

## AFFINITY TO FORM: ARTISTS WORKING IN WOOD

GERALD PETERS GALLERY  
1011 PASEO DE PERALTA, SANTA FE

## WILL CLIFT: FOURTEEN SCULPTURES

PHOTO-EYE GALLERY  
376 GARCIA STREET, SANTA FE

Through the ages wood has been used creatively. It has appeared in all arts from architecture and sculpture to music and dance. For nine thousand years the red cedar has sustained the Kwakiutl Indians of the Pacific Northwest who continue to make lodges, sculptures, clothing, weavings, musical instruments, and dance masks from the material. Five thousand years ago Egyptians laminated wood with plant glues for use in sculpture and building. In the contemporary world, it is amazing to consider that weight for weight, the stiffness (Young's *Modulus*) and strength of commercial wood and steel are comparable. Because wood is organic, it is firm and fibrous, but porous to air and liquids. Its patterns of grain and color vary, giving each piece a unique character. It does not hold cold and may be freely shaped by hand. No man-made material is so diverse in terms of visual appearance or has so much adaptability in structural and decorative use.

Coinciding with the *Collectors of Wood Art* annual forum, held in Santa Fe this year, many galleries are showing works in wood. A remarkable exhibition at Gerald Peters Gallery presents furniture and sculpture by nine master wood artists. Wendell Castle's whimsical chairs are thoughtfully contoured to the body so that sitting in one is a deeply pleasing physical experience. The chairs and matching table are also a delight to the eye. Like the shapes and surfaces of Ken Price's ceramic sculptures, Castle's forms and polychromed finishes have a playful, childlike quality, but simultaneously seem mature and complex, embodying configurations and patterns found in the natural world and the decorative arts.

At first glance the classic, elegant lines of Robert Erickson's chairs do not appear to invite the participation of the body. How wrong! The sinuous back of his rocker engages each vertebra, elongating and comforting the spine. A "choreography" of bubinga slats lyrically expresses the curves of life.

Barbara Cooper also explores organic curves with imagination. Alluding to processes of growth, her truncated, tree-like sculptures are carefully built up from layers of wood veneer. Gesture is everywhere in her work, suggesting how life forms are perpetually moving and changing through space and time. Although these dynamic sculptures have been constructed of throwaway materials gathered from furniture factories and put together with staples and glue that remain visible, each has the grace and structural integrity of a bias-cut Vionnet dress. Cooper's work, however, is not just visual poetry. It is rooted in experience—in the reality of living in the industrialized world. The "trees" of recycled materials with glue running down their surfaces are punctured by staples. They become powerful symbols urging us to seriously consider what contemporary man is doing to the environment.

British land and wood artist David Nash is known for his "ephemeral expressions of nature's ongoing processes." He works primarily on the land, like his friend Andy Goldsworthy. Since wood is fifty percent water, it cracks, changes color, and rots over time. Nash responds to these characteristics by creating "continual works in progress." Manifestations of the cycles of time are present in the ever-changing cracks and gestures of *Two Beech Sheaves*. This powerful work seems like a standing stone cleaved by bolts of lightning.

Luke Mann's vessels are turned from knotty, worm-eaten, and spalted woods, as well as burrs, croches, and stumps. The artist gives unusual pieces of material an intimate and tactile presence. The smooth surface of each work seems to ask for a caress, like the skin of a lover.

By shifting a block of wood off center on the lathe, Ron Kent has shaped works that do not exhibit the parallel-to-the-grain patterns found in most turned bowls. The resulting asymmetrical designs are painterly and sophisticated. They also harbor something much more elemental—a sense of the way wood grows. Kent's extremely thin and translucent vessels—like fine porcelain—seem to blend the terrestrial with the metaphysical.

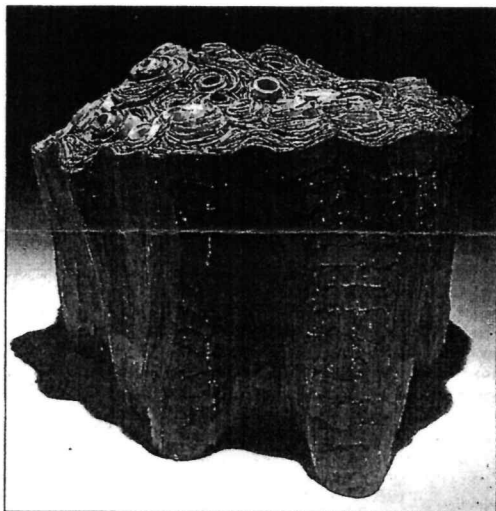
Poetry appears integral to Andrew Davis' beautifully incised installations. In *Mandelstam's Room*, Davis honors the words of Osip Mandelstam, a great master of the "Silver Age" of Russian poetry.

At photo-eye Gallery, self-taught artist and Santa Fe native Will Clift is having his first solo exhibition. Clift's work veers from the path of traditional woodworking and sculpture in that he is exploring two dimensions instead of three. After cutting thin strips of wood on a band saw, then slotting the resulting shapes, Clift assembles his pieces without nails or glue into perfectly balanced calligraphic gestures. These two-dimensional drawings in space create beautifully nuanced shadows that appear extremely three-dimensional. The "volume" of the shadows gives the works incredible energy, yet at the same time enhances the pensive atmosphere created by the pieces themselves. Matisse once said, "A drawing must have a power of expansion which can bring to life the shape that surrounds it."

SUSANNA CARLISLE



Will Clift, *Three piece, red, wood*, 28 1/4" x 6 1/4" x 3/4"



Barbara Cooper, *Fragment, wood, glue*, 18" h x 24" x 24", 2003