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# CULTURE

A PULSE CHECK ON ALBUQUERQUE'S ART, MUSIC AND THEATER SCENE



PHOTO BY DON JAMES/ATM

## FORM WITH FUNCTION

Starting with chainsaws and angle disc grinders—and finishing with delicate hand tools—ABQ sculptor Mark Levin uses a half-century of experience to hone wood from raw blocks to stunning pieces of furniture that often double as art. (p. 194)

# CREATIVES

DIP INTO THE PERFECTLY MIXED PALETTE OF ABQ'S ART AND ARTISTS



## OUT OF THE WOODS

FOR THIS ARTIST, FORM FOLLOWS SPREADSHEET

**M**ark Levin has his feet firmly planted in two worlds. As a sculptor and woodworker, he allows his creativity the slack needed to be fully engaged. At the same time, his panache for business helps ground the Albuquerque-based artist in making the best decisions. “I’ve been working at this for a good 50 years,” Levin explains. “I had about 16 years in the business world working at three different companies.” One could say there is a science to Levin’s genius. Before beginning a project, Levin will run a complete spreadsheet.

It will contain every piece of wood, glue and how many hours were put into the artwork.

This is so he can make a well-educated price—boiling it down to his net and profit.

He grew up in the country just outside of Chicago, where there were always chores.

His father had a wood shop, a haven for him to experiment with the artistic touch.

“There was never any intent to be an artist,” he says. “My work put me into the

art world. It hasn’t always been a comfortable fit. I find the business world more comfortable. First and foremost, I see myself as a businessman and then an artist. That doesn’t always work out well.”

Levin’s sculpture and furniture are rooted in the fruit trees, flower and vegetable gardens of his youth.

Before he would head into his father’s workshop, he would spend hours pruning, raking and picking fruit, in addition to helping his mother plant within her gardens. He says it was only natural that

his work evolved from those small wonders.

Learning woodworking in junior high school industrial arts, Levin had his first commission (a blanket chest) while a high school senior.

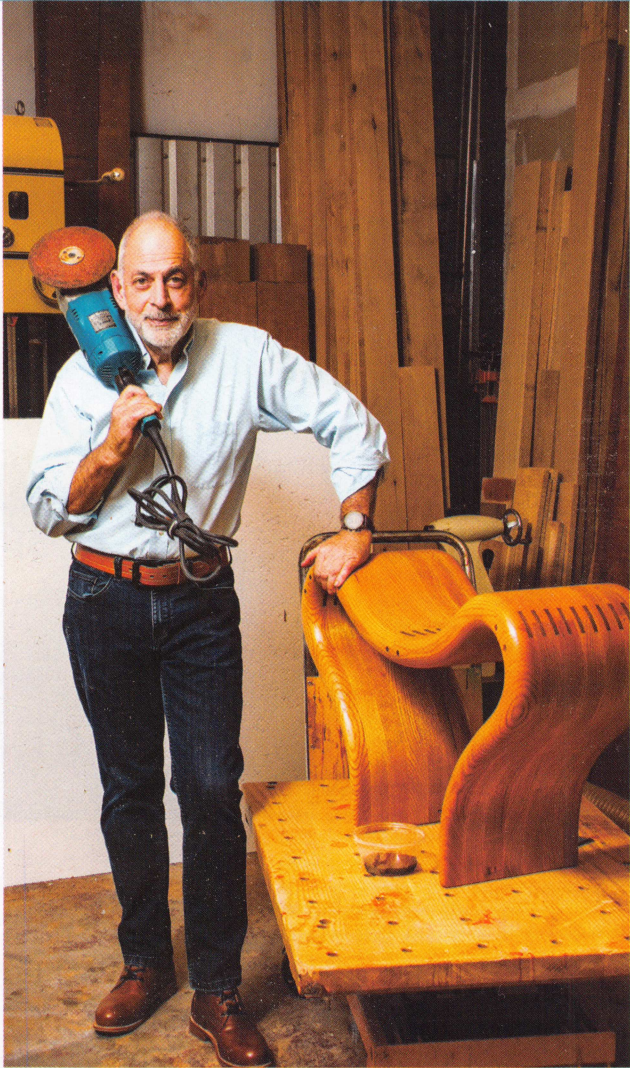
“When I left for art school, I swore I’d never eat another piece of fruit, let alone walk through the grocery store produce section,” he says. “But as I created work at art school, I gained a new respect for all the chores my parents gave me over the years and eventually got over the fact that my three sisters never had to so much as pick up a rake or pick one lousy apple.”

At art school, Levin continued his love for making things.

Yet his work drove him down the bumpy path to the art world.

“When I saw Wendell Castle’s Douglas Baker dining table, which flowed downward from the ceiling wall, it was a ‘come

PHOTOS BY DON JAMES/ATM



to Jesus moment' for this Jewish kid from Chicago," he explains. "I ended up studying under Bobby Falwell, a graduate student of Wendell's, and began my conversion to artist."

Immediately upon graduating college, Mark opened his first shop in Evanston, Illinois.

Levin began to plant roots in Albuquerque when he moved here in 2012. Each day, Levin will wake up at 6 a.m. and walk about six miles.

Every couple weeks, he will try to get to La Luz Trail for a more intense hike. Though, when he has time, he'll go to the eastern side of the Sandia Mountains.

After the exercise, he'll head to the studio where he will work until 5 or 6 p.m. Oftentimes, he will stop early to do paperwork. He was knee-deep putting applications together for art shows.

"I also keep up my website," he explains. "I find that I need to bounce from project to project."

Studio time is a constant, though he

carries the perspective of a businessman.

"It often puts me at odds with the art world," he says. "The business world is very black and white. There is no politics. You are either making money or you're not. In the art world, there are gray areas and plenty of politics."

This is why he will focus on completing his work and ship it to his buyers.

Over the course of a year, Levin will create and finesse about 30 pieces. He works with mostly domestic wood like cherry, walnut and white oak. Since 2020, the cost of materials has tripled.

Today, Levin's work is much more targeted, because he is in his early 70s.

"I do realize that the next piece could be my last," he says. "I pick projects and that has an influence on my commissions."

Like many other artists, he's had to pivot on the business side and continue down the avenues with a revenue stream.

"Artists like myself are finding the economics of art so much more difficult," he says. "The new generation doesn't have

any interest in art or collecting. We've had 9/11, a recession and a pandemic that changed the world. There are fewer and fewer opportunities." His process is done with intent.

"I dictate the form and I know what it's going to be," he says. "I do construction drawings and many times, I need to do a model. When I first design a piece, I envision it in matte black. If I feel the form has a lot of power, the beauty of the wood will do its part."

Most of his work is built using the stack lamination process, where smaller pieces of wood are glued together to form much larger blocks or "blanks."

"Once the blank is completed, I rough out the work with chainsaws and automobile disc grinders," he explains. "As the final form emerges, I taper to more delicate power tools and finally hand tools to define the details and sumptuous curves."

—ADRIAN GOMEZ