

The Inspired Vessel

Seven artists look to the past and to the future

TEXT BY KEVIN WALLACE

From the most humble aspects of utility, such as storing and serving food, to the most sacred objects, such as ceremonial chalices and funerary urns, the vessel has been a part of human life from the beginnings of recorded history. Makers have long known that the spirit they impart in the vessel impacts the life of those who use it. *The Inspired Vessel*, curated by Sara L. Cannon and Scott Canty and recently on view at the Los Angeles Municipal Gallery, celebrates this form and shows how contemporary artists are reinterpreting it with an understanding of its history and a vision of its future. The exhibition includes painters and artists working in traditional craft media, as well as those who are experimenting with new materials and approaches, including a wide-range of approaches to working with wood. Among them are David Fobes, an artist who combines function, sculpture, and painting in his work; Joseph Shuldiner, who uses willow branches in his sculptural vessels; and Minoru Ohira, a sculptor who works with rescued wood. William Hunter, Howard Michael Klepper, Howard Lewin and Gary Stevens, four

woodturners who represent a wide range of approaches to the field, are also featured.

The painted wall pieces of David Fobes explore both art and function. While some artists use paint as a way to cover bad workmanship, this is not the case with Fobes, a fact which is immediately apparent when opening the well-crafted drawers of red gum eucalyptus. The artist has been creating furniture and use-based objects for 20 years, and the works presented in *The Inspired Vessel* suggest furniture as filtered through shaped abstract canvases, exploring form and function along with the occult meanings of color and sacred geometries.

“‘Useful Art’ might be defined as an object that displays utilitarian and expressive qualities simultaneously,” Fobes offers. When an object begins to favor utility over its expressive nature, it falls into the realm of design. On the other hand, when the utilitarian function of an object is put into service of an idea or becomes subordinate to expressive consideration, the object approaches the realm of art.”

The work of David Fobes balances

these concerns. The pleasant geometry of the forms belies the complex angles that he must negotiate as a woodworker. The pieces are, on the functional level, cases with drawers, though they also work as pure sculpture and three-dimensional painting.

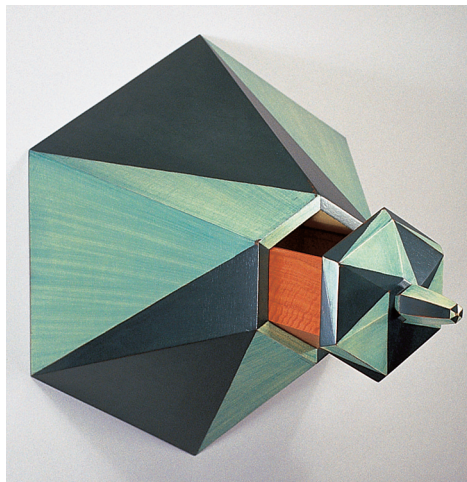
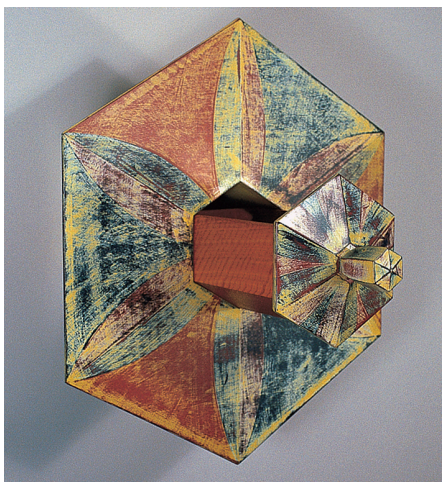
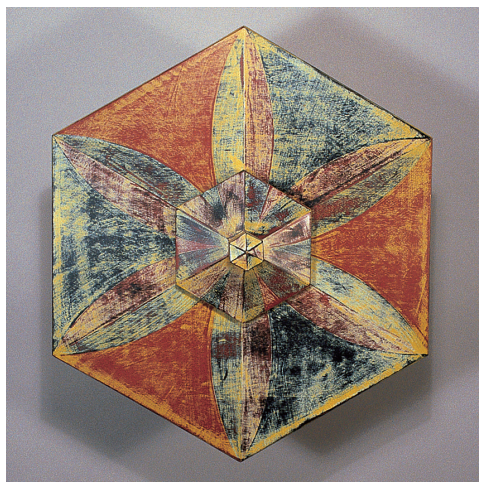
The work of Joseph Shuldiner utilizes willow branches and handmade paper to create abstract works that concern form and light. Influenced by *chochin*, traditional Japanese paper lanterns, as well as modernist design of the 1960s, Shuldiner has become known for both his installations and individual sculptural works.

