

An Accidental Artist

by John McAbery

I live and work in a small one-room cabin (288 square feet) on a roadless stretch of California's north coast. The cabin contains a woodstove for heat, hot water and cooking, a small sink, and a bed. I have two chairs and a small table, with a vise attached to it, where I work, and eat and read and conduct most of my indoor activities.

No matter how many times a day I sweep, every surface in the cabin is always coated with dust. I have a shower-room tacked to the outside of the cabin and the outhouse is thirty yards up the hill. A 50 watt solar panel provides enough energy to power two 12-watt light bulbs and I have a hand-crank radio to keep up on all the grim news from the outside world. My cabin is old and drafty and I often have to wear a jacket indoors. I don't have a phone or any connection with the world outside.

My cabin sits so close to the beach that during major storms it is sometimes surrounded by waves. It's kind of like living in duck blind with an incredible view.

I just looked up and spotted a harbor seal paddling her way up the beach. She's probably molting and will need a couple of days out of the water. Non the less, I need to persuade her to return to the ocean, otherwise the pair of coyotes that nose through the drift-line in front of my cabin every morning at dawn will invite her to breakfast. Fifty yards to the south, Hank, a stately and venerable great blue heron who has been my companion for thirty years, is standing statue-like in the creek, patiently waiting for an unsuspecting fish to swim his way. On the other side of the creek, a rough-legged hawk sits on a fence post waiting for an unwary mouse or ground squirrel to dash though the grass. Just offshore, a flock of pelicans is skimming just above the waves in their synchronized ballet. They are heading south, they'll return again in May. This a great place for watching birds.

Further offshore I can see the spouts of California grey whales on their annual pilgrimage to the Sea of Cortez. When they return in the spring with their young they swim much closer to shore. I love this place and I am a very fortunate man. This magic and beauty of this rugged coast inspires everything I do. It has shaped who I am.

This remote part of the northern California coast ain't Waikiki or Miami Beach. Winters are rainy and dreary and the rest of the year is usually windy or shrouded in fog. The coast is rocky and the water temperature is 51 degrees – not conducive to playing in the surf. So I spend most of time indoors, butchering blocks of wood.

One day a week I travel 11 miles to town, a little hamlet of 350 people with a post office and general store, where I can get groceries and check my email. I can't drive all the way to my cabin and have to hike in the last half mile with all of my supplies and materials including seventy-pound blocks of wood, strapped to my back.

My simple uncluttered lifestyle out on the edge of the continent gives me something that most artists can only dream of – TIME, time to experiment and explore, time to make mistakes and time to learn from them – Time to live in my art.

I call myself an accidental artist because I got through nearly 50 years of my life without ever realizing I had any artistic abilities. My career as an artist started on cold dreary November day in 1992, I had just turned 48 years old. I was walking on the beach picking up any trash that might have floated in on the waves - something I have done every week for the past 30 years – my way of saying thank you for the opportunity to live out here. Anyway I spotted a piece of broken mahogany lying on the beach; it was shaped somewhat like a foot. I took it back to my cabin and for the next week I sawed and chipped and dug into it with whatever carpentry tools I had. And after a week I had a crude but credible spoon – and I was hooked. The process of peeling away wood to reveal something hidden inside fascinated me. On my next trip to town I ordered some real carving tools, a couple of gouges, a keyhole saw and some riffler rasps. (After nearly severing a vein in my wrist, I got a vise.) I got some scrap lumber from a friend of mine who made furniture – maple, cherry, oak, walnut, madrone and California Bay Laurel - the wood I now use exclusively. For the next sixth months I spent EVERY free minute I had carving spoons, most of which went into the woodstove, but eventually I learned a few tricks and the spoons became more and more refined – the bowls on most of them were translucent.

Even after carving spoons for six months, I never considered carving “art”. A friend of mine asked me I was interested in carving art pieces and told him “no”. But he must have stimulated something in my brain, because not long after that I picked an abalone shell and decided to see if I could replicate it. (Just a big spoon without a handle, I thought) The first one I finished was passable; the fourth one was pretty good. The seventh one had a translucent bowl. The others ended their short careers in the woodbin. Then I started looking around for new things to carve.

There are plenty of subjects to carve out here, birds came to mind first, but they never sit still. There were shells and dried pieces of seaweed twisted in bizarre shapes, but all of them were well beyond my skill level – so I decided to improve my skills. I twisted a thin strip of paper into a mobius strip and tried to replicate it. I made two month's worth of firewood before I got the first one done. Then I made a few more. I got a piece of ribbon and twisted it into a double helix and started making firewood again.

