

TOM MYERS

artistic process

My process can be divided into mechanical, intellectual, and metaphysical components.

The mechanical component is by definition truly a process: “a systematic series of actions directed to some end.” It is linear, teachable, learnable and is skill-based. It progresses from point A to point E through B, C, and D. It has to do with learning the qualities of woods and other materials; the use of lathes and chucks; the use of cutting and scraping tools; and dozens of finishing techniques and embellishments. These skill sets are covered in dozens of books, videos, and instructional classes. The skills accrue with experience over years and decades and constitute craftsmanship, which is hard won and either can be an end in itself or a step toward the next two components of the process.

The first 3 years I spent working in isolation while I strove to improve craftsmanship. From the beginning I was restless with the approach and the second component of my work emerged, that of the intellect. I did not elect this approach, it elected me. I purposely avoided looking at other works in books, videos and shows so my work by necessity was very exploratory for me and very interrogative for my imaginary viewer.

The exploration was not outlined or planned at the beginning. It started by turning dozens of wood species while mentally cataloging their visual, tactile and olfactory properties. I added organic fibers such seagrass, linen and hemp cording and burlap cloth, all of which share the fiber color and nature of woods. In contrast I experimented with materials that seemed very different from wood: precious metal foils of gold, silver and palladium; molten lead and tin; and liquid aluminum. I sought forms, motifs and materials that were evocative of place or culture or emotion. I developed intricate weaves that that were axial in their geometry and pondered mass as a component of a vessel rather than “just” two surface components. I carved, burned and textured surfaces and used dyes, pigments, gessoes, and acrylics all the while noting their interaction with wood grain and vessel form. I examined the effect of adding negative space below vessels by elevating them on podia.

At no time did any of this seem like work nor did it seem mechanical. On a personal basis I knew I was on track. Series of works began to emerge naturally because I found them pleasing. Ideas flowed, one leading to the next or just seeming to bubble up from the subconscious. It felt effortless and natural. Most of my life I had been able to be “in the moment” and immersed but thought nothing of it. I had never heard of flow psychology or autotelism. I also began to think of my work as interrogative for an imaginary viewer who worked along side and who watched pieces created. Some of the questions that I posed to him were:

Is there beauty? (Sure, I love a pretty piece of wood that turns into a gorgeous vessel)

Is there interest? Harmony? Incongruity? (That can be fun)

Can I deny you the ease of thinking archetypal container function?

Can there be a third surface and not just an inside and outside?

Is that the same as mass?

Can form and motif evoke a sense of place or culture?

Why do surface finishes vary and do they serve a function?

Do intricate axial geometrical weavings accentuate the geometry inherent in a piece borne from a lathe?

Do they evoke a thoughts of particle physics or of astronomy or mystery?

Do organic fibers please visually and tactilely? Are they complimentary to the organic fiber nature of wood? Are they ever synergistic?

Can pigments and dyes suggest glass and ceramic? Can they make you notice grain patterns in the wood?

Do precious metals applied to vessels enhance the richness of the wood itself? Does that seem counter intuitive?

At first glance do you see quality? Is it evocative? Of what?

Those were the questions for me as well.

If you have crossed this line you do so willingly. This section is about the metaphysics of quality, mind and reality. It does not fit the definition of process in any meaningful way. That it exists is certain, but that I can explain it is not.

At a point in my life when I had little expectation of adding any new or different creative outlets, what struck steel to flint? How did a chance exposure to a lathe ignite a passion for form, balance and harmony borne of the axial geometry of work emerging from that tool? What was I seeking? At about that time I had discovered the poetry of Wallace Stevens. I was particularly drawn to two of his poems that are of his more approachable. I wondered if I was the “old sailor drunk and asleep in his boots” in “A Disillusionment of Ten O’Clock.” Was I in this palpable world but dreaming of the other world of the imagination?

