Oscar Tuazon has distilled his interest in functional minimalism, architecture, and the resonance inherent in the juxtaposition of incongruous materials into a new commission for deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum. Inspired by the beautiful and varied tree species at deCordova, and responding to the aim of the PLATFORM exhibition series to engage its unique landscape, Tuazon created Partners (2014; Figure 1). Conjoining natural and industrial elements, Tuazon paired one of deCordova’s sugar maple trees with a rectilinear concrete structure. These organic and artificial pillars rise from the Sculpture Park lawn to connect nearly two stories above the ground. Though each element has the capacity to be self-supporting, their merger is delicately balanced so that each becomes dependent on the other, creating a mutually supportive system through their union. Ultimately, the artist thinks of Partners as a proposition wherein “the work initiates a physical interaction between a concrete post and a living tree, and that’s a relationship that is going to develop and change over time. The work is a system with its own rules.”

The sugar maple tree forming half of Partners has rough shingle-like bark on its trunk and a deciduous canopy that produces an ever-transforming composition of color and form. The concrete structure is monochromatic, minimal, industrial, geometric, and staid. While the two objects contrast with one another in terms of superficial aesthetics, they mimic one another in their architecture: strong supportive footings below ground, a vertical post, and arm(s) that extend outward from a central post. In their joining the two entities create a framework for an architectural space. The post-and-lintel structure, an essential form in building, creates a doorway within the plein air gallery that is deCordova’s Sculpture Park, and reshapes the viewer’s experience of nature. Sited at the entrance to the Sculpture Park, this meeting between timber and reinforced concrete accentuates the diverging of nature and culture within the bucolic deCordova landscape. Reminiscent of an element of architectural framework, the concrete form signals the built environment beyond the tree and the greater Park boundaries. Tuazon capitalizes on the tension inherent in such abutments; his work has consistently engaged the dichotomies of organic and artificial matter, functional and useless form, success and malfunction in design, and control and disorder in process.

The overall austere and industrial aesthetic of Partners’ concrete structure yields clear formal comparisons to work born from practitioners of Minimalist values, particularly sculptors such as Donald Judd (1928–1994), Richard Serra (b. 1939), Tony Smith (1912–1980), and Sol LeWitt (1928–2007), whose work, Tower (DC) (1989/2009), is on display at deCordova on a lawn adjacent to Partners. These artists created objects that were simple in form and devoid of narrative, influenced by and/or made from industrial materials, and often created in serial or in modular forms with an emphasis on geometric configurations. While both Tuazon and these pioneering artists of the 1960s/1970s find inspiration in industrial forms, the elder artists’ relationship to these forms was largely aesthetic and conceptual. A reaction to the overly emotional gestural work of the Abstract Expressionists before them, their work was ascetic and featured pure, simplified forms. Tuazon’s brand of minimalism, however, is rooted in an economy of means that is reliant on utility to determine its form.

In addition to his commitment to a utilitarian minimalism, Tuazon gives primacy to architectonic values in his art. A do-it-yourself sensibility informs much of Tuazon’s work—perhaps inspired by the geodesic dome in which he was born that was hand-built by his parents in the woods of Washington state. Imitation of such resourcefulness is particularly evident in the collapsible/portable housing structures he made early in his career, built using plans from survivalist magazines such as Dwelling Portably, a hand-printed guide to living a rootless existence. While Tuazon’s earlier works can be seen as referencing a hippie-era notion of utopian freedom represented in nomadic lifestyles and handmade domiciles of those living ‘off the grid,’ recent works engage a more exacting study of architecture. While a student at the Architecture/Urban Studies Program at The Cooper Union School of Architecture in New York, Tuazon honed an architectural vernacular that is employed throughout his work and foundational to ambitious constructions such as Partners. Works such as Tonopah (2008; Figure 2) exemplify the artist’s investigations of the small margin that exists between success and failure in
architecture by employing a modest industrial design to engage the tension inherent in the assimilation of dissimilar materials into a singular configuration.

Tuazon also spent time working at Acconci Studio, the collaborative architectural design firm of the seminal poet, performance, and installation artist Vito Acconci (b. 1940). Acconci is best known for his early performance works of the 1970s, which were highly investigative of and dependent upon the relationship of his body to its physical and social environment. Acconci’s practice evolved to engage an audience more directly, first with performative installation work and ultimately with architecture and design, which he continues to this day. It is unsurprising then, given this mentor and early work experience, that Tuazon’s work likewise accentuates relationships between materials and the bodily experience in order to create works that re-shape one’s experience of environment.

