

The Power and Presence of Wooden Artefacts

Melbourne sculptor Ray Cologon has embarked on a new series which celebrates the 'magic and mystery' of wood.

Making objects is an experience which has a personal dimension. This is probably always true to some degree, even if the object is no more startling than a coaster or a paper aeroplane. It is through designing and making objects that we come to understand something of the power and presence of 'things'. Perhaps this experience is at its most intense when the foremost purpose of the object is as an expression of ideas and emotions, as is the case with sculpture.

Most sculptors work with a variety of materials but equally, most have their favourites. Like others in the field, Melbourne sculptor Ray Cologon has used and combined materials for different purposes and effects. There is no doubt, however, that Cologon is moved more than a little by wood.

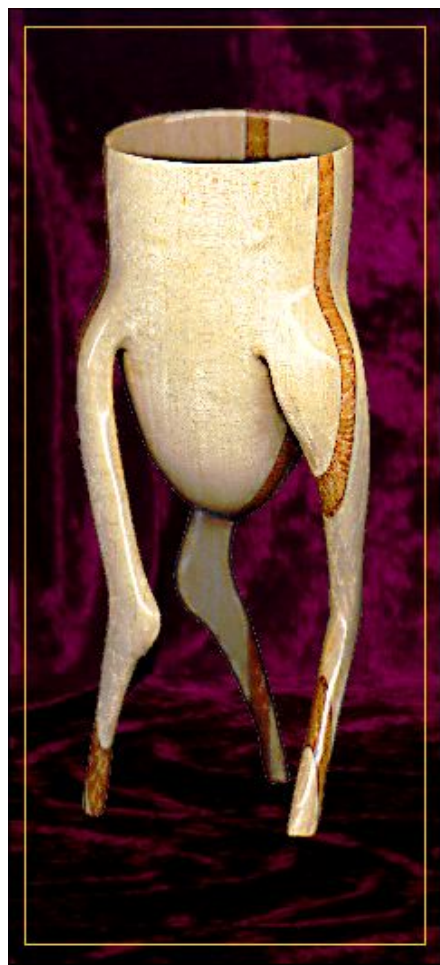
Cologon says "I have come to see that the form and substance of wood as a material resonates through objects made from it, intentionally or not". This is perhaps because of the organic character of wood and the immensely rich variety, both within and across species, which gives it an expressiveness and depth of character which is not evident in more homogenous materials.

This deepening appreciation of the qualities of wood as a material has been an underlying theme of Cologon's work as a designer-maker and sculptor over several decades. Recently, however, he has embarked on a direction which seeks to more overtly acknowledge the presence which wood lends to 'the object'.

Celebrating Wood

A current series of sculptures which has emerged from Cologon's reflections on his long association with wood reflects something of the place wood and wooden objects have had in

human culture over countless generations. Cologon says "...going back over our cultural antecedents as Anglo-Saxon and European Australians, I was particularly struck by the place of wood in the culture of the Celts and the ancient Druids." This has become a hinge point for a series of designs which re-animate half forgotten legends and lore to explore the magic and mystery of wood as both a material and as a cultural icon.



'Alembic Vessel-banded faun animorph' in Silver Ash with Silky Oak insets (16.1cm x 7.7cm x 7.2cm HxWxD). One of a series of pieces around the theme of metamorphosis and wood as a living entity, the lines of this piece echo both animal and plant forms.

The 'presence' of trees as living beings has spurred the human imagination across generations and cultures. Cologon admits to having been struck by how small pieces of driftwood often resemble bones - "remains from some extraordinary hybrid creature, the form of which we can barely conjure in our imaginations". One calls to mind the tales that have abounded in so many cultures about uncanny creatures inhabiting the dark recesses of ancient forests.

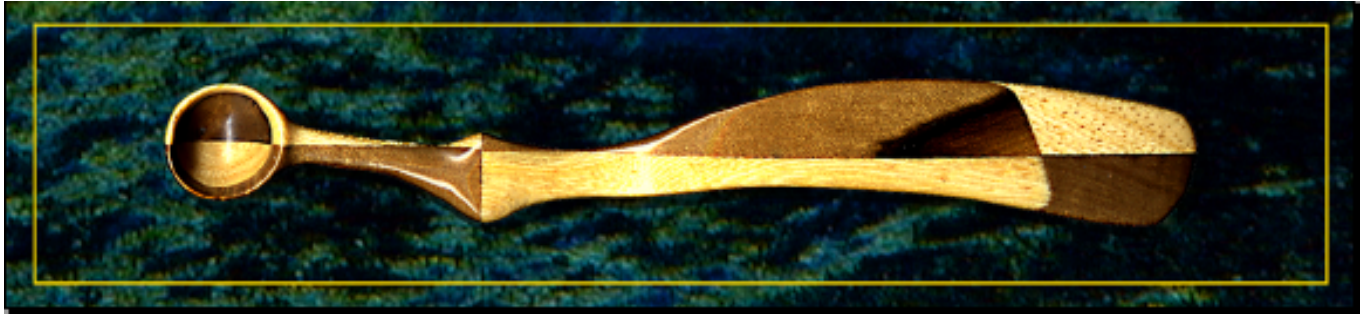
One can see that these ideas have provided some of the inspiration for his new catalogue of 'hand-sculpted artefacts' dubbed the "NightWing Series".

The NightWing Series

Cologon's current work is produced in a compact workshop in the outer reaches of Melbourne, under the business name 'NightWing Enterprises'. The series comprises over one hundred pieces to date and "seeks to present wood as a precious resource".

