



# CHRISTIAN BURCHARD: A MAN IN MOTION

Steve Loar

Photo: Betsy Blue



Photo: Kristy Kün

*Photos by Rob Jaffe, unless otherwise noted.*

**C**hristian Burchard has been a man in motion for most of his life. His story reads like a travelogue; he graduated from high school and immediately helped crew a ship to Australia, where he became a jackaroo (cowboy) and a seismic explorer for a mining company. Along with a friend, he then trekked through Southeast Asia, through the heart of Europe, and, eventually, home to

Germany. Here he committed to a two-year classic European apprenticeship that called for an entire year of using only hand tools. Interests in tai chi made for a continental leap to Colorado, USA, and then east to The School of the Museum of Fine Arts (Boston), with a focus on sculpture.

Once Christian permanently settled in Oregon in 1982, he began a lifelong career as a self-supporting craftsman



*Dancers*, 1990, Madrone burl, various hardwoods, 22" x 34" x 18" (56cm x 86cm x 46cm)



*Basket*, 1999, Madrone burl, 18" x 16" (46cm x 41cm)

and artist. Years of furniture making, house building, and turning bread-and-butter items (salad bowls, tops, spheres, and boxes) established an embodied craft that allowed Christian's eyes and hands to work in unison to execute the best possible form in the least amount of time and with the least amount of fuss. What we see as artistic objects were made by a man who supported his family as a woodworker his entire life—through children, houses, and colleges. It was during these formative decades of the late twentieth century that he clarified what motivated him to work and what brought him joy.

### Explorations in sculpture

My introduction to Christian's work, *Dancers*, came in 1991, when I served as a juror for the Vision & Concept exhibition at the Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts (Gatlinburg, Tennessee). It was love at first sight. Even thirty-two years later, *Dancers* remains an engaging contemporary work, a truly playful and pristine composition in madrone burl. The dancers appear unusually comfortable not pretending they might be utilitarian; they are unmistakably

sculpture. No candy or nuts will ever sully these expertly turned potato-chip-thin indentations. The dancers' energetic arrangement suggests life and movement, and their meticulous execution produces a mystery regarding their structure. Many in the contemporary turning field remain bound to a faux-utility, the beautiful thing never to be used, remaining forever decorative rather than acquiring the creative and aesthetic skills necessary to produce true sculpture.

The woodturning field began to grow in the late 1970s, so even when Christian began turning, it was still in its infancy, with the AAW not forming until 1986. Rude Osolnik's and David Ellsworth's work were leading the way in the development of a new decorative artistic sensibility, rejecting the pseudo-commercial industrial arts

aesthetics. Rude was widely known for his candlesticks, and David generally explored "pots." Rude's and David's work were generally about control of the wood, even when the object might warp a bit. Christian's 1999 *Basket*, a thin wet-turned vessel in madrone burl, represents an important vein of his early work. Increasingly, he sought wood that contained cantankerous grain. He knew this would allow him initial control but then would force him to let go and allow the wood to express its innate character. He was looking for excitement, to go places he'd never been before. Being self-taught, failure was a given part of the process, rather like firing a clay pot ▶

**Christian has maintained a high standard in the execution of his work, even while embracing unpredictability and risk.**



and not knowing what would come out of the kiln. Like many of the trailblazers, Christian believed you can't expect magic if you don't approach your work in a creative way. Even with the volatile character of madrone, he was evolving a knowledge of reading how the grain *might* distort. It became more about letting go than maintaining control.

Concurrent to these explorations in warping, Christian was perfecting the processes and skills to create stunning *Spheres* with precise embellishment. Note that as their size increases, the tolerance for deviation diminishes. With everything laid out, calculated, and known, the pursuit of exacting replication in each of the multiple orientations built tremendous hand

skills, but it did not nourish Christian's creative needs. He figures he's made hundreds of the spheres and now feels he is done making them. It is of interest that despite the field's investment in the pursuit of perfect things, coupled with Christian's many demonstrations explaining the process, no one has taken up this mantle. The beauty is intense, and whether they are embellished with formal or informal patterns, the precision and cleanliness are deeply satisfying.