“These pieces are a distillation of the various forms, materials, and sensibilities I have explored in my work for more

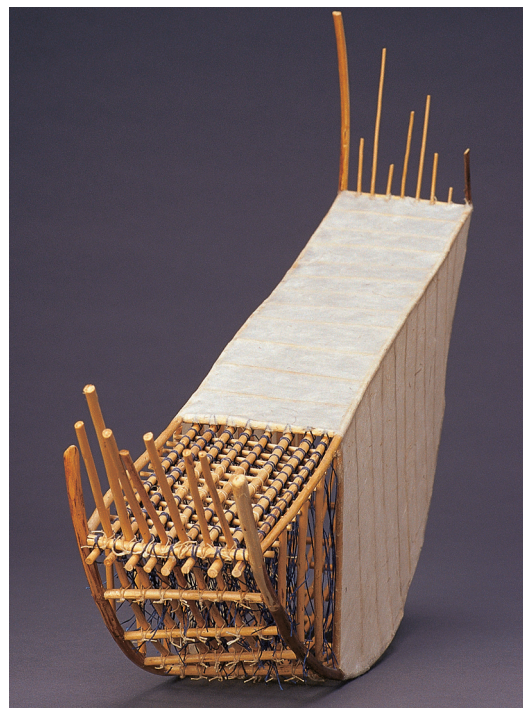
David Fobes, “Hex #2” [closed]; plywood, red gum eucalyptus, paints, brass; 22” x 22” x 22”.

David Fobes, “Hex #2” [open]; plywood, red gum eucalyptus, paints, brass; 22” x 22” x 22”.

David Fobes, Hex #3 [open], plywood, red gum eucalyptus, paints & brass, 22” x 22” x 17”.



ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS



than two decades,” Shuldiner says of the works in *The Inspired Vessel*. “They are the product of both a continuously evolving process of adaptation and abstraction from my original sources of inspiration, and an enduring fascination with refining borrowed aesthetic idioms down to their most fundamental shapes.”

Considering Japan to be the source of much of his artistic vocabulary, Shuldiner recently visited the country; taking in the stunning natural and man-made environments, he was stimulated by the beauty he found in the simplest details.

“I started to wonder what effect this kind of direct stimulation would have on my work when I returned,” he admits. “Ironically, inhabiting Japan, inhaling it, absorbing it, however briefly, seems to have had the effect of making it less important for me to emulate traditional Japanese style and craftsmanship in my work.”

The resulting work features an increased exploration of abstraction, with specific cultural references more deeply embedded or disconnected from their origins.

“I have attempted to remove successive layers of familiarity, deliberately obscuring associations, encouraging the viewer to decode the pieces with their intuition, rather than through a process of recognition,” Shuldiner says.

Minoru Ohira is a sculptor who often works with wood, although his approaches

are quite unorthodox when compared with traditional woodworking. A large-scale vessel form in the exhibition was created entirely from wood that was found in a trash pile on the side of the street. The wood was then broken into pieces and carefully assembled into the structural form.

