

Bringing wood to life

Through building functional sculpture, work that serves both a sculptural aesthetic and utilitarian function, **Erik Wolken** seeks to create rhythm and poetry in each of the pieces he makes



CAD drawing for 'You and Me' chairs

When asked about his journey to becoming a furniture maker, Erik Wolken tells me that he never intended to become a woodworker; in fact, this was something of a chance discovery. While roaming the stacks of books at his University library one day, he came across Wendell Castle's publication on stacked laminated furniture construction and was intrigued by the notion of building useful pieces from wood. This sparked a desire to proceed to find more books of the same ilk and the rest, as they say, is history.

It all began in 1961 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where Erik was born and grew up. Some 22 years later he received his BA in Geography and spent the spring of 1988 studying Furniture Design at Indiana University before going on to spend the autumn and winter of 1988/89 in the Programme of Fine Woodworking at Haywood Community College in Clyde, North Carolina. From 1989 to 1995 he worked as a cabinetmaker for Woodpecker Enterprises in Apex, North Carolina, before going on to open his own studio, where he has been working on private commissions and showing his work nationally ever since.

So that's Erik's journey in short, but if, like me, you're eager to discover how an interest in geography led to a successful career as a professional furniture maker, then do read on! Erik tells me that it wasn't long after discovering the work of Wendell Castle that he found himself needing a drafting table for a class he was taking in cartography: "I was a geography major as an undergrad, and too poor to buy one, so I decided to make one." Rudimentary at best and built from rough construction timber, screws and a carriage bolt to make it tilt, Erik had constructed his first piece of furniture and soon a fellow classmate saw his table and a commission ensued. Over the next few years, he went on to build a small workbench and played around at building very simple pieces of furniture using a set of Sears Craftsman chisels, a wooden mallet constructed from firewood, and a hand-held circular saw screwed to a piece of plywood, which acted as a table saw.

Coming from a family of incredibly talented artists, scientists and writers, all of whom found a way to make their own unique path in life, set quite an example for Erik to follow. Luckily, he found his voice, as he explains: "I have a variety of images, ideas and objects in my head, and they must get out, so I make them."

'You and Me' chairs: 940mm high × 635mm wide × 610mm dia. Sculptural chairs constructed from carved poplar, finished in milk paint and a hand-carved natural cherry seat finished with water-based lacquer. Available in either red or black



ABOVE: 'Human Shield #1' – 1,829mm high × 610mm wide × 356mm dia. Free-standing wood sculpture featuring two intertwined figures

Functional sculpture

Describing his pieces as 'functional sculpture', this maker's work serves as a sculptural aesthetic yet does not exist solely to be viewed from afar, but to be interacted with and used everyday. So what made Erik take this more contemporary route as opposed to a more traditional one? He states again the power of influence that discovering Wendell Castle's work, the father of the art furniture movement, had on him – an influence that has remained to this day. Glimpses of similarities can certainly be seen between the two makers, such as in their use of bold colours and the interplay of simple geometric shapes. But as Erik explains, his journey to developing his signature style was not as straightforward as it may at first appear: "At the time I entered a formal programme in furniture design and construction, and my biggest interest then was in the furniture of the Shakers. This was the kind of work I wanted to make, and I clashed mightily with my fellow classmates who came from a more fine arts background and were building funky odd-shaped and painted pieces that I just did not understand." That, however, was the beginning of a dialogue Erik began having with himself in which he really began to loosen up his conservative notions of furniture and started an evolution in his work whereby his designs were no longer technique-driven, but were now more concerned with expressing an idea – "a pretty artsy fartsy notion!" As Erik explains: "More often than not, I am taking a conceptual and purely sculptural idea, like in many of my figurative pieces, and making it conform to a function such as a table, cabinet or a chair, which is not always a comfortable marriage." That being

said, he has always liked the idea of building functional objects as opposed to pure sculpture, as he is very much drawn to the interaction that takes place between a functional object and its user, as well as the vital role the user plays in fully realising his work.

Process of discovery

As Erik says: "Creativity is a strange and unpredictable muse that I can never call upon when I need to. When that moment of inspiration happens, I try my best to capture it in either my sketch book or in the studio. More often than not, though, inspiration is a process of little pencil sketches that get developed over time into a finished idea." Having a very active imagination since he was a small child and still daydreaming of things to build to this day, he is also a big fan of taking long daily walks, which can also be a source of ideas, "just never when I need them!"

