



B·e·y·o·n·d the GRAIN

By Abby Luby

KIERAN KINSELLA

NICOLAS SIMILE



They're known as furniture artists and makers. Their original, one-of-a-kind pieces are born of an innate sense of design, fueled by artistic expression. What we get is functional sculpture that, paradoxically, is unleashed creativity within intrinsic constraints of form.

Finding a place to show this sculptural furniture can be tricky. Art galleries are uncomfortable with furniture as art and play it safe by showing painting and sculpture. Craft stores focus on smaller, quick sale items and commercial showrooms push cookie cutter furniture straight off the assembly line.

MICHAEL PURYEAR



Three years ago, High Falls furniture artist Josh Finn found a perfect space to show his work at the High Meadow School in Stone Ridge. He invited a few Hudson Valley makers to join him, including Michael Puryear, Rob Hare, and Anissa Kapsales, who, in turn, invited other artists to show their work. Today, the twelve member group is formally known as the Hudson Valley Furniture Makers, now gearing up for their third annual show in October.

Finn says local furniture makers are a unique breed whose solitary studio work motivates them to seek comradeship. "We're all essentially a one-person business. Getting to know other makers, going to their shops and seeing their set up is a great thing for all of us. There's a lot of good will and sharing of ideas."

The hottest topic in the group is marketing. How do you sell a \$5000 coffee table to someone who doesn't understand how the table is designed or constructed? Someone who could easily buy a mass produced table for a fraction of the cost? Kapsales, the sole woman in Hudson Valley Furniture Makers, says one-of-a-kind furniture demands a serious time commitment. "Some people think it takes just days to put something together but it could take two to three months, depending on the complexity of the piece. It has to be done in the right sequence."

...wood is the predominant material, trees are examined and multi-linear textures of the grain are explored...

Because wood is the predominant material, trees are examined and multi-linear textures of the grain are explored along with dramatic imperfections, natural cracks and intense contrast of sap lines. Some pieces combine wood with glass, concrete, mirrors, metal, plastics

ANDREW HUNTER



and found objects. Ultimately, it's the material that informs the piece and inspires design. Before the touch of a tool, drawings are rendered and tweaked for shape and balance. Finally materials are cut, molded, sanded, ebonized and joined. The long process makes for a hard sell to a society which craves instant gratification.

"We're always battling the concept of ready made," says Puryear, who designs furniture and teaches woodworking at SUNY Purchase. "People have a problem with the idea of waiting for a piece which, in some ways, harkens back to the traditional way furniture was acquired before the industrial revolution."

Furniture makers are particularly allergic to cold, mass produced furniture, prepackaged

and sold at big box stores—the ubiquitous pieces are the quick fix to furnishing homes on the fly. It doesn't matter whose hands made it, if any.

"When we go into a store and buy something we lose the connection to the maker," says Andrew Hunter, who creates furniture in his Gardiner studio using traditional Japanese tools.



JOSH FINN

Ed Felton's mission is to "figure out what the client wants." He designed a coffee table for clients who had a specific table in mind. "I'm not interested in making a stock design that already exists, but I understood what my clients responded to and offered something they'd never seen, something they liked more than what they originally wanted."

Teasing out a client's preference means getting to know how they live, what they like—facts that inform the building process.

"They get a piece that fits them exactly, a piece they'll hold on to for life," explains Kieran Kinsella, who creates sculptural wood stools and side tables. "We want to make solid, heirloom pieces with good joinery."

Durability and integrity are rooted mantras of Hudson Valley Furniture Makers members, whose work is made to last at least several generations—a practice that counters our disposable-based culture where the highways from production line to the garbage dump are too well traveled.

"People who own factory outlet furniture tell me it's falling apart," says Nicolas Simile, a furniture maker in Rosendale. "My pieces weigh three times more, don't move and last forever."

Besides durability, there's something special about furniture imbued with energy from the artist's hands, then passed to the hands of the user. This unique presence invites both visual and physical interaction.

"The owner creates a history with the piece, a history that's more valuable than the original use of the piece," offers Rob Hare who creates



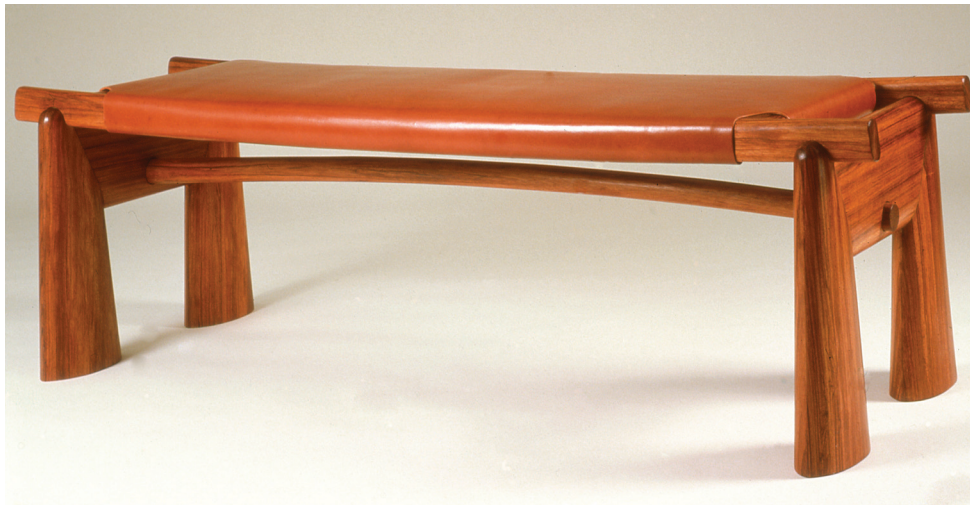
NICOLAS SIMILE



EZRA WALTERMAURER



ED FENTON



MICHAEL PURYEAR

furniture with wood and metal. “If I build a dining table, people live with it, eat on it. There are arguments, fabulous meals, and it gains an emotional value—it’s the central thing where all this occurred, a touchstone. It’s what’s wonderful about furniture.”

As sculpture, the furniture weaves in the maker’s personal aesthetic. “I take standard forms and conventions, add twists and tweaks to nudge the piece into the realm of something different, something personal,” says Ezra Waltermayer of Kingston. “I lean more toward the conceptual and work in the realm between functional piece and art object.”

Members bring their different backgrounds and experiences that highlight the group’s diverse profile. Johnny Poux’s background is production furniture, interior design and sculpture. “Some of the first pieces of furniture I made were for myself,” he recalls. “The process is very satisfying.”

John Cox, who has designed and built furniture with his wife Nico Accardi for over 20 years, says being part of the Hudson Valley Furniture Makers is a networking plus.

“You get tips, learn who people are working for. There’s a lot of back and forth. You also see a lot of tool envy.”

At the October show, furniture will not be roped off but accessible to touch, sit at and in, open and close. Nor will the work be standing alone. On hand will be the furniture artists themselves, ready to divulge the intriguing story of their pieces.

“Anytime you can put a face with the work, it’s a great thing,” says Jeff Johnson, a furniture maker in Poughkeepsie who teaches wood design at SUNY New Paltz. “The way we approach making one of kind pieces is with a sculptor’s sensibility.”

The Hudson Valley Furniture Makers 2010 Exhibition & Sale will be at High Meadow School, Rte. 209, Stone Ridge, October 8 through 11. Sa/Su 10 AM-6 PM, Mo 10 AM-4 PM. Opening reception Fr 10/8 6-9 PM. See www.hvfurnituremakers.com for more information.



JEFF JOHNSON



ROB HARE