



'Father's Watch', 2012, holly and pigments, 18 x 15 x 18 cm. Private Collection

PHOTO: TIB SHAW



'Vendence Recycled', 2013, maple, pigments, 30 x 25 x 46 cm. Private Collection

PHOTO: JOHN CARLANO

DEREK WEIDMAN: CIRCLING NATURE

The work of Derek Weidman builds upon traditions of art in wood by combining diverse genres and an idiosyncratic exploration of form and colour.

Profile by Kevin V. Wallace.



PHOTO: JOHN CARLANO

DEREK Weidman is an artist who utilizes machinery to speak of nature. He spends an enormous amount of time thinking about what he does, how he does it and, perhaps most importantly, why he does it. Avoiding erratic decisions in creating work, he asks questions about aspects of his sculptures at nearly every level of creation.

'I have always felt my work has improved not based on mechanical skill, but rather via some epiphany ... that it is richer thoughts that make richer work,' he explains. 'While trying to reconcile my medium, technique and subjects, I've found that, as I grow as an artist, each aspect has come into line with the other. I feel that, in the end, such investigation allows a sculpture to not just sit in reality, uncertain and shy, but rather to have something to say and with the clarity of a bell.'

Weidman emerged as an artist in the field of woodturning and, while he is in demand as a demonstrator – sharing techniques for multi-axis turning and painting – the market for his work is ultimately to be found in the world of contemporary art.

'Woodturning is still pervaded by the expectation of exquisitely finished bowls and vessels quietly displayed on pedestals with aesthetic experiences of grain, finish, and form, celebrated for an everyman, down-to-earth humbleness,' says Michael McMillan, Associate Curator at the Fuller Craft Museum. 'Many of the artists involved in the woodturning field do not have the visual vocabulary to understand the meaning, motifs or themes in the work of an artist like Derek Weidman, or want to make a timely investment into trying to decipher everything he is doing thematically – or even technically. As people routinely dis-

'Parts of the Whole', 2015, a collaboration with Hannah Aliyah Taylor, holly, pigments and ink, 28 x 20 x 20 cm

miss what they don't understand, it makes sense that a lot of deeply cerebral and ambitious pieces of wood art are often scoffed at in woodturning circles. The exciting, content-rich works of his *Thought Series* can be a hard sell to many people in the woodturning field, as they are deeply founded upon traditional craftsmanship principles not initially meant to be infused with the amount of narrative that exists today. Showcased as sculpture in a contemporary art exhibition, there are different expectations and more openness to exploring the emotional reasons behind what he creates.'

Weidman's approach to creating sculpture utilising the lathe grew organically and relatively quickly. The genre of wood art was part of his childhood, as his father was a bird carver/decoy carver who attending various carving shows every year.

His father became involved with woodturning, and had a work exhibited in the Woodturning Center's Challenge Roots exhibition – the same year that Binh Pho, an artist who would ultimately become a leading figure in the field, and one that Weidman would eventually collaborate with – had an early piece in as well.

Weidman's father was creating works using Reifendrehen, or German ring-turning, a unique type of toy manufacture that was developed in the vicinity of Seiffen, a small town in the southeast of Germany. In this process the material is worked on a special lathe to produce a wooden ring, the cross-section forming the outline of the desired object. Small slices are then sawn off the ring and used as the raw material from which the finished figures are made by carving and painting. It is a process that demands great skill, originally created to enable the efficient mass production

'Mandrill', 2010, box elder and pigments, 23 x 23 x 35.5 cm. Permanent collection: The Center for Art in Wood



'Polar Kinship', 2015, holly, quilted maple, pipe, broken glass and pigments, 25.4 x 20 x 12.7 cm. Private collection

PHOTO: JOHN CARLANO



PHOTO: KARL SEIFERT



PHOTO: KARL SEIFERT

'River King', 2011, box elder, holly, drift wood, pigment, 25 x 25 x 35 cm of wooden figures during the 19th century.

The German ring-turned vessels made by Weidman's father were realistically carved and painted. 'I grew up and felt wood was art, but always felt it was my dad's art not mine.

I was more interested in being a comic book artist,' he recalls. This ambition makes clear how Weidman's unique approach developed – and how today, in some ways, represents a merging of the two. He had become fascinated by comic books as a child, enthralled with the colours and stories, and experiencing an epiphany that continues to inform his work: 'I was drawn to the fact that they were supernatural – something fantastic and unreal, as they weren't grounded by reality. Realising what was being represented wasn't real, I knew that to be a comic book artist, I couldn't look at things to draw them – I had to invent them ... as to work from study would be cheating.'