Suffering a hand accident when using a jointer in his early 30s meant that Erik was unable to work for a period of time and knowing that he needed a larger set of skills, he started to learn CAD: "Those skills have proved to be very valuable and long before the days of SketchUp, I was able to do fairly advanced 3D computer modelling and was able to make up for my lack of drawing skills by being better equipped to visualise my ideas."

In short, however, Erik says that his process of discovery is to always have his eyes open to what is happening in the visual world, whether it be nature, or the art and furniture world in magazines, museums, galleries or websites. He is constantly on the prowl,

looking at anything and everything, which might kick off even an inkling of an idea. "Inspiration and discovery exist everywhere; you just need your eyes open to be able to recognise it." One of Erik's favourite reference books is on Japanese architecture and he also points to *Steal Like an Artist*, a book by Austin Kleon that includes amusing anecdotes and helpful tips on unlocking your creativity. Erik also explains that as he has started actively making furniture of his own, he has also been greatly influenced and inspired by the Memphis Group and Italian architect, Ettore Sottsass.

Design process

When asked how his design process begins, Erik tells me that most of his ideas start in his sketchbook, before being created into simple 2D drawings in CAD, where he can begin to work out issues of scale and proportion: "If I think the idea has merit, then I do a 3D rendering in CAD and start further defining the individual elements that make up a particular piece." Since his work often involves carved and textured surfaces along with colour, which are hard to reproduce on the computer, Erik often builds a scale model, which brings all those aspects together. In the case of more complicated pieces such as chairs, he will build a full-scale mock-up out of cheap construction grade materials. "Though the process seems linear for me, it rarely is. I rarely have an idea completely worked out before I start construction and I will often have design issues to resolve, which require going back to my sketchbook and repeating the whole process until I have worked out the problem at hand." Thinking of his designs as 'perfect storms' in which

the individual elements of shape, colour, texture and imagery come together to make the whole piece work, in many ways the design for Erik starts with an idea or a concept and then quickly moves on to really being just creative problem solving. "For example, on the 'You and Me' chairs, I couldn't figure out the design of the back rest pieces and over the course of a couple of weeks I sketched many designs, modelled some more on the computer, cut them out full-scale in cardboard, and carved some out of cheap timber, all the while waiting for that moment when I sensed I had a good solution." In terms of the ethos behind his designs, Erik says that the fundamental character or spirit of his work is to tell a story: "I have always been interested in storytelling and documentary film and audio documentary, and creating a narrative for my pieces is a large part of how my thought process begins, and in many cases, such as my pieces with digital image transfer, the narrative I have created is from my own life."

From looking at his pieces, it is obvious that Erik is certainly influenced by the world around him, be that natural or man-made, and his skill in terms of taking a piece of timber and turning it into an object that is imbued with historical images, or which gives a nod to a specific structure or architectural form, is clear to see, and above all, immensely enjoyable for the viewer.

Although much of his work features painted and mixed media elements and often no natural wood, when he does incorporate this into his pieces, he tends to be guided by the appropriateness of the colour of a particular piece of wood for the idea at hand and its working characteristics. Since much of the natural



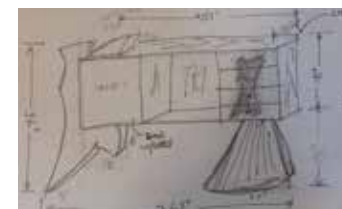
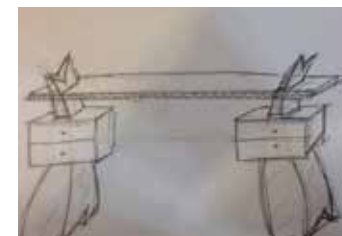
'Torso #1' and detail

RIGHT: 'Dancing Couple' mirror – 749mm high × 838mm wide × 140mm dia.



