



“Conversations with Wood” Reveals Diverse Directions in Wood Art

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by Pat Rogers

NEW HAVEN, C.T.—Art made from wood has been quietly rising into fine art consciousness since the mid-1980s and gained motion in the 1990s when the genre of “wood art” was first coined. All the while, Minneapolis collectors Ruth and David Waterbury have been watching, searching and collecting and, in time, amassed over 500 works of wood art—one of the premier collections in the United States. A curated portion of their collection is currently on view at the Yale University Art Gallery in New Haven, CT.

“Conversations with Wood: Selections from the Waterbury Collection” presents 70 objects from the Waterbury collection along with select artworks given by the Waterbury’s to the Minneapolis Institute of Arts and the Yale University Art Gallery.

The exhibition presents the evolution of wood art over the past 25 years, according to Yale University Art Gallery. Objects on view represent a focus on the lathe and wood turning as its transformation into an artistic field that now includes many more processes. Pieces range from simple turned bowls to objects that highlight the irregularities found in the wood to works that explore the ways wood can be manipulated and transformed into art.



“Full Circle, Slipping Stone Series” by Robyn Horn, 2005. Jarrah burl, 23 1/2 x 25 x 7 inches. The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Gift of Ruth and David Waterbury (Yale B.A. 1958).

A unique component of the exhibition is the inclusion of interviews of contemporary wood artists. This allows viewers to gain fuller insights into the works on view and on the state of wood art in general. These artist “conversations” stem from words written by nearly 130 living artists and collected in the exhibition catalogue.

The artists each have works in the Waterbury Collection. Prominent international artists included are Michelle Holzapfel, Robyn Horn, Todd Hoyer, William Hunter, Ron Kent, Michael Mode, Hayley Smith, Alan Stirt, and Bob Stocksdale. Also included are six essays providing personal and historical perspectives on the development of wood turning.



“Sculpture” by Michael J. Peterson, 2007. Madrone, 8 7/8 x 7 3/4 x 22 1/2 inches. The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Gift of Ruth and David Waterbury (Yale B.A. 1958).

“Conversations with Wood: Selections from the Waterbury Collection” also provides a visual reflection on the wide-ranging variety of artists working in wood art and in the diverse range of objects art that define the field today, according to the gallery.

The extreme poles of scale can be seen in the exhibition in Christian Burchard’s *Torsos*, which covers a large expanse of wall with ethereal floating forms, to Jack R. Slentz’s table sculpture, *On the Edge*, to Michael Hosaluk’s small-scale work *Family*.



“On the Edge” by Jack R. Slentz, 2002. Red oak, 19 x 10 x 10 inches. Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of Ruth and David Waterbury, B.A. 1958, in honor of Betty and Whitney MacMillan, B.A. 1951.



“Family” by Michael Hosaluk, 1998. Maple with acrylic paint, largest piece L. 11 inches. Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of Ruth and David Waterbury, B.A. 1958, and Marcus Waterbury in honor of Richard Levin, Ph.d. 1974, for outstanding leadership as president of Yale University, 1993 - 2013.

Other sculptures in the exhibition were selected to reflect remarkable technical and artistic skill combined with exceptionally specimens of wood, according to Yale University Art Gallery. These include William Hunter’s *Garden Songs* and Derek Bencomo’s *Shadow Dancer, Fourth View*. Both pieces channel grace and motion enhanced further in beauty by wood that might be achingly beautiful on its own.



“Garden Songs” by William Hunter, 2004.
Cocobolo, 17 x 7 1/2 inches. Collection of Ruth
and David Waterbury, B.A. 1958.



“Shadow Dancer, Fourth View” by Derek Bencomo,
2003. Koa root, 13 x 13 1/2 inches. Collection of Ruth
and David Waterbury, B.A. 1958.

“Conversations With Wood” portrays the playful side of art through Mark Sfirri’s *Rejects from the Bat Factory* and Giles Gilson’s *Gravity Bottle*.

The exhibition also tackles the thorny topic of craft and art and ways they become entangled.

“Many contemporary woodworkers use traditional craft processes and materials to create objects that embrace a range of artistic practices,” states an Information Sheet for the exhibition.

“Giles Gilson’s *Stratus* pays homage to the “stables” of Alexander Calder, while Connie Mississippi’s *Object for Magdalena Abakanowicz* references the work of the Polish sculptor. Christopher Cantwell employs a broad range of exotic woods to create narrative scenes. Michael Brolly’s *Scorpoid*, also on view, melds technical virtuosity with humor. Some of these artists are associated with wood turning, but their use of stack lamination, joinery, carving, and inlay attests to the breadth of their skills.”