PHOTO: BILL SMITH

'Pan', 2009, holly, ebony, pigments, 25 x 18 x 15 cm. Private Collection



PHOTO: JOHN CARLANO

'Sage Grouse', 2014, holly, ebony, redwood, pigments, 35 x 30 x 30 cm. Montalto Bohlen Collection

This led to the development of drawing skills that allowed him to capture the landscape of his mind, ignoring the mundane details of what exists in the real world.

'I doggedly pursued comic book art until in middle school art class I was exposed to the work of Hieronymus Bosch and Salvador Dali,' he recalls. 'Suddenly, fine art was as exciting and imaginative as comics were to me, and I realised that I wanted to be a fine artist.'

Today, two artists from the comic book genre can be considered particularly influential on Weidman's work: Jim Starlin, best known for cosmic settings, space opera and revamping the Marvel Comics characters, and Todd McFarlane, known for his dark approach to the Spider-Man franchise and the fantasy series *Spawn*.

As an art student Weidman spent a great deal of time teaching himself in accordance with his own conceived artistic rules. The better teachers realised that the best that could be done was to attempt to steer him somewhat in his development. When a scout from an art college visited the high school and looked through his portfolio, she remarked, 'You are extremely talented and you draw like a dream, but nothing is from study.'

'Of course not,' Weidman replied.

When she told him, 'We are going to have to change that if you come to our school,' he answered, 'Well, surely I will not come if that is your intent.'

Weidman took courses at Bucks County Community College for two years where Mark Sfirri taught, attending as many of Sfirri's classes as he could. It was Sfirri who showed him the powerful shaping capabilities of a wood lathe – particularly as a contemporary sculptural tool. He also introduced him to the work of a number of important artists, including Constantin Brancusi, who proved a major influence in legitimising sculptural abstraction and seeing the beauty in choice.

'Derek was an unusual student in that he came up with his own projects that didn't exactly fit with what was assigned,' Mark Sfirri recalls. 'Much of his interest was in turning and carving, but he was in a furniture program. He took a History of Furniture class and was required to write a paper about the various styles in furniture and he opted to design pieces that were in the style of each of the periods. That was a unique approach.'

The combination of German ring turning and multi-axis work has proven central to his approach, though it was colour that connected all of his interests. At a collaborative event just after he began turning multi-axis head forms, Weidman met Jacques Vesery, who agreed to decorate one of these forms with his dis-



PHOTO: KARL SEIFERT

'Round Horn', 2013, quilted maple, 20 x 10 x 15 cm. Private Collection

tinctive approach to burning and painting.

'I was amazed not only by Vesery's skill, but how the application of these techniques influenced the appearance of my form,' Weidman recalls. 'I was still honing my craft and seduced by wood grain, but that collaboration changed all that overnight and, with some modifications, allowed me to start achieving effects that were in line with my interest in comic book illustration. The dark edges and bold coloration became a mainstay of my work and, because I use holly which has a colour similar to parchment, it enables me to achieve bright colours with just washes so the grain still shows through.'

A tension between Pop Art sensibility and Naturalism is evident in the work, which typically lands between the two extremes, which serves his forms well. His use of colour is largely guided by nature – but occasionally he uses colour conceptually as well. Just as the natural world sometimes offers a flash of colour in a sea of sepia, so too does Weidman sometimes use colour to provide a focal point.

From the time he began turning and carving, Weidman built his work and life not from other peoples answers, but rather his own questions. Considering why he chose wood as a medium, he found the answers gradually began lining up to environmental issues – that trees have a life to them and this life can bolster the work he was making. In terms of working with a very specific shaping device – the wood lathe – he found it a means of addressing other concerns and creating a visual language.

'I began thinking about a visual language of circles, which somewhat implies an order of things, a sameness, from the micro to macro, from atoms to planets,' he says. 'It's also a machine, with a history that ranged from the ancient to the modern, that allows for new shapes while having an industrial aspect. The animals I create have a look and visual language born of a machine, though in collaboration with the human hand. They appear imperfect, but alive, with tool marks and torn grain, yet they also look as if they couldn't have been made by a human hand alone because they are perfect in places.'

