*'Canyon Walls #10', 2004, bleached madrone burl, 48 x 30 cm*

*'Medusa', 2001, dogwood, copper and silver, 56 x 30.5 x 20 cm*

# MATERIAL AND PROCESS

Christian Burchard is a sculptor who utilises the process of woodturning to create works that embrace tension, connection and balance in both process and content, reflecting the vicissitudes of his life. Profile by Kevin V. Wallace. Photography by Rob Jaffe.

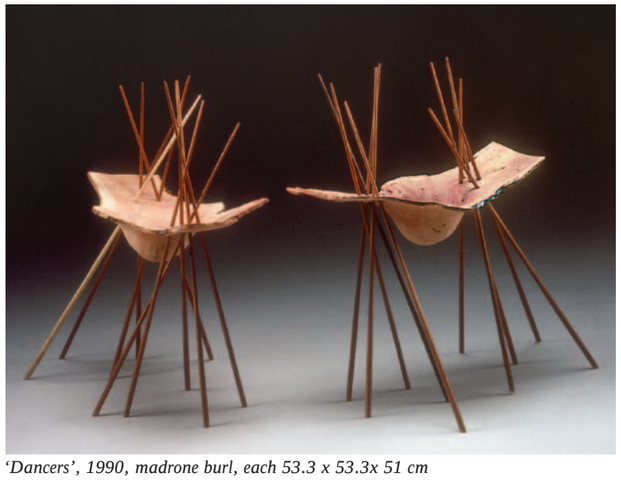
THE artistic journey of Christian Burchard began with a wanderlust and desire for freedom of expression that was out of step with the world in which he was raised. Growing up in northern Germany, his father worked in finance in the same office his own father had worked in, making it abundantly clear what the family's expectations were.

On finishing high school Burchard went to Australia and New Zealand for a year and travelled through Asia in an attempt to escape this fate. When he returned and announced his decision to become an apprentice to a furniture maker, his father considered the choice of profession quite intolerable.

The artist's path created a great deal of tension in the

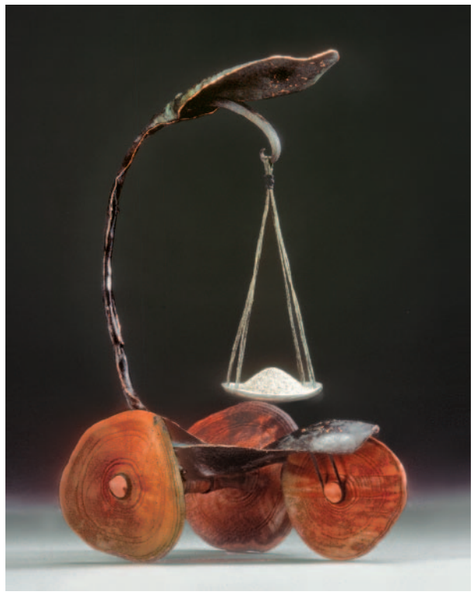
*'White Pots', 2002, bleached madrone burl, largest diameter 30.5 cm*

*'Tomb of an Unknown King', 1990, madrone burl, diam. 45.7 x 45.7 cm*



*'Dancers', 1990, madrone burl, each 53.3 x 53.3x 51 cm*

*'Tight Laced', 1999, bleached madrone burl, 41 x 51 x 30.5 cm*



*'The Gift', 2000, madrone, copper and silver, 20 x 30.5 x 13 cm*

family, which took years to work through. Far from the acceptable and expected career in finance, Burchard's dream was to find a means of supporting himself anywhere in the world. The life of the independent craftsman appealed to him as he had always enjoyed making things with his hands. He moved to Austria, where he worked as a carpenter – building houses, refinishing furniture and making toys. During his sojourn there Burchard pursued an interest in T'ai Chi and became friendly with an old Chinese master who invited him to come to the US and reside at a Taoist Retreat Centre in the mountains of Colorado.

Two years later Burchard attended the School of the Museum of Fine Art in Boston, where he studied drawing and sculpture. He then studied art in Vancouver, Canada, before moving to Oregon where he still lives today. He initially supported his family by building houses and making furniture, while experimenting with sculptural work. He credits his former wife Micheline with supporting him strongly in his early years, assisting him in these explorations and helping him to refine his vision. Essentially self-taught on the lathe, his career as a furniture maker was eclipsed over time by his desire to create vessel forms and sculptural work.

'I liked the freedom that the lathe offered,' he says of this direction. 'I like its physicality, the immediacy of its use and the speed with which ideas could be realized.'