## Spheres



*Old Earth Series*, 2000, Osage orange, black ink, 10" (25cm) diameter



*Between Heaven and Earth*, 1999, Cocobolo, paint, 8" (20cm) diameter

### Similarity vs. duplication

Because of his highly inquisitive mind and an acknowledged need to pursue the unexpected, Christian's work has taken a variety of paths though sculptural woodworking. This has made his work difficult to pigeonhole since having a consistent process or style is seemingly paramount in artistic classification. As a result, Christian's work has always hovered at the edges of the contemporary scene, even with consistent visibility. His "work" is best appreciated in the context of his enormous overall output. The rewards that the successes and failures offer him are an ever-expanding skill set and the knowledge of the material and processes. Christian has maintained a high standard in the execution of his work, even while embracing unpredictability and risk.

As the years passed and his skills increased, Christian found himself frequently asking the same question: *I already did that—why would I want to do it again?* Here a good metaphor for Christian's emerging sense of the world are the two poles of photography. On one end, there is mechanized reproduction of identical images. On the other, there is the classic silver solution method with a red light overhead. In this method, the products are similar but can never be truly identical. Even in a controlled series by the most skilled hands, the images are



*White Basket Pair*, 2013, Madrone root, bleach, linen thread, larger: 10" (25cm) diameter

*essentially* the same. Christian's artistic explorations would follow this track into *similarity*.

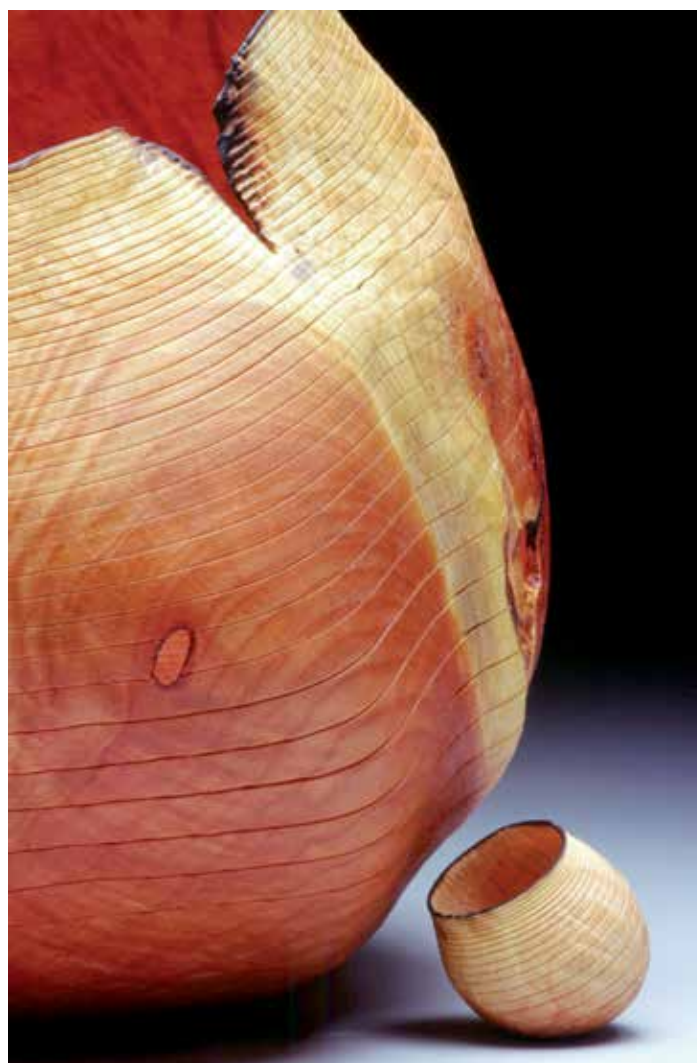
Where does one find the line or passage that establishes an elegant form? For Christian, years of searching for perfection are conveyed through his hands and tools. This allows him to make educated guesses as to what entangled stresses lay within the walls of a madrone burl block. Those walls that exhibit themselves as fixed while being turned are bound to flex in innumerable ways as they dry into thin-shelled bodies. Christian estimates he has made over 12,000 *Baskets*, some measuring an immense 22" (56cm) in diameter and down to  $\frac{3}{4}$ " (19mm). They are obviously all related, but each is as unique as a human face. There is no attempt at duplication. For those who see the baskets as all the same, consider the challenge and freedom of repeating the same gestures but without worrying about measured perfection.

