

ELLSWORTH KELLY
AUSTIN
BLANTON MUSEUM OF ART

7: The Totems

Hello, I'm Veronica Roberts, Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Blanton Museum of Art.

When you enter *Austin* by Ellsworth Kelly, your eyes are drawn to a soaring, emphatically vertical, eighteen-foot-high sculpture made of California redwood.

The artist first explored this type of shape in 1974, calling the series “Curves,” but he later began referring to these sculptures as “Totems.” All of them reflect two segments of an imaginary circle deployed to create a tapering form that either swells outward or gently compresses inward.

Austin's Totem curves inward in a concave fashion, and were we to measure the imaginary circle whose segments form the work, it would have a radius of about 257 feet. For Kelly, using curves allows—quote: “the eye to move fast over the sculpture, to experience a sensation of speed.” Unquote. He loved the idea of the speed of looking at the form combined with the slowness suggested by the very old age of the wood itself. Likely hundreds of years old, the tree's age is revealed in the beautiful lines of its dense woodgrain.

The sculpture was fabricated from a huge redwood log salvaged from the bottom of a Northern California riverbed. The log had been cut down in the nineteenth century at the height of the timber industry. Kelly worked with the same fabricator, Peter Carlson, for many years, and Carlson's company oversaw the milling of the wood into its current shape, which was done on a gantry mill—a robust machine capable of working on a large scale with precision within thousandths of an inch.