After a month or two, I got that design to work and I made three or four of them before looking for another challenge. I drilled hundreds of holes into a board 1/2 inch apart and then got some shish-kebab skewers. I stuck the skewers in the holes. Twisting a ribbon around and between the skewers I was able to create models for my ribbon designs. I created a lot more firewood, but I kept learning and eventually I carved some pieces that I could feel good about.

Even after two years of carving, I never really considered myself an artist. I didn't try to market my work. I gave most of it away because I didn't have enough room in my cabin to keep it. Then one day in October of 95, a beautiful young lady named Gretchen Bunker walked up the beach and into my life. Gretchen is a fine artist and she liked my work. She had connections with some art galleries and got my work into galleries in Seattle and Santa Fe. Aspen and Los Angeles – voila', I went from being a wood carver to being artist.

Gretchen also sketched some new designs for me to try. Not knowing the intricacies of carving, she created some really challenging designs, ones that I would have never attempted on my own. I tried and failed a lot but I eventually got some to work, so I started creating more complex designs of my own.

I carved my ribbon pieces almost exclusively for a couple of years before I started to look for new forms to challenge the limits of my abilities, (new ways to make mistakes). Worn and broken seashells captured my imagination next and I started replicating them in between my ribbon designs. Later on I added dried convoluted pieces of seaweed to my repertoire which presented more new challenges and more new ways to make mistakes.

I don't sell my work through galleries anymore and I don't go to shows. I love my life on the beach so much that I just have no desire to be anywhere else.

My website: www.johnmcaberywoodsculptures.com., my ETSY shop and word of mouth bring me all the clients I need. Gretchen manages my website and my daughter manages my ETSY shop, so I can stay out on the coast and carve whenever I want and I want to carve every day.

Gretchen does my photography and designs the bases for most of my pieces and she still challenges me with new mind-boggling designs now and then.

My favorite material to work with is California Bay Laurel. I like it because it is both tough and flexible. It has an interlocking grain so I can carve very delicate pieces out of it. It has a lot of color and grain definition. Bay Laurel is indigenous and abundant in this part of northern California. There are always a few windfall trees blown down every year, so I never have to cut down a tree to produce my work. I really like that.

One of things I like about the style of carving I do is the adrenaline rush I get when push the limits

of the wood and succeed. Even after years for carving, I still have to rely on a lot of guess work - making cuts in places that I can't even see – drilling holes from different angles from different sides of the sculpture and praying that they meet somewhere deep in the heart of the wood – planing the wood to 3/16th of inch and hoping that I don't plane too much. Wood is an unforgiving medium - one slight error and I have to start over from the very beginning. I can turn a month's worth of work into firewood in a instant. I've done that more times than I care to remember, but if I can learn something from my failures, I don't feel that I've wasted my time.

I hate noise and clutter and only use a handful of tools, one Japanese keyhole saw, one brace and bit, one mallet, two gouges, two carpenters chisels and a half dozen Microplane rasps.



You asked about my favorite pieces. My favorite piece is always the one I'm currently working on. I'm much more interested in the process of carving than I am in what I produce. As soon as I finish a sculpture I'm ready to put it away and start on another one. If I do have favorites, they are one's that challenged me the most - my first spoon, my first double helix, my first shell, my first convoluted piece of seaweed or any piece where I pushed the limits of what I thought I was capable of. Right now I'm fascinated by the idea of warping space. (Ala M.C. Escher). For the past three months, I've been discarding one piece after another. I haven't had any success yet and maybe I won't; but I'm having fun trying.



My first spoon.



"Symphony" – this was Gretchen's first design. It stumped me at first, but expanded my work in whole new directions.



"Vortex." I took a big leap with this one. I was amazed when I succeeded on my first attempt. I was on pins and needles every step of the way.



"Essence" was my first piece modeled on a broken shell fragment.



“Ocea” was modeled on a dried piece of seaweed. It is carved out of madrone.



“Whelk.” When I started carving this one I had no idea even where to begin, and I was about 99% positive that I would never finish it – I was wrong

I sometimes wonder what I would have done with my life if I hadn't picked that first piece of mahogany and carved that first spoon. I could have easily missed the most creative and rewarding time in my life.