*People are not going
To dream of baboons and periwinkles.
Only, here and there, an old sailor,
Drunk and asleep in his boots,
Catches Tigers
In red weather.*

Likewise, his “Poems of Our Climate” resonated with me at that particular juncture of my life. Life had been very satisfying and good to me but I wished for more.

*Clear water in a brilliant bowl,
Pink and white carnations. The light
in the room more like a snowy air,
Reflecting snow. A newly-fallen snow
At the end of winter when afternoons return.
Pink and white carnations—one desires
So much more than that.*

Indeed I was yearning for something creative and found it in my art. I found immersion and fulfillment: both in the craftsmanship of art but also in the intellectual process. I began to understand what Robert Pirsig wrote about in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* and *Lilia*. For the first time I grasped his Metaphysics of Quality. I experienced it in a tangible way.

“Quality,” or “value,” cannot be defined because it empirically precedes any intellectual construction of it, namely due to the fact that quality exists always as a perceptual experience before it is ever thought of descriptively or academically. Quality is the “knife-edge” of experience, found only in the present, known or at least potentially accessible to us all.

Art was for me both a conduit into the immersion of autotelism and an experience with Pirsig’s metaphysical “quality.”

I have always had a tendency for introversion and am accepting of that, but I found that art can serve as a bridge, a mechanism of spanning voids. I thought about Reverend John Ames’ late night pondering in Pulitzer Prize winner Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead*.

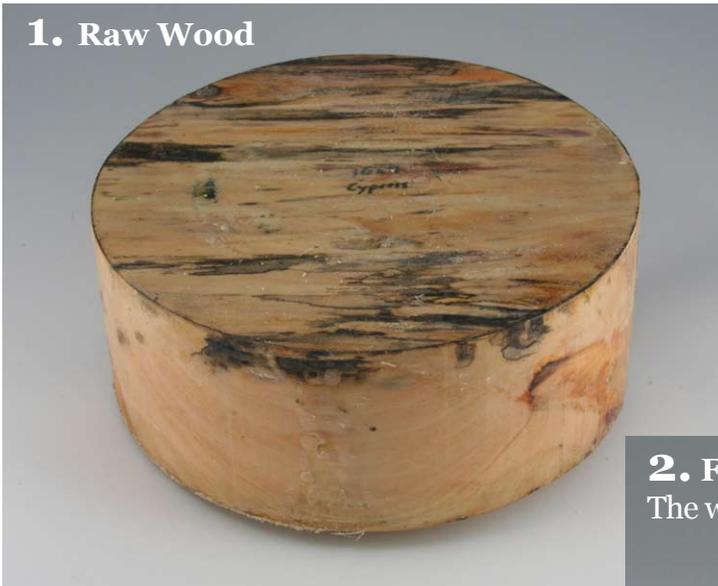
*“In every important way we are such secrets
from each other, and I do believe that there is a
separate language in each of us, also a
separate aesthetics and a separate
jurisprudence. Every single one of us is a little
civilization built on the ruins of any number of
preceding civilizations, but with our own variant
notions of what is beautiful and what is
acceptable—which, I hasten to add, we
generally do not satisfy and by which we
struggle to live. We take fortuitous
resemblances among us to be actual likeness,
because those around us have also fallen heir
to the same customs, trade in the same coin,
acknowledge, more or less, the same notions of
decency and sanity. But all that really just
allows us to coexist with the inviolable,
untraversable, and utterly vast spaces between us.”*

So, my art is craftsmanship, exploration, interrogatives, intellect, immersion, fulfillment, metaphysics of quality, and bridge building. I have attempted to explain what I have done and how and why; yet I have no sense of success. It has been like trying to capture water in a net. Part of that failure is mine; part is a function of topic. How can language capture descriptively that which is of the mind? I am convinced that mind is not just the brain but is the business of the brain and that there is an abiding mystery that resides in humankind as that world of mind.

For my family and friends who love me and who have mercilessly prodded me to show and explain my work, thank you.

evolution of a vessel

1. Raw Wood



2. First Stage Form

The wood must dry and shrink before final shaping.



3. Finished Form



in the studio