The *Thought Series* was Weidman's first sculptural body of work. As the woodturning world was largely concerned with vessel forms, he approached the series as vessels. *Pan*, from 2009 is an excellent example of this series. In 2010, he took part in The Center for Art in Wood's "International Turning Exchange Program" with *Mandrill*, the largest multi-axis work he had ever created. *Rhino*, the work that followed, shared a strong visual expression of the lathe, with



PHOTO: KARL SEIFERT

'Zebra', 2011, maple, ebony, pigment, 20 x 25 x 15 cm. Bender Collection

the use of wood grain and sandblasting added to the language. These bold works set the tone for the rest of his *Animal Series*, taking his work where he wanted it to go and paving the way for larger works.

Modern art movements have influenced and flavoured Weidman's work – his use of bold colour and motion bring to mind Futurism and the artists associated with Der Blau Reiter, while the multi-axis manner of reducing natural forms to geometrical equivalents is reminiscent of Cubism.

The work has a certain correlation to Cubism, but instead of being inspired by it, it followed a natural path to likeness through the way he breaks down forms into circles. According to Weidman, 'Theirs was born more out of theory and mine a result of process.'

The work from other cultures interests Weidman because of its



PHOTO: JOHN CARLANO

'Saint of Bossou', 2015, holly and pigments, 25 x 25 x 25 cm. Private Collection



'Woodpecker', 2015, holly, and pigments, 35 x 33 x 18 cm

invented and complete visual language. 'There is reality, and then there is the filter that they devise that can take in the world and project it back with a unique visual interpretation,' he says. 'A bear or a seal carved by an Inuit is immediately recognisable, and I believe if they carved a television – a form typically outside of their oeuvre – you would recognise it as Inuit, as the filter would show up.'

With the *Animal Series* he sought a visual language that was appropriate to his time and place, that could talk about anything – a complete filter – and he used a wood lathe to help him design the language. 'I felt this was appropriate to the US in our post-industrial era, to utilise a language born out of a machine to create American cultural work.' 'We are celebrating 30th year as a gallery and the hallmark of our success has been exhibiting acknowledged leaders along with promoting emerging superstars, notes Thomas R. Riley, whose gallery represents the artist. 'Weidman personifies this concept. He brings not only innovation in technique but also visceral expression of his artistic aesthetic. He has conquered scale, mixed medium and nuance



'Painting the Sun', 2014, in collaboration with Binh Pho, holly, maple, epoxies, acrylic paint, 10 x 10 x 10.5 cm

of collaboration – not bad for a “youngster”' 'Derek has an amazing imagination when it comes to the sculptural object on a rotating axis,' says Binh Pho, a leading figure in the field who recognised his potential early on. 'Most of the multi-axis turners can plan ahead a few steps, and the a viewer can easily recognise how the work was created. With Derek's work, he plans so many steps ahead and creates a sculpture form that resembles a recognized object but the viewer can't imagine that it was done on the lathe ... he is truly taking the lathe-turned object to another level.'

Examining the artist's work over the last five years, reveals a highly refined aesthetic and the constant expansion of language and subject. For example, *River King*, from 2011, was inspired by learning of hippos going into a river to be cleaned by cichlids – small fish – and found how these different organisms were benefiting each other to be truly beautiful ... 'each clinging onto it while helping others do so in an uncaring world'.

With *Zebra*, from the same year, he let the tool marks and torn fibres remain in the finished work. 'I have come to love this effect, which is called “tear out”, as the degree of distress from the machine processes couldn't be achieved easily by human hand and further informs the work and the message I want to convey,' says Weidman.

Growing up in Bucks County, the artist is very much aware of the shadow cast by the important American sculptor Wharton Esherick, who lived and worked in the area. *Smile Eyed Whitetail*, from 2012, is an homage to the artist, who was hugely inspirational in Weidman's early first steps as a sculptor, and created from a tree than came down on Esherick's estate.

A Green Man is a representation of a face surrounded by or made from leaves, quite often with branches or vines sprouting from the nose, mouth, nostrils or ears that sometimes bear flowers or fruit. Found in many cultures, it is likely relates to nature deities, though as a decorative architectural ornament it can be found on a variety of buildings, from churches to inn signs. Weidman's *Verdence Recycled*, from 2013, is a variation on the *Green Man* – a contemporary take utilising a wood lathe to “carve” it, leading to a strikingly different visual.

