that it reads at once as altar and as offering. Beside the *kali*, the kinship is plain. Both are shaped to receive a body at rest. One waited for a chief two centuries ago; the other waits for whoever kneels before it now.

Olivia England works across embroidery, marquetry and metalwork, reclaiming an English tradition from the women whose labour sustained it but whose names history so often left unrecorded. The same division runs through the objects around her. The headrest was carved by men for the heads of men, the Kamba stool belonged to an elder alone, and the Akan pipe to those who held office. In Fiji, while men carved, women beat bark into *masi*, the decorated cloth exchanged at births, marriages and funerals, but it was the carved wood that collectors called art and the cloth they filed away as craft. England's own country drew the same line, between the guild carvers whose lineage runs to Grinling Gibbons and the girls stitching samplers in the parlour, yet Olivia England refuses the division.

Her work begins with embroidery, the most intimate of inherited skills, passed down the female line and made redundant by industry, along with the unpaid domestic labour it carried. For *Gosforth 1963* (2026) she turned to footage of her grandparents' wedding: the embroidered image is a cropped snapshot of the bridesmaids' dresses and bouquets, with the parts of a mother-of-pearl sewing kit inlaid below. *M.E.* (2024), made with her

other grandmother, is a curtain with her initials at its corners. Open, the letters hang apart. Drawn closed, as curtains are at the end of the day to gather a household in, they meet. The work keeps the quiet closeness of a home, and the way women's craft has so often stayed on its private side, out of view, much as museums draw curtains over works too fragile for the light. Like Franklin's carving, which is incomplete until someone kneels to it, the work gives up its full meaning only to those who engage with it. The historic objects ask for the same attention. Their line and patina tell only part of it; a headrest is fully seen when we picture the sleeper it held.Alongside the curtain, A Scroll (2024) sets the face plate of a Singer sewing machine into the grain; brass needles line its edges, so quietly placed they seem to have grown there. The sewing machine, long a tool of women's work in the home, now sits in wood, a material long kept for men.

Wood keeps a history. Its rings record each drought and each season of plenty, the fire that scarred it and the year it leaned towards the light. In this room the old and the new are read against one another: the headrest beside the hollow carved for a forehead, the elder's stool beside the thread laid into timber, the chief's pipe beside the hunting cabinet, and Drew's burnt timbers beside Alvarez González's found cabinets. *Heartwood* asks us to keep these histories too, the difficult and the tender alike, at the centre of how we look, because that is where, like the old wood at the heart of the tree, they hold us up.

Artist biographies

Herbert Golser
Herbert Golser lives and works in Klein-Pöchlarn, Austria. He trained at the Technical School for Wood and Stone Sculpture in Hallein and as assistant to the sculptor Josef Zenzmaier, before studying under Bruno Gironcoli at the University of Applied Arts, Vienna, where he graduated with distinction in 1993. Recent solo exhibitions include *Materia* at the Rocca Paolina, Perugia, and *La Delicatezza del Legno* at the Palazzo Ducale, Urbino (both 2025), and *The Soul of the Material* at gallery rosenfeld, London (2022). His monograph, *Changing Shape*, is published by Kerber Verlag. He is represented by gallery rosenfeld.

Leonardo Drew
Leonardo Drew was born in Tallahassee, Florida, in 1961 and grew up in Bridgeport, Connecticut. He studied at Parsons School of Design and received his BFA from the Cooper Union in 1985. He makes sculpture and installation from wood, rope and other natural materials, weathered by hand, and has exhibited in New York, London, Los Angeles, Berlin, Paris and Hong Kong. Recent exhibitions include *Ubiquity II* at the South London Gallery (2025), The Power Plant, Toronto (2021), *Making Chaos Legible* at the North Carolina Museum of Art (2020) and *City in the Grass* in Madison Square Park, New York (2019). His work is held in the collections of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Pérez Art Museum Miami, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, the Studio Museum in Harlem and Tate.

Mario Sergio Alvarez González
Mario Sergio Alvarez González is a Cuban artist based in the Netherlands, working across installation, painting, photography, film and public intervention. He graduated in Fine Arts from the Instituto Superior de Arte, Havana, in 2019, and is a 2026 resident at the Rijksakademie, Amsterdam. His installation *De Tuin* is in the collection of the Fenix Museum, Rotterdam. Recent exhibitions include *The Farm* at ARCO Madrid with Gallery Diez and Ellen de Bruijne Projects (2025), and *Two Old Dogs* at Gallery Diez, Amsterdam (2024). His earlier work was shown at the 13th Havana Biennial and in the Résonance programme of the 15th Biennale de Lyon (both 2019). He has received support from the Mondriaan Fund and Stichting Stokroos.

Franklin Collins
Franklin Collins is a South Korean and British artist based in London, working mainly in wood, metal and ink. He graduated with a BA in Fine Art from Central Saint Martins in 2025, and worked as a fabricator at Antony Gormley Studios from 2023 to 2024. In 2025 he was runner-up for the Hari Art Prize and shortlisted for the MullenLowe NOVA Awards. His residencies include the Gullkistan Center for Creativity in Laugarvatn, Iceland (2025), and Art Agenda Nova in Stryszów, Poland (2026). His work has been shown in London at the Crypt Gallery, Filet Space and House of Annette.

Olivia England
Olivia England is a London-based artist working across embroidery, marquetry and metalwork. Her work looks at the lived history of objects and their capacity to hold memory, and at hand-made skills passed down through generations, set against mass production. She holds an MA in Visual Communication from the Royal College of Art (2023) and a BA in Fine Art from Manchester School of Art (2022). Recent exhibitions include *The View From a Hundred Years Away* at Texture, Manchester, the Hari Art Prize and *Echo Soho* at Soho Revue (all 2026), and *On View* at gallery rosenfeld (2025). In 2026 she was in residence at the Good Eye Project and Soho Revue, and curated *The Spoils* at Bolding, London.

Curator biography

Joséphine May Bailey
Joséphine May Bailey is the founder of Ansaldo, an independent curatorial consultancy and artist agency that develops connections between artists, galleries, curators and institutions. Her work is concerned with creating the conditions for meaningful collaboration, new opportunities and sustained artistic practice.

A curator and former gallery director, she has over a decade of experience across commercial galleries, institutions and international exhibition-making; her practice centres on artist advocacy, feminist perspectives and the development of thoughtful exhibition programmes and lasting cultural relationships. Alongside her gallery work, she founded 8 Vine Yard Residency & Project Space and co-founded ArtLoft, a cultural salon and mentorship initiative fostering access, visibility and critical exchange for emerging and mid-career artists. Through these platforms, she has brought together leading voices across contemporary art and culture.