



Lost worlds found

FROM A CHILDHOOD COLLECTING NEIGHBOURHOOD JUNK TO A CAREER CREATING ART FURNITURE PIECES FROM FOUND OBJECTS, **TED LOTT** TELLS THE STORY HIS LIFE, HIS WORKS AND HIS SIDEKICK – A RESCUE DOG NAMED BEANS.

Tell us about your background and training.

My background in woodworking started as an undergraduate student at the Maine College of Art in Portland, Maine. I had intended to be a sculpture major and took a woodworking course to help me learn how to work the wood tools, but fell in love with it. Luckily the college was starting a Woodworking & Furniture Design major that year, and I became part of the inaugural class. I also took part in a number of workshops at places like Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, and the Penland School of Craft. I also received an MFA from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, a three-year programme.

How did you learn your craft?

I was fortunate to study under a number of talented and influential woodworkers, but I must credit my learning largely to practice and repetition. I'm always interested in the next project and the next challenge: both in the technical woodworking aspects and the challenges of moving forward an idea or concept of what the work is about. For that reason I very seldom repeat a work, or make more than a few of each piece. The ideas sometimes get reiterated, but I feel like they evolve with each new work, each re-telling of the story.

What was the first project you completed?

My first project was a total disaster, it was an assignment for my beginning woodworking class. I can't even remember now what the parameters were, but I distinctly recall that I bit off way more than I could chew, and the project fought me the entire way. I still remember the moment that I threw it into the scrap bin and started over. It was an inauspicious beginning, but it taught me a lot about the importance of perseverance and moving forward, even when you can't see the way.

Your artworks are like nothing we've seen before. Please could you tell us a bit about your journey to making them and the thinking behind them?

My current work revolves around architecture and its relationship to the objects of material culture. I work with found furniture, suitcases and other items that carry their own history, and the evidence of their previous lives and purposes as useful objects.

I've been working with found objects for a lot longer than I have been a woodworker. Even when I was in grade-school I was attracted to these things, which other people might describe as junk. I would walk around our suburban neighborhood with a red wagon and collect the 'trash' that other people were getting rid of. A lot of the time I would take it apart or reassemble it back together in different ways, or just keep it around because I liked it. I was a strange kid. I give lots of credit to my parents, who supported my weirdness. My dad opened an account with the local hardware store so I could ride my bike over there and get supplies like screws, glue, paint and so on. I remember my mom pulling over on the side of the highway so I could get out and collect all the hubcaps that had rolled off people's cars...

My current body of work grew from a graduate school course on vernacular architecture. We were studying local buildings and the methods that were used to build them. The connection between furniture-making and architecture has a long history: the most obvious examples are the post and beam methods, which use a lot of the same joinery techniques as furniture, such as mortise and tenon joints, but on a larger scale. However, most of our current housing is built using stud-frame construction, with standardised materials like the 2x4. I became interested in what that process of stud frame construction would do if reduced in scale.

Later, during an artist residency, I began to combine the architectural miniaturised stick-frame method with existing





furniture, and the result was powerful. The juxtaposition with full-sized objects highlights the relationship. Each is designed around the scale of the human body, but at different scales.

Where do you get your ideas and inspiration?

The best ideas come to us from the world around us, so I'm always looking, always reading, always exploring. I'm a believer in learning through doing. The action comes first, then the ideas develop while you work.

You particularly mention the idea of shelter on your website, can you tell us a bit about that and how you work with that concept?

Along with clothing, food and water, shelter is a basic requirement for human life. During most of our history, shelters were made of local materials: timber, stone, hide, grass and mud provided protection from the elements. However, with the coming of the industrial revolution, locally sourced materials gave way to industrially produced ones – 2x4s and nails replaced timbers and elaborate joinery.

Today, stud frame construction is a primary means by which shelter is created from wood. While connoisseurs have long lauded the skill, precision and exacting craftsmanship required to create a post and beam structure, the majority of our homes, commercial buildings and other structures are made using the stud frame method.

I love the simplicity, logic and engineering brilliance of stud frame construction, which we usually only see when we pass by construction sites. This method is used everywhere, but hidden, almost completely overlooked.

How do you source your materials?

I usually buy rough-cut lumber from near to wherever I am working. I like to search out local sawmills and get to know the people who run them. After a while, they will call you if they get a good batch in that they think you might want. For the found objects and furniture, I'm always keeping an eye out, checking on garage sales, thrift shops, antique malls, and so on.

When you're picking a found object to work with, is there anything that you are particularly looking for?

There is no specific set of criteria, but I definitely know them when I see them.