After a form has acquired a satisfying profile, the interior must be excavated to match the exterior. The extraction of the interior mass calls for old-school gouge work that calls upon embodied craft, "The Knowing." Christian doesn't use the currently fashionable coring jigs that use pivoting cast-metal arms to save precious wood. This now trendy method produces matching salad bowls, just like those made by everyone else who is using the apparatus. Christian's search has been to repeat the sense of the same form but in a manner that works with what he sees and senses in a particular block, thereby producing a unique form each time. After the physical labor of the core's removal, he draws down the walls to a uniform thickness of approximately  $\frac{1}{8}$ " (3mm). All of this is done through the skills of hands, ears, and eyes. His rigor demands meticulous surfaces inside and out. "I hate sanding," relates Christian. ▶



(Above) *Baskets*, 2000, Madrone burl,  $\frac{3}{4}$ " to 12" (19mm to 30cm) diameter

The baskets are obviously all related, but each is as unique as a human face. There is no attempt at duplication.



(Left) *Father and Son*, 2000, Madrone burl



## Books



*Another Literary Dynasty #14*, 2015, Bleached and scorched madrone burl, 18" x 26" x 18" (46cm x 66cm x 46cm)



*Book #5*, 2014, Bleached and scorched madrone burl, 12" x 18" x 10" (30cm x 46cm x 25cm)

## Bones and Scrolls

(Right) *The Bone Game*, 2015, Bleached madrone root, 14" x 24" x 21" (36cm x 61cm x 53cm)

(Below) *The Lost Scrolls*, 2019, Bleached madrone root, 6" x 32" x 6" (15cm x 81cm x 15cm)



## Inspired by madrone

It is of particular note that the other strands of Christian's work are largely generated from considering the *Basket* off-cuts of madrone. The *Baskets* require the largest portions of the blocks, and everything else is made from what Christian senses or sees in the scraps. The scraps pile up, are far too interesting to toss or burn, and become the primary source for all of his other forms. The question, *Where do your ideas come from for all of those non-basket forms?* begins to be answered at this stage. The madrone chunks are sorted as to first impressions of what they might become. These might be riffs on what he's done before (like thousands of *Books*) or new forms or directions that come directly from considering what possibilities lie within. Inspiration might be as simple as the difference between a burl and a root section. Christian's work is propelled by curiosity and wonder, but it is based in the material and the possibilities it offers at any given stage. And that material is now consistently wet madrone.

Even the differences between a burl, a mass of roots, the occasional piece of straight grain, or a transition area tap into a range of experiences that Christian draws upon as he joyfully confronts and slices the masses with his chainsaw. Some root sections have prompted him to create 6'- (1.8m-) tall forms, whereas the *Baskets* can be as small as ¾" and *Books* can be 1½" (38mm) and incorporate live burl edge. Another metaphor, "going/falling down the rabbit hole," illustrates the conceptual playground that Christian recognizes in the possibilities of the scraps. As the first impressions are registered, certain pieces are assigned to become scrolls or monuments or riddles, or something entirely new, an experiment. Then the process of Yes/No begins. No sketches, just impressions. *What's possible? How might*

*I achieve it?* Try it, fail, try another way—the push and pull of exploring. The skills of the mind come to the fore, based on a deep confidence in the hands. Christian sees the entire dance as a collaboration between him and the material, the glorious *what-ifs* of the early stages of production.