Winter Jewel, from the same year, reflects the artist's love of seeing cardinals in winter: 'They appear very much like a ruby gem on white gold, and in creating the piece, I embraced the sensibility of jewellery as a sculpture, with a strong geometric aspect.' Similarly, he was inspired the following year to create *With Sage Grouse*, depicting a bird he sees as 'an amazing creature, perfectly suited for my visual expressions. I remember seeing one and being nearly intoxicated by how interesting it was visually'.

Painting the Sun, from 2014, created in collaboration with Vietnamese artist Binh Pho, is one of the largest single multi-axis works Weidman has ever produced. A YouTube video captures the dangerous exploration, capturing the large work flying off the lathe at head height.

'As Binh and I stood looking at *Painting the Sun* when it was finished, it was hard not to appreciate how dramatically the woodturning field has grown ... how new technology has allowed for new expression,' Weidman says. 'Every surface is covered with the concentric cuts of a wood lathe, and yet no turning has ever looked like it. With my shaping and Binh's dramatic colouring and surface design it's hard to believe this was made with the same machine as the wooden hollow forms of the field ... and yet, it was.'

Recently, Weidman has started focusing on movement generated by the sweeping cuts of the lathe, to imply gesture. In the case of *Blue Claw*, the pinching action of a crab – an animal the artist has long wanted to depict.



'Connection', 2015, holly, steel and pigments, 213 x 122 x 30 cm

'As a child, my family fished, clammed and crabbed every year for a few weeks at the Jersey shore,' he says. 'I always liked to set the crabs free for one last run before they were cooked, so for many years they were loosed in the house, much to my delight. My family was very patient with me.'

A circular form that took his *Animal Series* to a new level was *Connection* – a work that he thought carefully about for a long time because of its ambitious scale and scope. Due to it being composed of 17 different forms, all linked in theme and technique, the piece is complete unto itself and says everything that the artist wanted to say in his *Animal Series* in one sculpture.

'I learned of chimps in the Bossou region seeking out snares and disarming them with sticks,' Weidman says of the inspiration behind *Saint of Bossou*. 'They were also reported to have been seen angrily shaking traps that had caused animals to be injured. They behaved almost altruistically and compassionately, so I made this sculpture depicting them as saints, with a disassembled trap as a head piece or crown.'

Beginning with his experience with Jacques Vesery, collaboration has been an important way of expanding the language and in *Parts of the Whole* he collaborated with an artist who works in glass, Hannah Aliyah Taylor. The work aimed to show different aspects of the same thing, either coming apart into being, or melding into each other. From layers of consciousness to duality of self to shared experience and the degrees of distinction and sameness.'

An environmental statement, *Polar Kinship*, addresses pipelines going through Alaska, and the importance of humans finding ways to integrate their progress with the preservation of the rest of the beings we share this planet with. With *Woodpecker*, Weidman used the lathe to capture gesture and imply the pecking movement of the bird as it might appear in an animated short.

'I work from a place of wonder,' Weidman says of his process. 'Inspiration hits me like lightning bolts that I then need to get out of my system. My hope is for people to leave my work feeling energised – not so much in a physical sense but a mental one.'

Weidman's interests in the natural world extend beyond the artistic and he volunteers at The AARK, a non-profit wildlife and rehabilitation centre staffed by a cadre of professionals and dedicated trained volunteers who provide 24-hour service, seven days a week, 365 days a year for orphaned or wounded creatures.

'Blue Claw', 2015, holly and pigments, 35.5 x 25 x 23 cm



'Smile Eyed Whitetail', 2012, poplar from the Wharton Esherick Estate, ht 38 cm

'The AARK has become a second heart in a way, or at least an extension of what I want to feel and express,' he says. 'I feel a connection with everything that flies, walks, swims or crawls and I want to share that – not because I believe the connection I feel is unique, but because I desperately want more people to feel it. The AARK exists due to the compassion that does exist in our species and the world. Feeding orphaned baby squirrels, or bandaging up the broken ... these creatures would suffer then die without intervention. Not everyone ignores these little lives; they matter and are not forgotten.'

I work from a constant sense of equality, valuing all living things and I hope that people connect with that in my art – and then the art to their real world experiences, says Weidman. 'If my work in some way shares the value of all the creatures we share the planet with, I feel I have done my job as an artist. There is a clarity to where my work wants to go, to share the beauty of what is out there. If we can find a way to make peace every other inhabitant of the Earth, we will find peace in ourselves.'

Kevin V. Wallace