Do you have any advice for readers who would like to make things with found objects?

It's really helpful to spend some time getting to know the object, really understanding its materials, how it was made, where it was put together, and possibly how can it be taken apart. I suggest spending some time drawing the object. There's nothing that helps to comprehend something better than drawing it.

How does your design process work?

That really depends on the piece. Sometimes, if I have a pretty good mental image of the work, I'll just begin with no design or drawings at all, just a rough sketch. On other works, I'll end up doing full scale 1:1 drawings of the work from all directions before I even cut a single board.

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With the found object works I sometimes take a photo of the object, then manipulate it using a variety of methods, from Photoshop to actually cutting and pasting the print-outs of the object with real scissors, and then drawing on top. Often then the drawings get scanned, digitally edited, then printed and drawn on again. This process goes on until I arrive at the finished design, or until I screw it all up and have to start again with the original photo. Sometimes I'll have two or three designs for a single object, then I have to decide which one to go with.

Tell us about your workshop.

I'm really lucky to have a home workshop situation, a 2,000sq ft barn that's located in our back yard. It's a single-storey barn with 12ft ceilings and a concrete floor. We just moved in spring 2020 and I did a lot of improvements before taking residence, including insulating, putting up drywall, electrical, painting and so on. The biggest improvement was the installation of a 10x10ft insulated glass garage door. My previous studio was in a beautiful old industrial space and had tons of great natural light, but the new barn had no windows at all, so it really makes the space a pleasure to work in.

Your little dog Beans features regularly on your Instagram feed and even has her own Insta account. Can you tell us a bit about her and what she gets up to when you're working?

Beans is my full-time sidekick and shop dog extraordinaire. She's a rescue we got while living in upstate New York, she came from a family who were forced to move and couldn't keep her. She's about five years old, and is a chihuahua-pug mix, or 'chug'. She has a spot in the shop over by the window where she sits and observes the goings on both inside and out. Before Beans, I never had a pet of my own, and she has brought so many great things to my life, including making me get out and go on walks, which is a great way to get out and think over a problem. But most of all, it's the greatest feeling to have something that gets excited whenever you walk into the room!

Which woods do you most like working with and why?

With the architectural work, I started out using exclusively white pine, because softwoods are the 'correct' wood for 2x4s. However, I have moved over to using basswood, which is a similar colour, but is a little easier to work with and doesn't gunk up my machinery with pitch. I've also recently made a few pieces with cherry and with walnut. Because most of the work is assembled with a pin nailer, it's important that whatever wood I use be soft enough that it doesn't cause the nails to turn and protrude out the sides.

Do you work with other materials as well?

I have recently begun working with brass, which I'm really loving. It's a relatively common material, not too precious, which is

important to me. It's easy to work and can be cut and sautered with ease, and its strength allows me to work thinner, on items like windowpanes, than I can achieve with wood at the same scale.

What sort of finishes do you prefer?

Most of my work uses a brushed-on tung oil finish. It gives the wood a basic level of protection, but my pieces are intended to bear the evidence of age and use to accumulate their own history along the way, so I don't try to get the finish perfect.

Tell us about how you work – what type of tools do you like to use?

I'll use anything that will get the job done, but my go-to tools in the shop are my bandsaw, where I mill the scaled lumber; my chapsaw, where I cut things to length; and my 23-gauge pin nailer, which is the primary way that I assemble the work. A lot of people think that using a pin nailer is cheating, or that the resulting structure will be weak, but the concept is the same as in a full-scale building – a single nail connection may be weak, but the accumulation of thousands and thousands of them ends up creating an extremely strong and durable object.

Are there any tools you avoid?

I'm not a very digital thinker, so I don't use CNC or anything like that. No shame, but just not my thing.

What is your favourite project you have worked on?

My favourite is always the next one. I just started a new piece working with some steam-bending and combining with some other materials and found objects. On this one I'm working without any drawings or plans, just feeling my way through. It's a bit unsure and nervewracking, but it keeps me excited to get in the studio.

What is the most challenging project you have worked on?

I did a public art piece many years ago in collaboration with another artist. I've never encountered quite so much bureaucracy in making anything as that. It was challenging and exhausting and hard, and I'd love to do another one!

Where do you see your work going in the future?

Looking to get back to doing large-scale work, now that I'm in a new studio and will hopefully be here for a while.

What do you do when you're not working?

Lately it's been all about the home improvements, but we also love to canoe the rivers around where we live, it's a really simple and lovely way to get out into nature and experience a change of pace and scenery while staying properly socially distanced!

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