

Art in America

October 2022

Shoots and Ladders: Chadwick Rantanen at Bel Ami
By Travis Diehl



Chadwick Rantanen, *Wooden Boards and Flowers*, 2022, pigment print in walnut frame, 14 by 20½ inches

Chadwick Rantanen’s show at Bel Ami played out on two registers: One set of works, a surprisingly conventional series of walnut-framed color photographs of odd arrangements of objects, flora, and the occasional fauna, hung on the walls at the standard 60-inch height. The other, a series of small models of staircases and ladders produced in thin plywood, hung much lower, at shin or dollhouse height. These parallel displays (all works 2022) suggested two shows installed at once, phasing in and out of sync. *Press Fit (Ladder)*, for instance, a thin stepladder that, at five inches high, looks like a smudge on the wall, resembles the woolly brown object in the middle of the sidewalk depicted in *Farmer Gene*—which, in turn, echoes the longer, angled strip of gray tufts of grass growing from the crack in the same image. Just as ladders have twin rails, the majority of the photographs’ compositions are laterally mirrored. *Window*, a shot of a pane of foggy glass, is split by a finger wiping it clear down the center—and this fat vertical is itself doubled to the right, as by the grass, with a thin diagonal smudge.

Rantanen often puts the “mediated” in media. His previous series of sculptures elaborately, superfluously broker connections—between lightbulbs or batteries and their sockets, for example, with overbuilt adapters shaped like lobsters or butterflies, or between the floor and ceiling of almost any gallery or studio via extendable struts covered in prismatic foil. His modeled objects are flagrantly artificial, or artful. The tiny staircases, useless as such, are laser-cut and notched together in a format usually reserved for the flat-pack souvenirs at a science center gift shop (the titular “press fit” kits), meant to be punched out and assembled into the ribs of a *T. rex* or the armor of an M1 tank. The sculptures’ machine-induced discoloration troubles their dollhouse calm—a few of them haven’t been cleaned and still bear the smoky hatching of the laser’s burns, an effect something like rust creeping down fire escapes. What do they connect?

Both series share this wooden, maquette quality. The sculptures hang flush against the wall by some subtle tape or cleat, appearing to float. *Press Fit (Staircase)* includes a side representing the exterior wall of a building, cut with three windows, hugging the supporting surface so that the stairs appear to protrude not just from an imaginary tiny building but from the gallery too. Other ladders are oriented as if to serve the wall. At least two have “patches,” places where the laser etching implies that the sides were broken and splinted back together with tape or rags, offering a bit of character to these crisp-cut constructions.

Circling the room, a visitor could see two photos hung on parallel walls come into view at once—to the right, near a corner, was *Wooden Boards*, a vertical closeup of two blocks of dark, stained wood, and to the left, a few feet deeper into the space, was *Wooden Boards with Flower*, which depicts two very similar blocks, also framed roughly symmetrically, but this time with a cluster of yellow flowers growing through the central gap. The wood resembles, or maybe is, the grainy walnut stock framing every photograph. These quotidian scenes appear in fine art dress; their formalism pervades the room. Descending from the mezzanine-level gallery, you wonder how the stairs would look as a model; you wonder how the double doors would look as a photo; the world appears replete with formal correspondences, replete with art—unnecessary bits of beauty between things.



Chadwick Rantanen, *Press Fit (Staircase)*, 2022.
Laser cut plywood, 6 ¾ by 2 by 4 inches