Ohira’s sculpture incorporates the influences of three different cultures: his homeland of Japan, three years spent living in Mexico, and now living in the United States. Having received his MFA at the Tokyo National University, he has a deep knowledge of art history, which was further enhanced by two years of study at the Mexico National Institute of Art. From the primitive and powerful stonework of the Aztec, Toltec and Mayan civilizations to the shapes of village dwellings, the years in Mexico fed an interest in totemic sculptures, enclosed shelters and the complicated patterns and variations the artist observed in nature.

Moving to Los Angeles, Ohira turned to materials that were found near his studio, which was located in an industrial area. Among the materials that interested him were pieces from urban construction sites such as split lumber, chopped layers of paint and splintered edges of wood. Today he often works with old-growth redwood, maple and Douglas fir taken from demolished homes built in the 1930s and 40s,

William Hunter, “Glimmer in Crosscurrents”; cocobolo; H: 15½” x D: 6½”.

William Hunter, “Tango”; vera wood; H: 11” x D: 11”.

William Hunter, “Free Vessel”; cocobolo; approximately 15” x 15” x 15”.

Joseph Shuldiner, “Untitled Crescent #2”; washi, willow, waxed linen thread; 20” x 15” x 4”.

using a Japanese hand axe to shave off thin strips which he works into his sculptural forms. These found pieces of wood are often combined with slate, twigs, and pigmented fiberglass resin, transforming the abandoned into objects of beauty.

“After many years in Los Angeles, I have begun to combine all the facets of my various backgrounds,” Ohira says of works such as the large-scale vessel in *The Inspired Vessel* exhibition, which features thousands of wood strips and pieces glued over complex wood armatures. “The technique and treatment of the material is primitive and dictated by the natural properties of the materials themselves. It is the character of the natural materials that is also incorporated into the form.”

Although there are rich traditions associated with the wooden bowl, exploring the potential of the non-functional wood vessel is a fairly recent phenomenon. Four artists



who explore the potential of the lathe were featured in the exhibition. They include Howard Lewin, who creates forms that celebrate the beauty of the material itself. The artist's aesthetic is in line with pioneers of the field such as Rude Osolnik and Mel Lindquist, who utilized the bowl and vessel as a means of exploring beauty in what traditional woodworkers would consider flaws and imperfections. Lewin prefers to turn green wood, since it provides greater latitude as to size, shape, and grain direction, and it is more cost-effective. He also embraces the fact that the final shape of a green-turned vessel is not predetermined.

"During the drying and curing process, many strange and wonderful things can happen," he says. "Trying to control this

phenomenon is fascinating, wondrous and not always successful."

The artist admits that he is amazed by the directions the field of woodturning has gone over the last few decades, Lewin refers to it as the "baroqueanization" of the field, driven by a need to create work that is different. Although much of his work remains closely allied with the simplicity of the natural edge vessel, he has explored a wide-range of approaches, from vessels created from dyed dowels of various sizes to a series based upon the visualization of Einstein's theory of relativity.

"I never know how or what influences what I do...things just sort of happen," Lewin offers. "It has always amazed me and still does. These zingers, as I call them, come at odd times—sometimes with a hiatus of several months or even years, and there is no predicting them. To pin down how they got there has baffled me, to the point that I don't even try to understand them."

Like many, Howard Michael Klepper's first experience with the lathe was

Howard Michael Klepper, "The Bishop"; maple burl, ebony; H: 23" x D: 8".

Howard Michael Klepper, "Turned wood vessels".



Gary Stevens, "Firedance #15"; redwood lace burl; 14" x 31" x 21".

Gary Stevens, "Shell Series #58"; redwood lace burl; 12" x 15" x 20".

in a junior high school shop class, where he turned a mahogany bowl that remains in his mother's home. In the years that followed, his life led in different directions—he practiced law and taught philosophy at Stanford University. Yet a love of woodworking remained, including building and repairing guitars, and in 1997 he left academia to devote himself to making wooden objects.