## Creative paths

Christian's large old bandsaw now takes its place alongside the lathe, chainsaw, and his knowledge of the fantastical possibilities awaiting him within the contortions of the madrone

Those walls that exhibit themselves as fixed while being turned are bound to flex in innumerable ways as they dry into thin-shelled bodies.

grain. Like the *Baskets*, the *Books* affect us immediately as something familiar but abstracted or stylized in ways that make them new and mysterious. There is an abstraction that encourages a deeper level of interpretation and consideration. They come in all sizes and all levels of contortion but involve focused repetition in a way different from the *Baskets*. The "pages" express a similarity of slice and effect. After all, books don't typically have wooden pages, let alone the wild waving surfaces that are fixed to the dry spines. With his *Basket* groupings, Christian communicates a perception of humanity and family that shows up again and again in his work. We're also introduced to Christian's language

of burned pattern, decorative to the casual observer, possibly even sensed as a blur, but applied with a conscious intention of suggesting a forgotten language or meaning. With his *Books*, the pyrography is applied in response to the geography of the surfaces and, sometimes, are sandblasted back to establish more of a gradation.

In Christian's *Bones & Scrolls*, we see tighter relationships through insertion, nesting, binding, or simply arrangements. They are more complex than the *Books* and offer more decisive, less subtle, varieties of forms and relationships. The similarly burned "text" on the tubes further strengthens their association. The viewer is drawn into an implied history that encourages deeper examination and consideration. We are presented with a variety of horizontal and vertical, as well as bound and free configurations. Whether bound, freely stacked, or composed, *Bones & Scrolls* suggest stories that we do not know. Their effect on us is much more direct than the storytelling or historical significance of the *Books*. The presence or absence of the burned essays makes for an added mystery. Hidden connectors allow us to respond to the arrangements but also present us with a subtle disturbance in that we know things in life really can't do that. Another mystery.

The tubes turned for the *Bones & Scrolls* are seemingly obvious, but the technical and muscular challenges are significant. They begin life as turned and sanded rods that are then drilled using the lathe's tailstock. The boring process is always constrained by the few inches of travel the tailstock can move. The wet shavings quickly clog the shaft, further adding to the complexity. The drill head must be repeatedly drawn out, cleaned and reinserted, with any depth beyond the length of the drill necessitating custom drill extenders that can ►

## Drilling tubes

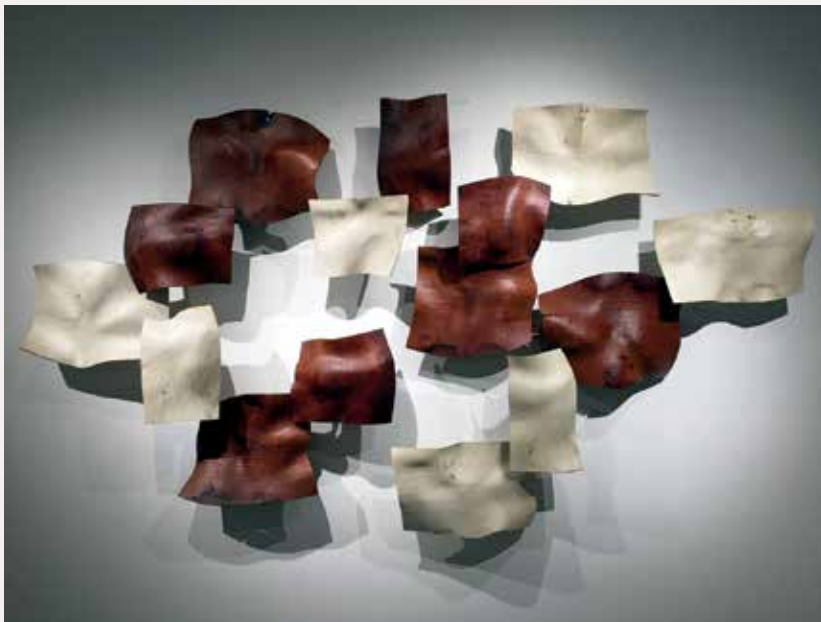


With the aid of a lathe bed extension, Christian uses the tailstock for deep drilling to create tubes for various sculptures. Note the steady rest, which provides essential support during this process.