ABOVE: 'Archetype Bench' – 914mm high × 1,422mm wide × 432mm dia. A celebration of arcs and angles, with a curly maple seat, turned and painted maple legs, and an asymmetrical back of laminated and painted Baltic birch plywood

BELOW: 'Mz. Muffetts Tuffetts' – 1,320mm long × 406mm wide × 432mm tall. Bench/coffee table made from cherry, maple, Baltic birch plywood, paint and coloured pencil



'Dancing Cabinet' and design sketches – 1,067mm high × 1,524mm long × 457mm wide. Cherry wood carved and painted, with gel medium image



LEFT: 'I Have No Mouth But Must Scream' – 457mm high × 991mm long × 150mm dia. Made using carved poplar and paint



LEFT: 'Up A Creek' table and 'Shield' mirror – 864mm high × 1,473mm wide × 305mm dia. Richly grained cherry legs and a sweep of brushed aluminium support a subtly tapered wedge of warm cherry with red milk paint accent



LEFT: 'Wave Bench' – 457mm high × 1,422mm wide × 356mm dia. Carved cherry top, paint and Baltic birch plywood



'Torso #4' and detail



'Human Shield #3'

wood he uses is carved, he also tends to use only local hardwoods, such as cherry, maple, walnut and ash. "I am also drawn to the story behind obtaining a piece of wood, such as receiving an ash tree from a local tree service, which I had milled into slabs and air-dried in my workshop." Erik says he has never really used exotics in his work for two reasons: 1) he doesn't approve of how many are unsustainably removed; and 2), he has never really bought into the notion that a 'wow' piece of wood in itself gives value to a piece; to him the value of his work is in the thought process he brings and the careful choice of materials.

Working space

Working from a small studio he created for himself four years ago, Erik tells me that he used to rent large commercial spaces for many years, where he had access to many high-end commercial tools, so this new working space is very simple in comparison: "I just have the basic necessary tooling: a 3hp Delta unisaw, Hammer/Felder combination jointer/planer, Grizzly bandsaw and drill press, as well as a basic dust collector, all of which meets my needs as well or are better than the many expensive tools I had previously." Erik's workshop also features tall ceilings and great lighting, all of which contribute to making it a wonderful space to work in. Sharing previous workshops with between 2-10 other people meant that Erik struggled to be creative in what could often be a loud and chaotic environment, as he says: "That ability to cope in larger, crowded spaces gave way as I turned 50, which is why I ended up building my own little 'shop behind my house in Chapel Hill, North Carolina." Now he finds that a quiet environment, odd for a woodworker, with little interruption, is what he needs most in order to successfully create.

When asked about his favourite tools, Erik admits

that, if we are talking about big stationary tools, he doesn't really like any of them as "they are loud and dusty and though they provide a necessary service, I am happiest when I am not using them." He also has no romanticism about using hand tools and will use whatever tool gets the job done in the quickest, most efficient manner regardless of its noise and dust factor. This maker is most content when he is in the stage of a project where he can shape something with a pattern maker's rasp or carving chisels: "I just like the quiet of hand tools; I will put a hand dovetailed drawer in a piece once in a blue moon just to prove to myself that I can still do it, but for the most part, my joinery involves Dominos, biscuits and screws, with an occasional machine-cut mortise & tenon."

Future plans

At the time of writing this, Erik is currently working on a large bamboo kitchen project for a client with the hopes that at the end and with his bank account restored, he can spend a couple of months working on some ideas he has for a large outdoor sculpture, but in terms of a broader future plan, Erik says that a big question in his mind has always been "can I do work that is better than what I have already done? The fear that I have already done my best work is a quandary I will carry with me for the next 10 years, for at this point in my career and life, and having now crossed the 50 threshold, all I know how to do is to keep plugging away in the studio and challenging myself to do new work." Continuing to develop new series of work and continuing to be intrigued by that which surrounds him highlights the fact that Erik Wolken has no desire to give up doing what he loves any time soon, which is great news for the many fans of his work, his clients, and for everyone else who's life is enriched by his magnificent work. **GW**



FURTHER INFO

As well as having his own website – www.erikwolken.com
– Erik's work can also be viewed here: www.artfulhome.com

REFERENCES

Japanese Detail: Architecture
by Sadao Hibi, 1989, Chronicle Books; First Edition

Steal Like an Artist
by Austin Kleon, 2012, Workman; First Edition

The Wendell Castle Book of Wood Lamination
by Wendell Castle, 1980, Van Nost Reinhold, US

ABOVE RIGHT
& FAR RIGHT: Views
inside Erik's studio

RIGHT: Outside
Erik's studio