In exploring the potential of the process, he looked first to the work of David Ellsworth, who assisted in him in understanding the language of the wood vessel.

'Even before I met him in person, Ellsworth was my first teacher and a strong influence,' says Burchard. In learning to speak an increasingly sculptural language, he also looked to other leading artists in the field, such as Michael Peterson, Todd Hoyer and Stoney Lamar.

By the late 1980s, Burchard had mastered the lathe-turned vessel form and was also exploring the potential of totemic sculpture with pieces such as *Tomb of an Unknown King*. The bowl form, with its history of utility and ceremony, was elevated in sculptural works such as *Dancers* and pieces from his *Chalice Series*.

*'Mad Max', 1999, madrone burl and steel, 25.4 x 20 x 10 cm*

The visual (and physical) weight of works like *Medusa* and *Swimming In The Sky* make it clear that Burchard remains a serious sculptor, exploring the emotional potential of dynamic form. Yet the artist has shown that he can leave the psychological burden of serious sculpture for an adventure in fun. The resulting works, suggestive of dysfunctional vehicles, included *Mad Max, George* and *Running with the Bulls*. Combining whimsy and surrealist imagery, they offered the potential for commentary, in poking fun at our addiction to automobiles, while providing what he calls 'a vehicle for ideas'.

Burchard's material of choice is Pacific madrone burl, a wood which changes as it dries, forcing him to step back from the work and relinquish control for a short time while letting the wood find it's own shape. In fact, the material resists all attempts to dry it evenly, warping and cracking and becoming extremely hard once dry, making it almost useless in regard to traditional woodwork. Burchard works with the wood's particular character. By turning the forms very thin, the vessels develop wonderful gestural forms without splitting, yet he can also utilise the dramatic effect of cracking by leaving the forms thicker.

In madrone burl, Burchard found a material that had all of the freedom he sought in life; it suited his mode of self-expression and offers a wide range of colours and textures. The timber grows along the northwest coast of the US, in the region where the artists lives.

Due to its high moisture content, freshly cut madrone makes woodturning much more enjoyable for Burchard than working with any other material. 'There is mist coming off of the wood and water running down your tools. The sound is quiet, the colours are rich and I can make a perfect finish with cutting tools alone,' he says.

'Knowing that the form you're creating is actually going to change when the wood dries introduces an element of randomness. Every piece offers a pleasant surprise.'

The artist's most successful work to date has been his *Basket Series*, which evolved out of the unique quality of this wood.

Having acquired the skills necessary to create techni-

*'Swimming In The Sky', 2000, black walnut, 76 x 61 x 20 cm*

*'Pictures of an Exhibition', 2003, scorched madrone and copper, 51 x 15 x 15 cm*

*'Black Baskets', 2001, scorched madrone burl, dia. 3 cm to 30 cm*

*'Spherical Vessels', 2002, madrone burl, largest diameter 30.5 cm*

*'Canyon Walls #25', 2005, bleached madrone, 48 x 30 x 10 cm*

cally challenging works in such a volatile material, the artist has developed a unique creative language. Some influences were conscious, such as studying northwest coast Indian art while attending college in Vancouver and an abiding interest in the Asian aesthetic, which can be seen in many aspects of his work. The natural world has also been a major influence on his work.

Yet it has been everyday life and watching his children grow up that has had the greatest impact on the artist's life. This is obvious in the reference to relationships in works that can convey all of the tension, struggle, connection, and balance of being part of a family.

'Working as a craftsman/artist helped me find a place in the world – a way to connect, to realise that I have something valuable to offer, to touch others through the spirit in the work,' says Burchard, who generally prefers works in series, usually developing more than one at a time, while exploring the connections between them and using these as bridges to new work.

The artist also explores the human figure, utilising the language of primitivism through the lens of modern sculpture. By allowing the wood to shrink and twist, works are created that cannot be accomplished in any other material, with pieces seeming to have personalities of their own. These abstract forms utilise gesture to further explore character, leaving their intentions for the viewer to decipher.

Indeed, the strength of the artist's work is understatement – a vocabulary that does not lean as much upon personal declaration as an ability to encourage the viewer to imbue the work with personal meaning. This is accomplished through charming the spirit, stirring

*'Stepping Lightly' (detail), 1996, Cuban mahogany*

*'Fragments #2', 2004, bleached madrone burl, 107 x 142 x 20 cm*

emotions and utilising imagery that sparks the collective unconscious.