*My Family Chronicles*, 2018, Bleached and scorched madrone burl, mahogany, sandstone, 9" x 18" x 9"  
(23cm x 46cm x 23cm)



## Installations and Wall Sculptures



*With Wings Outstretched*, 2017, Madrone root, bleach, 5' x 9' (1.5m x 2.7m)

Photo: Jordan Ahlers

*Laying Down the Shield #1*, 2019, Madrone burl, bleach, 35" x 17" x 7" (89cm x 43cm x 18cm)





produce cylinders upwards of 24" (61cm). But remember, each plunge is still limited by the few inches that the tailstock quill can travel. These demands require that the mass of the entire tailstock assembly, not just the drill, be slid back in order to clear the shavings, again and again and again.

Christian's *Installations and Wall Sculptures* reveal another creative path alongside the *Scrolls and Bones*. A bandsaw mill is now used for the swaths that make the different kinds of large panels, with Christian having moved beyond the brute physicality of his early days with an Alaskan chain-saw mill. These compositions require more of us as viewers. They are more conceptually bound through their relationships into wholes. No wedges, no physical connectors, no binding, just elegant association. The surfaces are now free from any spine or other restraint as they flex in dramatic waves. Whereas the *Bones and Scrolls* are tight compositions, here the relationships are expansive and have the simplicity of a breath. They are as much about the vibrancy of the negative space around each composition and the fingers of space reaching into each one as they are about the physical construction. Shadows are everything. The wall pieces often seem composed like a painter might perceive the limits of a canvas. The obvious challenge regards what happens within the space of the frame, but there is also the potential to change the encompassing space.

Working opposite the thin panels, Christian's *Monuments* are imagined from piles of waste blocks. And what a commitment it is! So much material and so big. Their somewhat clunky personas may put off someone who has only seen Christian's smaller work, but they are an important facet of his artistic growth. Once surrounded by madrone chunks, he plays, rather like a child, as he imagines possible relationships. Guided only by a mental ▶



*Iglesia*, 2018,  
Madrone burl,  
bleach, blackwood,  
20" x 12" x 9"  
(51cm x 30cm x 23cm)



*Monument*, 2017,  
Madrone root,  
20" x 17" x 9"  
(51cm x 43cm x 23cm)



image with no sketches or models, he speculates what might align with what to create a shoulder, a hip, a leg. And slowly the blocks come together, until they are figures. A light sense of abstraction guides/frames this conjuring humanity. Whether striding, posturing, or simply standing, the blocks are brought together into single figural compositions. Once a figure is devised, each block must be bored for heavy metal rods that create a permanent unseen armature. As with the *Scrolls* and *Books*, the burned patterns or even the occasional use of a copper panel are meant to evoke a voice from a history we might read literally or aesthetically.

In recent times, Christian has changed how he assesses his large number of *Books*. They used to be graded as firsts and then most of the seconds were burned by the boxful. Recent changes in perception have lead Christian to compose with batches of books for the wall, as in *Triptych*. When placed together to create graphic assemblages, they still invite us to consider the singular wooden book, but now they powerfully project a newfound vigor as a community member.

I believe many of us would be happier and produce more exciting work if we were able to follow Christian's ethos: "Enjoy risk. Risk is everything. Try to locate excitement, go to places you've never been before, fail a lot, seek chances, embrace joy." ■

For more, visit [burchardstudio.com](http://burchardstudio.com) or find Christian on Instagram, @chburchard.

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Steve Loar is an educator, sculptor, and author. He is Professor Emeritus and Director of the Center for Turning and Furniture Design, University of Indiana (Pennsylvania), where he taught from 2005 to 2016. He previously taught at Rochester Institute of Technology (New York), 1982-2005.



*Bridge #1*, 2009,  
Madrone burl, various  
woods, 9" x 17" x 6"  
(23cm x 43cm x 15cm)



*Triptych*, 2022, Madrone burl, bleach,  
38" x 76" x 6" (97cm x 1.9m x 15cm)

Photos: Kristy Kün

