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# MIND OVER MATTER

THE WOOD ART OF **ROBERT F. LYON.**

BY REBECCA KLASSEN

**W**hen I spoke to Robert F. Lyon this May, it was commencement season, the month or so when sage advice delivered by noteworthy people is roundly celebrated in the news. School's out forever for him, too; he had just finished his last classes as professor of sculpture at the University of South Carolina after 37 years of teaching. What would he say to this year's graduating MFA students?

"Follow your heart, and don't let anything throw you off," he says. "What I mean by that is, follow your instincts in your work, and let the work take you where you think it needs to be, and don't let people change you. Don't let sales change you; don't let galleries change you. Let the work tell you where it needs to be."

Lyon's independent streak has applied to media, as well, a trait perhaps more typical of sculptors than artists who usually swim in craft waters. For the past 10 years or so, he has been known for his work in wood—controlled forms with meticulous attention to detail, i.e., finely crafted—but he had spent decades focused on ceramics and glass. And even then he was no loyalist, like the time he was asked to be in a glass show and he made vessels using miles of Scotch tape. To talk to him, though, he comes across less like a rabble-rouser than someone who delights in thoughtful experimentation and pushing materials.

He describes his entrée into wood art as almost an accident. For 20 years or so, he had been making unfired clay

and wood sculptures that reflected on vernacular architectural forms like African granaries, ancient Mayan monuments, and the shotgun and dogtrot houses of the American South. (Bernard Rudofsky's *Architecture Without Architects* was "like a bible. I carried that thing with me everywhere," he says.) Thinking he wanted to add finials to the tops, he bought a lathe and taught himself to turn wood.

"I completely lost myself," Lyon says, "both in the process and the kinds of shapes that I could make off of the lathe, and I really abandoned the work that I had been doing and kept learning about the process of turning. Several months went by, and I thought that maybe I'd even made a mistake, because alright, I'm learning how to turn, but what the hell am I going to do with these forms that I'm making?"

It wasn't until he visually related the spindles he was making to lobster buoys that things clicked, leading to what he calls *Earth Buoys*—way-finding markers for land rather than the sea. There's an eco-underpinning to them, but that seems secondary to the evident pleasure

in exploring form. Standing at anywhere from around 2 to 8 feet, some self-supporting and others with an integrated stand, they are studies in contrasts of shape, grain, color and texture.

A 2009 fellowship, the renowned Windgate ITE International Residency at The Center for Art in Wood in Philadelphia, marked another shift. "All my time was spent

**1**  
*Earth Buoy #1,*  
sandblasted fir,  
maple, 38 x 5½ x 5½"  
(with stand)

**2**  
*Smoker,* scorched  
elm, 10 x 19 x 8"

**3**  
*Information Tool #1,*  
laminated book pages,  
1½ x 7½ x 1½"



2



3



4



5



6



7

working on, thinking about and talking with the other residents about what we were doing,” he says. He had already begun a punning series based on a passing quip overheard at a conference—“Aren’t we all just vessels of information?”—with turned vessels, an *Information Vessel*, using book pages he had laboriously laminated, as well as an awl-shaped object dubbed *Information Tool #1*. But for Lyon, the metaphor goes beyond nudges and winks.

His mother had recently passed away, and he’d witnessed her mental decline through the course of her illness from cancer. That, and the experience of being with her when she died, led him to develop a series on transience and memory using pencils, erasers and vessel forms as metaphors, as well as graphite in chunk and powder form to be shaped or dragged and smudged.

Fragility is the human condition, really, and it rubs against our youthfully modern will for boundlessness and perpetuity. Memory loss “happens to so many people,” he says, “or at least it seems to now. Maybe it’s because people are living longer, and it’s easier for us to experience this sort of thing. It just makes me think about this knife edge that we live on. It’s a very fine line between a seemingly healthy life and a diseased one.” He recounts a story about walking on campus with a colleague who had developed a slight limp—the first sign, it turned out, of Parkinson’s disease. “And it’s just like, how in the world did that happen? Maybe

it’s because I’m getting older or something, but it just seems as though life is a delicate balance.”

Lyon has put unusual materials to work on his lathe. In addition to the pencils, erasers and laminated book pages, he’s turned a bowling ball and blocks of epoxy-saturated denim. And, as in *Smoker* and *Stinger*, he will look at a vessel sideways (literally) to create meaning—in this case, around the honeybees he’s begun to raise. He doesn’t like to make the same thing repeatedly and remains adamant on being open to what the future will bring, preferring his internal barometer to satisfying some writer with predictions on what’s next.

“Life can get complicated,” he says. “You know, school is so simple. You show up and you have lots of people to talk to, and hopefully most of those people are going to give you reasonably sound advice about what it is you’re trying to do. When you get out, you’re going to have to find people whose opinions you trust. There’s so much life stuff that can get in the way, making it harder to do what it is you think you want to do. Don’t you think?” ●

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- 4** *Earth Buoy #2*, sandblasted fir, maple, 41 x 5 x 5" (with stand)
- 5** *Scorched Tower*, wire-brushed cypress, sandblasted cypress, 27 x 5½ x 5½"
- 6** *Zig Zag Buoy*, sandblasted fir, 22 x 5¼ x 5¼"
- 7** *Stinger*, ambrosia maple, holly, 20 x 19½ x 20"