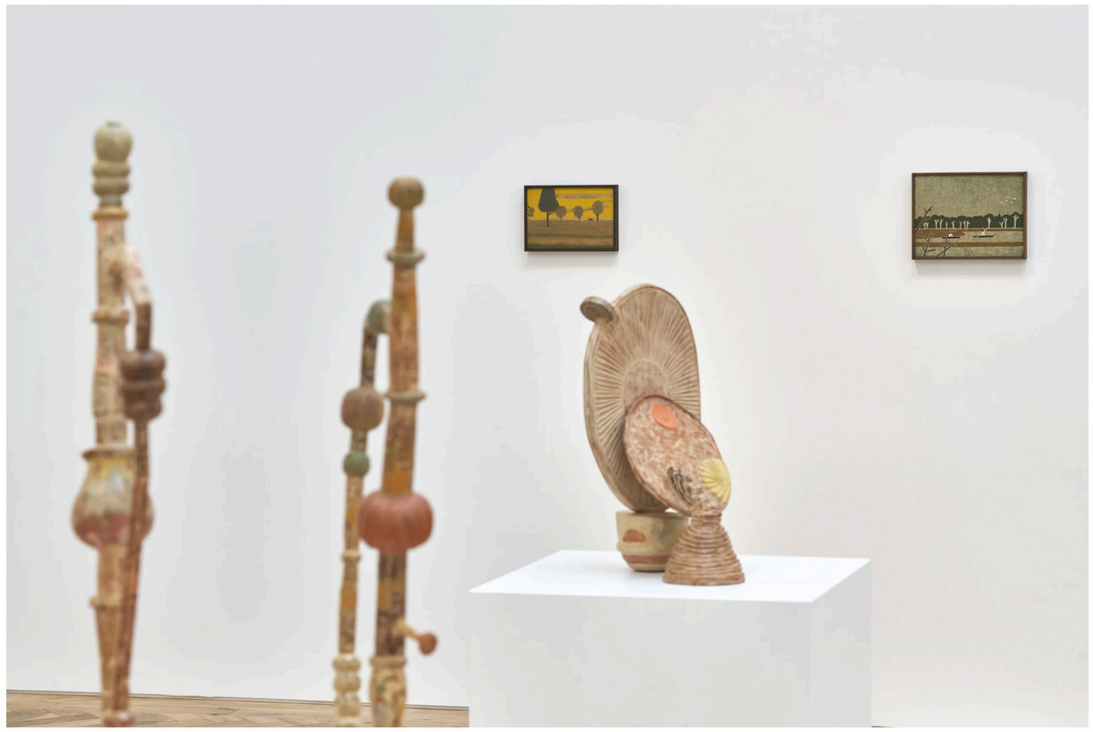
sculpture
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Installation view of "John Joseph Mitchell and Joel Tomlin," 2026. Photo: John McKenzie, Courtesy the artist and Ingleby, Edinburgh

Joel Tomlin

October 22, 2026 by Greg Thomas

Edinburgh

Ingleby Gallery

Joel Tomlin's wooden sculptures have the air of things long discarded, newly discovered, and lovingly restored. Paired with John Joseph Mitchell's spirited, naïve paintings in a double-header exhibition (on view through November 7, 2026), they suffuse Ingleby's main gallery space with an atmosphere of human warmth and gentle mischief. Passing among them, I was reminded of a line from the Glaswegian poet Edwin Morgan's verse on his friend Ian Hamilton Finlay, created during the era when Finlay was producing small-scale toys and poem-objects in glass, balsa wood, cork, and other household materials: "you give us the pleasure of made things."

Based between a makeshift studio in London's East End and a countryside cabin in North Frankenwald, Germany, Tomlin collects items of discarded wood ("[e]verything begged, borrowed, repaired and found," as an artist's note puts it in the text accompanying the show), often allowing them to rest for months and years in one of these two locations before converting them into rackety folk-art curios. The exhibition includes many of his "Tear Jars"—small, long-necked wooden carafes in rich browns and hazels, rubbed with beeswax like antique furniture being helped to breathe again. The thing is that these "jars" are solid. As containers, they are functionless. But we sense that the catharsis implied by the title lies in the process of making itself, and, for the viewer, in basking in the very tangible made-ness of the thing presented.

There is a potential Marxian reading here: the animation of the world and the humanizing effects of unalienated creative labor; the shedding of tears of relief. I also intuit something of the spirit of the scale-model as described by Claude Lévi-Strauss or Susan Stewart—the feeling of emotional mastery that comes from miniaturization, removing the complexity of utilitarian function from an object that bears its trappings. Given the rustic, Romantic flavor of Tomlin's forms, and the rural Bavarian fastness where some of them were made, we might even posit a Heideggerian reading of the world-making quality of crafted objects.

Other, less baggage-laden parallels are available, however, for the hutting life that Tomlin's practice evokes, from historic Buddhist literature (Kamo no Chōmei's *Hōjōki*, for example) to Paul Celan and J.H. Prynne's evocations of the hut as metaphor for the politically and socially freighted encounter between individual and world. Tomlin seems to lean into some such associations in outlining the reciprocity between his two creative environments, "the urban giving energy and wit, the rural a slow metabolic rate and understanding of surfaces."

All such musings aside, what is also vital to note about Tomlin's sculptures is that they are not only like objects, but very much like people, and animals. Several of the nine larger sculptures placed on central plinths have the ungainliness of foals or teenagers, with found wooden supports and spindles poking or bending outward like arms and legs. Titles such as *Distaff Boys* (2026), *Instrumentalists* (2024-26), *Ray Goat* (2026), and *Centaur* (2023-26), lean into associations of mammalian liveliness.

Other pieces suggest primitive cottage machinery or furniture, perhaps in the spirit of the more whimsical, Dada-esque end of kinetic art (Jean Tinguely comes to mind). Surfaces are rough with tool marks, while tempera finishes in pastel colors appear partially worn away post-application, as if to imply a further process of aging or living-in. Raised floral and concentric patterns complement a sense that we are looking at the distant cousins of lampstands and curtain-rail finials.

This is a deeply satisfying show. Tomlin's works are replete with the grounding quality that comes from a feeling of the physical world terraformed through human intelligence and dexterity, the pleasure of made things.