'In this technological age, I find that people are responding to objects that are gentle, carrying a human touch and sensitivity. I often notice that peoples' reaction to my work transcends skill and material and connects to the spirit and heart of the maker – a wordless connection that speaks a language that all of us can understand.'

Burchard uses the characteristics of the wood to create forms with attitude and gesture and, when grouped, these attributes suggest relationships. The soft surface textures the artist employs are the direct result of the cutting-edge of his tools and light sandblasting. Openings are often burnt for contrast and to enhance their looseness. Often he will bleach the wood to lighten or remove its colour.

Among artists who work in wood, there are essentially two aesthetic approaches. One holds that the material is the most important thing and the maker is simply revealing the natural beauty. The other treats the wood as a material to be manipulated according to the artist's intention, which is regarded as the true essence of the artwork. Burchard moves freely along the line that separates these philosophies – between his affinity for wood and the desire for self-expression.

Over the past decade, he has often returned to a series of *Spherical Vessels* which utilise the purity of form as a canvas for his exploration of line. He continues to explore both the potential of the vessel form and pure sculpture, often blurring the borders between the two.

His understanding of material and process has allowed Burchard to accomplish much more without constantly imposing his will on to the material, but rather trusting it to have a voice that is strong enough not to require excessive artistic input. For example, the wall pieces of his *Canyon Series*, like elements from a halcyon landscape, offer fragments of memory and imagination that challenge the viewer. Taken as representation, they suggest worn pages, left out in the rain and sun to fade and distort. Perhaps they were love letters, or pages from a journal, yet the viewer is left to find the words

*'Canyon Walls #23' (detail)*

*'Canyon Walls # 20, 2005, bleached madrone burl, linen thread, 41 x 51 x 38.5 cm*

*'Canyon Walls #20 + #23, 2005, bleached madrone burl, linen thread, 41 x 56 x 51 cm*

that have been washed and bleached away. Ultimately, the works function like Rorschach inkblots, as portals into individual perception, challenging preconceptions and eliciting an emotive response. Such works expand the limitations of language, for they are pure feeling and represent different things to different people.

*'Canyon Walls #24', 2005, bleached madrone burl root, 33 x 20.3 x 7.6 cm*

With the *Canyon Series*, Burchard has taken the vernacular of modern art and incorporated the utilitarian form and language of craft to create bold new work. The impact of abstract expressionism is obvious – perhaps more so than among his contemporaries, who exert considerably more control through accepted routines, formulas and strategies of expression. He knows that improvisation allows one to bypass preconceptions and seemingly trustworthy well-trodden roads. In embracing this spirit while cutting into wood and exploring three-dimensions, Burchard creates work with a transformative quality that steers clear of convention. It is work that provides an addition to the known, rather than a reflection of it.

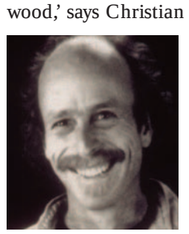
Having studied Taoist philosophy and the I-Ching, Burchard realizes that there is a sort of magic in randomness and he remains open during the process to spontaneous occurrences. His art is embedded in the experimental, which offers more integrity than that which is controlled. It is an automatic approach advocated and wholeheartedly embraced by the surrealists, who realised that an accident is only a mistake if it is dismissed. Burchard knows to reserve judgment and trust his technical and creative processes. While embrac-

*'White Pot', 2005, madrone burl root, 28 x 20.3 x 25.4 cm*

ing previous art movements, he honours the traditions of craft. His work presents a true dialogue with the material in which his knowledge of its nature and an ability to listen, allows the wood to speak freely. In this way, the work truly reflects his own life.

Christian Burchard's path has led him through diverse cultures and expansive philosophical perspectives. In exploring the potential of an original artistic vision, he has remained rooted in the challenges of everyday life. Looking back, he sees his entire life as a continuum, from his relationship with his father to his own relationship with his sons. A love of nature and freedom and a willingness to remain open to risk have been crucial to his art and life.

'In retrospect, much of my career has seemed to have happened by chance and I can't even say when I made the initial decision to attend art school or to focus on wood,' says Christian Burchard (left). 'But I don't think I could help but be an artist.'



**Kevin V. Wallace**

*Christian Burchard's work is in numerous public and private collections, including the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Minneapolis Art Institute, the Detroit Art Museum, the Mint Museum, the Mobile Museum of Art, the Long Beach Museum of Art, the Contemporary Museum and the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian Inst.*