"Wood is the natural material par excellence; no two pieces are alike," he offers, citing a reason for utilizing the material that is familiar to all of those who have taken to it. "This is more pronouncedly the case with the burls and other highly-figured woods with which I often work."

The vessels of Howard Michael Klepper bring to mind formal human figures, standing upright like proud chess pieces. They are created using a large boring bar of his own design, and long, curved hollowing tools that he made in a blacksmith's forge. The artist is driven by the challenge of extending his capacities, as well as those of the wood turning medium. As might be expected of a retired professor, his interests are also philosophical.

"Both the structural and aesthetic properties of a given piece of wood set parameters for the turner's design," Klepper explains. "Design is further constrained by the use of lathe turning, which imposes the circle—considered by the ancient Greeks to be the perfect geometrical form—upon the natural geometry of the wood."

"There is thus an inherent tension in the turned wood object between the formal and natural, between the simple and

the complex,” he continues. “In designing a piece, I believe that the turner must confront and explore these conflicts. In some of my pieces I seek to bring opposing elements into harmony. In others I present them in a state of dynamic tension.”

The work of Gary Stevens celebrates the organic beauty of wood, including the natural edge, while at the same time utilizing precise fluting to create vessels that are striking and sophisticated.

“Over the years I’ve learned many things about wood and work, but perhaps most important is what I’ve learned about myself in the pursuit of my work as an artist,” Stevens says. “There is a struggle between the process and material during the creation of artwork that is so demanding and often so humbling that one cannot help but learn lessons with time.”

“Working this exquisite redwood burl that comes from under the ground on my own property is a gift that I consider myself most fortunate to have received,” He continues. “My aim is to work in a manner and achieve a result worthy of this glorious material. The process and the self-revela-

Minoru Ohira, “Vessel of Wind” [detail];
found wood; H: 90” x D: 45”.

Minoru Ohira, “Vessel of Wind”;
found wood; H: 90” x D: 45”.



Howard Lewin, “Double Bull’s Eye”;
pine; H: 16” x D: 16”.

Howard Lewin, “Untitled”;
carob; H: 10” x D: 16”.

tion that occur throughout it are crucial to my growth as a person.”

William Hunter has been an important figure in expanding the field of contemporary woodturning, both in reference to the vessel form and as pure sculpture. Much of Hunter’s work explores the connections and possibilities to be found between the two. His works speak of fluid motion and shifting rhythm, transforming the vessel through an approach that reflects both nature and progress.

The artist’s “Free Vessel” challenges our definitions of the vessel, as it is free of foot, shoulders or mouth. The work is in fact a vessel that has been cut apart, offering a number of possible arrangements. It is a sculpture that celebrates abstraction and negative space.

“This piece, comprised of four elements, is about the deconstruction and transformation of the vessel,” Hunter explains.

“Free Vessel, by arranging space with a new integration of separate elements and energy that flows through each part, has no particular vantage point, no singular view, no central focus, leaving only the faint echoes of the vessel.”

Hunter’s work is largely informed by nature, from microscopic structures to the landscape. “Nature’s rhythms, patterns, tensions, relationships, and the energy of life provide a vast pool of visual stimuli,” he says of his creative process. “I use different responses to these various scenarios in an intuitive way to relay the energy I feel and to express myself. It is never clear-cut, not a single moment, or object, or emotion, but a blending of these voices with an abstract response.”

The Inspired Vessel presents the work of artists who are taking the medium of wood into the new century. It is a period in history where the modern embraces tradition, the utilitarian contains self-expression, and the language of art transcends distinctions of craft, design, painting, sculpture and function. The evidence of centuries of wood-working tradition can be found in the works on display, along with approaches that are unlike anything that has come before. The future lies in the hands of these artists—those who are currently exhibiting across the country and, ultimately, the future artists who have begun working with wood and have not yet envisioned where it might lead them.

Kevin Wallace is an independent curator, consultant, and writer in the field of craft art.