“Windscape” by Bruce Mitchell, 1989. Redwood burl, 8 x 22 1/2
inches. Collection of Ruth and David Waterbury, B.A. 1958.

Through their collection, the Waterburys presents the changing field of wood art and its artists since the late 198s, according to Yale University Art Gallery. They have also built one of the premier collections of wood art in the United States, according the gallery.

“As leading collectors, Ruth and David Waterbury have played a central role in raising the visibility of wood art nationally and building a collection here at Yale,” says Patricia E. Kane, Friends of American Arts Curator of American Decorative Arts, Yale University Art Gallery. “This exhibition is a rare opportunity to view a collection of this caliber, and to learn more about the recent history and

innovation of contemporary wood artists.”



“Lunar Sphere” by David Ellsworth, 2000. Spalted sugar maple, 13 3/4 x 13 1/2 inches. The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Gift of Ruth and David Waterbury (Yale B.A. 1958), in honor of Christopher Monkhouse for bringing wood art to the MIA.

The Waterbury’s happenstanced into wood art during a 1984 visit to Hawaii, according to exhibition information. They became entranced by a translucent piece by Ron Kent, meeting the artists while attending a show on wood. From there, the couple began drawn into the world of wood turning and began attending demonstrations sponsored by the Minnesota Woodturners Association and purchasing works from local galleries, according to Yale University Art Gallery.

In 1988, they viewed “The Art of Turned-Wood Bowls”, a national exhibition of work from the early and important wood collection of Edward Jacobson. The show inspired them to meet artists and acquire their work. Two resources for collecting contemporary wood art were important in their journey as collectors: The Center for Art in Wood (formerly the Wood Turning Center), in Philadelphia, and the American Association of Woodturners (AAW) in St. Paul. Both were founded in 1986.

While the Waterbury’s have focused works by favorite artists, curiosity has kept them seeking. The pair looks broadly and investigates many artists and numerous styles of wood art, according to Yale University Art Gallery.



Bowl from “Post Nuclear Series” by Ron Kent with Myra Kent, 2005. Norfolk Island pine, 8 7/8 x 9 7/8 inches. Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of Ruth and David Waterbury, B.A. 1958, to celebrate the 40th Anniversary of the Friends of American Arts at Yale.

Yale University Art Gallery’s interest in wood art did not start with “Conversations With Wood.” In 2001, the gallery co-organized the exhibition “Wood Turning in North America since 1930” with the Wood Turning Center. The exhibition incorporated loans from individuals and institutions from across the country. The accompanying catalogue presented the first historical overview of turned

wood in the 20th century.

The exhibition was presented at the The Minneapolis Institute of Arts (Oct. 21 – Dec 30, 2001); Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian, American Art Museum in Washington, D.C. (March 15 – July 21, 2002) and the Yale University Art Gallery in New Haven, CT (Sept 10 – Dec 1, 2002).

In 2002, the gallery presented a small exhibition of gifts received from the collection of Robyn and John Horn. In 2007, important wood art objects were included in the exhibition “Art for Yale: Collecting for a New Century.”

The gallery has been collecting wood art since the mid 1990s. A recent highlight was the 2010 gift of works from the collection of Irving Lipton, one of the finest collections of cutting-edge contemporary wood art from the 1970s forward. In addition to gifts, the Gallery has an endowed acquisitions fund for contemporary wood art and regularly exhibits wood art in the permanent galleries of the newly expanded museum.



“Blossfeldt Vase” by Michelle Holzapfel, 2001. Birch, 11 1/2 x 13 x 7 inches. Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of Ruth and David Waterbury, B.A. 1958, in honor of Betty and Whitney MacMillan, B.A. 1951.

In some ways, “Conversations With Wood” conjures comparison to “Against the Grain: Wood in Contemporary Art, Craft and Design” at the Museum of Arts and Design in New York City. One difference can be found in the presentation of turned pieces, explained Yale University Art Gallery. The NYC exhibition presents more furniture and sculptural pieces but fewer examples of classic turned pieces than “Conversations with Wood, the gallery said.

BASIC FACTS: “Conversations With Wood: Selections From the Waterbury Collection” remains on view through Aug. 18, 2013.

The Yale University Art Gallery is located at 1111 Chapel Street (at York Street), New Haven, Connecticut 06510. www.artgallery.yale.edu.