The concrete structure created for Partners does not conspicuously announce itself as an art object; instead its form is ambiguous, as likely to be an elaborate support system set in place by an arborist as it is a work of contemporary sculpture. Partners’ formal allusion to efficacy allows the work, despite its monumentality, to be a relatively unassuming sculpture that is assimilated, rather than inserted, into the natural environment. “On some level,” the artist says, “I hope the work disappears, that you might walk by it without noticing it immediately, maybe it’s something you only see in a double-take.”² In addition to its ostensibly practical form, the capacity for the work to potentially ‘disappear’ is due in part to Tuazon’s careful consideration of complementary forms, scale, and placement in relationship to the viewer’s experience of the sculpture. The accessibility of the work is furthered by Tuazon’s engagement with a tree; an entity often ascribed anthropomorphic attributes. The artist has explored the relationship between trees and humans in past works such as People (2012; Figure 3), a work in which a tree anchors the connection between form and function, acting as a post onto which was grafted a basketball hoop and handball court wall.

Though Partners lacks the latent functionality of People, it does similarly expound upon the architectural focus consistent throughout Tuazon’s work. In particular, they each speak to the belief that it is what happens after the work’s creation—its life beyond its maker—that is truly important. As Tuazon said, Partners
is a proposition for a new structural relationship between nature and culture. From the moment of their grafting together, neither the tree nor the post can exist wholly without the other. Left to its own devices and exposed to the elements, Partners’ future is unknown. Over time the concrete may begin to crumble, or the tree may fall, disconnecting itself from its concrete companion.

This poetic inevitability begs a larger, metaphorical reading of the work: the physical interaction between the organic and human-made is a constantly evolving relationship, one that generates a precarious system with a set of rules that must be followed in order that neither nature nor industry collapses at the hand of the other. Tuazon has presented the ‘partners’ in this relationship for us to consider, and has done so within the more specific context of art. Existing at the impasse where a work of art approaches, yet does not fully achieve, functionality and where a seemingly utilitarian form ceases to be useful, Partners prompts questions about form and function as they relate to the creation and experience of art.

Samantha Cataldo, Koch Curatorial Fellow

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1 Artist in conversation with author.
2 Ibid.

**Figure Captions**

Right and cover:
Partners, 2014
sugar maple, reinforced concrete
dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist and Maccarone, New York
Photograph by Clements Photography and Design, Boston

Figure 1:
Partners, detail, 2014
sugar maple, reinforced concrete
dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist and Maccarone, New York
Photograph by Clements Photography and Design, Boston

Figure 2:
Tonopah, 2008
wood steel, metal, winches, cement
dimensions variable
Installation view at Maccarone, New York
Courtesy of the artist and Maccarone, New York

Figure 3:
People, 2012
sugar maple tree, concrete, metal basketball backboard and hoop
dimensions variable
Installation view at Brooklyn Bridge Park, New York
Courtesy of the artist and Maccarone, New York
Photograph by Jeffrey Sturges
BIOGRAPHY
Oscar Tuazon (b.1975) is a sculptor living and working in Los Angeles, CA. Tuazon studied at The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, New York, NY (1995–1999), the Whitney Museum of American Art Independent Study Studio Program, New York, NY (2001–2003), and at The Cooper Union School of Architecture, Architecture/Urban Studies Program, New York, NY (2002–2003). In 2007, he co-founded the collective-run artists’ gallery, bookshop, and publishing house castillo/corales in Paris. His work has been shown extensively in galleries and museums throughout the world, including at the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; The Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; and in the 2012 Whitney Biennial, The Whitney Museum of American Art, NY. He was also a participant in the 54th Venice Biennale (2011). He has had solo exhibitions at The Institute of Contemporary Art, London; Kunsthalle Bern, Switzerland; The Ludwig Museum, Cologne; and Public Art Fund, Brooklyn Bridge Park, NY. Among other accolades, the artist was recently awarded a prestigious Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Grant (2013).

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PROGRAMMING
Artist Talk October 1, 2014 at 12 PM

PLATFORM
PLATFORM is a series of solo exhibitions by early- and mid-career artists from both the New England and national arts communities. These shows focus on work that engages with deCordova’s unique landscape. The PLATFORM series is intended as a support for creativity and the expression of new ideas, and as a catalyst for dialogue about contemporary art.

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