The timbers Cologon has selected for this enterprise include a number of native species, often contrasting with exotics (including several delightful examples of locally-grown European species). Whatever their origins, timbers are combined through inlay and lamination techniques to engender mood and colour in each piece, using contrast and harmony to set against the contours and outlines of the form.

Several steps have been taken to highlight the refinement and the depth of character of the featured timbers. One of these is the scale of the works; all of the pieces are small, ranging from 9.2cm to around 35cm in their largest dimension. This is one part of a process by which the work is rendered personal and its individuality is brought into sharper focus.



'Charm Spoon' in Blackheart Sassafras and Ivory Ash (17.7mm x 2.7mm x 1.7mm LxWxD). A number of these have been produced, each different, but each embodying similar references to naturally occurring forms such as those found among sun-dried bones, driftwood and, of course, among the natural forms of plants and trees themselves which are by turns lean or curvaceous, then knurled and knotted.

Somewhat at odds with contemporary fashion in the art scene, the work also pays more than passing homage to the traditional crafts. This has required an investment of time and patient application to achieve balance of line and form and to present it with a finish that does justice to the luminosity and vibrancy of highly figured timbers. This gives the pieces something of a timeless quality.

number of respects. Foremost among these is the use of advanced polymer acrylic sealers and finishes. Whilst the application of these requires painstaking labour, the results are refreshing.

The new technology gives Cologon's work a finish with glass-like clarity in contrast to the cloudy amber sheen of most available finishes (polyurethane, oils and traditional spirit varnishes) which by comparison seem to obscure and mute the natural features and character of the timber.

Nowhere is the character of a truly clear finish more evident (and more refreshing) than with features and insets in very light timbers such as Holly, Hornbeam or Silver Ash. The effect is sufficiently striking that it has been mistaken for ivory or some like material, by clients not familiar with finished wood with this appearance.

Another area where the crystal clarity of finish produces an effect which is both striking and exciting is with highly coloured woods such as Gidgee (an Acacia) or Purpleheart and with figured woods such as birdseye Myrtle.

where old (and some not so old) roads fail".

As will be evident to those with a tutored eye, many pieces in Cologon's current series are in part hand-turned during the process of making. This establishes the essential form or symmetry of some parts of the piece. In many cases, however, work which precedes and continues after the turning stage plays an important role in the final effect.

Notable exceptions to this are the miniature masks ('masquettes') which are hand-carved inside and out down to a thickness of several millimetres.



'Miniature Summoning Pipe' in Purpleheart and Holly. (9.4cm x 4.3cm x 4.3cm LxWxD). A uniphonic aerophone with fipple-fluted mouthpiece and flared and sculpted stem to provide a characteristic woody tone.

New Clarity

Despite references to the past, Cologon's techniques and the pieces he produces are nonetheless quintessentially contemporary in a

The Adventure of Making

The artist describes his approach to making as "leaning towards pragmatism rather than purism" and it would seem that in pushing the envelope to achieve particular effects, he has found it necessary to modify various tools and, in a few cases, create new ones. He is matter-of-fact about this: "rather than reinventing the wheel, I try to take from established methods — what works and is appropriate to the needs of the piece — and to begin my adventure of discovery at the point



'Sylvan Masquette' in reclaimed Huon Pine. (12.7cm x 8.7cm x 5.5cm HxWxD). The Celts believed that the spirit of a benevolent wood elf after its decease, inhabited a forest tree, captured forever within the fibres of its timber.

Packaging - Part of the Art

Perhaps it is the attention to detail which gives these works their initial impact. One of several surprises which set the work in this series apart, however, is the way in which the loving attention to detail carries through to the final presentation of the work.

After each of the NightWing sculptures is complete, it is catalogued and a scanned image of it is prepared. Each piece is then fitted to an individual velvet lined and padded box. The scanned image becomes the centrepiece of an individualised label which carries the image of the work, and the lid liner includes a similarly unique signed parchment certificate complete with printed details about the work, the timbers used and the ideas that inspired it. One cannot see one of these finished pieces at close range without realising that this is something very special.

Whilst this is not typical of the way wooden artefacts (or contemporary sculptures for that matter) are sold, Cologon sees it as part of redefining wood as a precious resource. He makes the boxes himself, each one hand crafted to exacting standards, seeing them as an integral part of the artwork.

The works represented in the NightWing Series represent a total package – one which embodies a progression of ideas, images and passions which go beyond the here and now.

Going Public

As the first groups of objects in this series reached completion, the artist has sought public response and feedback, with several groups of pieces being displayed at the Victorian Arts precinct.

As with any venture of this kind, the artist recognises that not everyone will ‘get it’ first time around. However the reception has been encouraging, and the artist says “there is a group for whom the work makes a kind of sense, and who respond with warmth. This is more than gratifying as it seems also to indicate that we are not altogether lost to an age of mass production and disposability...”

Indeed these works are not merely intriguing and unusual in design — though they are that. They are bound to captivate anyone with an eye for the imaginative and the whimsical, especially those with a fondness for the striking beauty of wood

The first major exhibition of works from the NightWing series — a collection of one hundred pieces — will open at Art Affairs Gallery in the Melbourne inner suburb of Carlton on 22 July. The works will remain on show until 5th August.

Dr Cologon is a trained sculptor, as well as a musician and consultant. He is Melbourne-based and can be contacted via email at cologon@webtime.com.au



‘Alembic Vessel’ in Australian Elm and New England Cedar (22.4cm x 7.9cm x 7.9cm HxWxD). Shown above arranged as an ‘open forest temple’, the upper dome can be inverted and placed in the base as a cup.