

WORKING IT THROUGH

American Contemporary Works in Wood/
Dairy Barn/ Athens, Ohio/Sept 28-Oct 28

By John Sofforth

Given the growth of bad painting and poorly installed sculpture, the eighty-six works in this national exhibition formed "to celebrate excellence in woodworking" raises a critical point. Bright ideas can live with good workmanship in the same piece. Only since the 17th century, when materials and idealists politically raised the temperature of their debate, have physical concerns and psychological problems grown so disparate. Their suppositions were that enlightenment and expression could better be served, respectively, either by *praxis*-the "working through" of being through from-or *idea*-the "seeking of spiritual value for materialization"(Kandinsky). Once photography assumed art's narrative, therefore "useful," role in late 19th century, the debate sent *praxis*(craft) and *idea*(art) in different directions.

In this invitational preview of a new bi-annual juried Contemporary Wood National exhibition at the Dairy Barn starting in 1985, the working through of this old argument was evident. When asked about the selection from the slides of works, Coordinator-writer Ellen Gerl said, "If a new twist was added for traditional form, we explored the work further. All forty-three artists we chose personalized traditional ideas."

W. Richard Goehring's cherry *Rocking Chair* and Mark J. Burhan's *Stool* blended Shaker functionalism with organic-decorative stylization. Gary Prater's humorous mahogany *Highboy* and John Kennedy's curvilinear walnut/rosewood inlay *Endtable* dovetailed Empire-style furniture with exquisitely smoothed transitions of edge to surface. Alan White's iconic ebony/padauk untitled piece and Nicolai Klimaszewski's bizarre mahogany *099-38-4640* overlaid surrealism with fine woodworking. Yet in driving up to the Barn, one was not prepared for these Griffith's contrasts or their quality in seeing Dennyplayful cascading outdoor snowfence installation. It

Art Dialogue

suggested a symmetrical Appalachian Art Dialog topography, but not art "working through" wood. Inside, the contrast between *praxis* and *idea* was notable. Behind Robert C. Whitley's showpiece polychromed maple/walnut *Stormy Night with Planet Sculpture* was Chris Meyer's labored, Mieczkowski-style *Type A* and *Trelis*. Metal wood fasteners were merely painted over, thereby compromising a complex but imprecise linear stick-frame design. By comparison, though not the most exquisitely worked piece, *Stormy Night* (used in the Barn's brochure) made the point that poorly crafted art pales beside well-arted craft.



Mark Levin, *Leaf Table*.

The aesthetic range opened up considerably with Connie Campbell-Eaton's steamed red Oak *Squared* maquettes and her huge, lumbering Horn. These process pieces were contrasts to Robert Fry's minimalist oak-slab pattern installation, *1999*, and to David Hostetler's meticulously carved/polychromed *Dancing Woman* and *Standing Woman*, from his sensuous *American Woman* series. Dennis Dorogi's beautiful, classy *A Model Lap Dulcimer* rested easily beside Salvatore Palombino's two *Baroque and Modern Tenore Violas*, and they suggested an interesting exploration into form and function's interdependence.

The diversity of attitudes, processes and forms provide Ora

Anderson's scaled-to-life *Laughing Gull* and *Killdeer* elbow room beside international exhibitor Jack Larimore's three pieces. His *Torso Table*, more than his flawed *Ball Top Table* or Mackintosh inspired *Sperm Chairs*, expressed the Post-Modernist cache of lively surface decor applied to neo-geometric(spiked New Wave) Philadelphia design. Larimore's masterful detailing using mahogany, purple heartwood, bubinga, maple, lacewood veneer, glass, marble and wool mohair, portrayed High Showcase flair.

Function was made delightful in Gary Caccione's *Coffe Table* of bird's-eye and curly maple and paduak. His \$1,250 piece, the median price in the exhibition, was one of the few works that tightly balanced aesthetic aplomb with precision woodworking. Caccione's machine- aesthetic was a world apart from Cindy and Cliff Nishimura's free-spirited, random-weave honeysuckle vine *Hand Basket*, an Appalachian original.

Style and craftsmanship collaborated ideally in Mark Levin's walnut *Leaf Table*. Its strong presence evoked Antonio Gaudi's incredible structural invention and imagery. Flowing out of the Nouveau Curvilinear tradition, Levin's table and two other works epitomized hand- worked excellence. While not as startling as Larimore's table, Levin worked real magic and style into heroic form.

This years exhibition was well attended. Next years juror's include California master-craftsman Sam Maloof, Ohio sculptor David Hostetler, and Jonathan Fairbanks, curator.

The exhibition posed more than fine woodworking and Modernist-Post-Modernist/Regionalist design and values, more than the idea of *praxis*-with-*idea*. In remembrance of the *fin de siecle* Arts and Crafts movement and artist-craftsmen Michael Thonet, William Morris and Charles Rennie Mackintosh, *Works in Wood* proclaimed a renewed aesthetic consciousness toward style and execution.

Jeff Spofforth is an artist working it through in Athens.