



PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROBERT F. LYON

20 minutes with Robert F. Lyon



Tegan Foley spends 20 minutes finding out more about the work of woodturner **Robert F. Lyon** who works with a number of different mediums whilst pursuing a full-time career as professor of art in sculpture at the University of South Carolina

You produce works in paper as well as wood; how do these two mediums complement each other?

Paper is derived from trees. I then glue the paper together once again forming the material into a solid form that somewhat resembles wood. So, like the trees they are made from, they can also be turned on the lathe.

The pieces you create in wood are very sculptural and unusual; can you explain your

sources for inspiration?

While I often try to emphasise the beauty of the material, craftsmanship and mastery of traditional forms and techniques are the means to express ideas, not ends in themselves.

During my mother's terminal illness, I observed the loss of memory associated with ageing, and began to think about the transient nature of the human memory and the written word. While I was a resident at the International Turning Exchange, I began working with some non-

traditional materials that included pencils, graphite and erasers.

What are your current likes and dislikes within the sphere of turning?

My likes include the worldwide community of turners, the growing acceptance of wood as an art medium, and the workability of wood. My dislikes include the relatively small number of university/



ABOVE: 'Banded', maple (*Acer campestre*) with egg shell banding 330 x 560 x 200mm (13 x 22 x 8in)

BELOW: 'Plate of Dreams', canary wood (*Liriodendron tulipifera*), pencils, erasers, 55mm (2 1/4in) x 200mm (8in)

college wood programs in the US, long hours of sanding and the fact that wood has a mind of its own – this is both a dislike and like.

What direction do you see your work taking?

I see my work continuing to develop along my current line of exploration. The next piece is often based on the ones before, so the development is often methodical and deliberate. When a piece suggests something new, the idea goes into my sketchbook for either elaboration or storage for another day.

If you could only offer one bit of advice to someone starting out turning, what would it be, and why?

Don't try to learn everything before you start turning 'seriously'. Our goal should not be to become walking encyclopaedias, but rather use the knowledge and skill we have at any given point to explore our own creativity. Don't confuse the priorities of others with those of your own.

What music and which book are you currently into?

While my general taste in music is rather eclectic, I've always been a rocker, and to this day most of the music played in my workshop and studio is rock.

In terms of books, I recently finished Bill Bryson's book *At Home, A Short History of Private Life*. Also, I've just started two new books – *Extra/Ordinary Craft and Contemporary Art*, edited by Maria Elena Buszek and *The*

Art of Not Making – The New Artist/Artisan Relationship by Michael Petry.

Tell us about the piece you are currently working on.

I just finished work for a one-person exhibition at the Vero Beach Museum of Art in Vero Beach, Florida. These pieces were part of what I call the 'Hive Series', which is based on my recent interest in beekeeping. In this series, pencils are grouped together in cross-section so they take on a honeycomb pattern.

Which turners do you most admire, and why?

All of the turners I admire, I admire for much the same reasons, that is their ability to use turning as a tool for personal expression, while probing for the 'edge' of the medium. These would include, but are not limited to, Michael Hosaluk, Todd Hoyer, Stephen Hogbin, Maria van Kesteren, and Gord Peteran. I also greatly admire Albert LeCoff, the Director of The Center for Art in Wood, not for his turned work, although he was a skilled turner, but for a lifetime of unyielding dedication and service to the development of art made out of wood.

What do you think the best single development in turning has been?

The understanding that the lathe is but a tool and wood can be used for personal expression. One of my professors at the Tyler School of Art, Rudolf Staffel once said that he wasn't interested in working in glass because he couldn't make it ugly. He complained that he could drip it on the floor and the glass was still beautiful. While I'm not suggesting that we try to make wood ugly – although some do it

beautifully – we have to understand that the beauty of the medium does not have to be an end in itself.

What do you see yourself doing in five years' time?

I have been a practising artist for over 35 years, and I expect that to continue. Furthermore, I am a professor of art in sculpture at the University of South Carolina. Sometime in the next few years I expect to retire from teaching and work full-time in my studio while allowing some time for teaching/ workshops and travel. ●

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BELOW: 'From the Hive', Comb Foundation, ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*), pencils, epoxy and graphite, 230 x 180mm (9 x 7in)



MAIN: Robert in his workshop

