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Carving Out His Niche

By RALPH GARDNER JR.

I've been trying to describe, if only to my own satisfaction, my reaction when I walked into Mark Brady's Upper East Side gallery last week and got my first glance of David Esterly's art. Was it amusement? Giddy excitement? Awe?

The subject matter is the stuff of still-life paintings from the Old Masters to 19th-century American art by painters such as William Harnett: flowers in profusion, sea shells, antique letter racks filled with everyday objects such as letters, feathers, string. There's only one difference: Mr. Esterly's medium isn't paint. It's wood. British limewood to be precise, in this country called linden.



Thayer McClanahan

David Esterly mounting his exhibition at the Mark Brady gallery.

"I get it at great trouble and expense from Britain," Mr. Esterly explained as he showed me around. "The grain is very mild and crisp. The wood is soft but very strong. You can carve across the grain. You get wonderful cuneiform shapes. You can make it paper thin—like a petal."

The artist, who lives deep in the woods upstate, on the bend of a river outside Utica, explained that he's a fan of 18th-century Dutch still-life painters, artists such as Jan van Huysum. When you see that sort of art in museums, the realism and virtuosity is so great that it's almost self-defeating; you're enchanted by the

technique but, like a magic trick, your efforts to deconstruct the effect sometimes gets in the way of fully enjoying the art.

The same thing goes for Mr. Esterly's work. You can't imagine how he manages the delicacy of the effects that he creates. And how much time it must take to turn dead wood—no matter how supple and cooperative—into objects that more than mimic nature, that have the sheen of life.

Like all great art (and I don't think I'm exaggerating by calling it great; the giddiness I felt was similar to being unleashed at the threshold of a room filled with Vermeers), there's something

intuitive about it, as if you and the artist are simultaneously stumbling upon some underlying truth.

And the triumph is all the greater when you consider that he's pulling it off in a monochromatic medium. "It's the pleasure of illusion," he explained, pointing out one of his favorite effects. It was a single tulip leaf in a large piece that incorporated gardening tools and a profusion of flowers in buckets.



A detail from his work, 'Quodlibet #2,'

Thayer McClanahan

"This is for a lady who has an Olmsted garden on the North Shore of Boston," Mr. Esterly said. "She said in some years there's a moment when her peonies, iris and tulips all bloom at the same time. I chose that moment. And then I copied her gardening tools."

But the tulip leaf whose craftsmanship he admired isn't a faithful copy of an actual tulip leaf. "It's not as flat as a real tulip leaf would be," he confided. "I discovered if you carved a leaf with holographic accuracy it looks like a wooden leaf. You haven't taken account of the medium. In order to make it come to life you have to

introduce selective exaggeration."

Mr. Esterly didn't plan to be a woodcarver when he grew up. Indeed, his career path gives hope to all of us whose third-grade art teacher helped us to the realization that we had no talent.

"She said draw a painting of whatever comes to mind," the artist recalled, of an actual traumatic third-grade episode. "What came to mind was a waterfall in a jungle. She looked carefully at it and said, 'I see what you've done. It's called abstract art. You haven't drawn a picture of anything, have you?' I was so wounded the door to the palace of art slammed shut. I never imagined I had any artistic talent. I'm still not sure I do. I don't believe in intrinsic gifts for anything."

Mr. Esterly assumed he'd become an academic. He graduated from Harvard and then attended Cambridge on a Fulbright scholarship. But his life changed the afternoon that he and his girlfriend and now wife, Marietta von Bernuth, dropped into St. James's Piccadilly Church, and he spotted a cascade of leaves and flowers, fruits and vegetables behind the altar, made entirely of wood. It was the work of Grinling Gibbons, a master 17th-century woodcarver.

"It was carved with a fineness and fluency and realism I'd never seen before," Mr. Esterly remembered. "It seemed to speak to more than my mind. I had a full body and mind reaction. It's a hyper-organic art. You're using a botanical medium to portray botanical subjects."

While the encounter with Gibbons might have been unplanned, his education had primed him to embrace the artist. "I'd studied Yeats and Pound," he said. "They saw no distinction between craftsmanship and art. Yeats in particular had this vision of unity of being where your imaginative and mental and bodily lives were all one."

His first instinct was to write about Gibbons. Mr. Esterly was an academic, after all. (He eventually did. His book, "The Lost Carving: A Journey to the Heart of Making" about a year he spent at Hampton Court Palace in the late '80s recreating a Gibbons work that was destroyed by fire, was published in 2012.) "But you couldn't understand how his style developed unless you understood something about his materials and tools and his methods," the artist explained. So he tried his hand at carving. "With the first stroke the genie was out of the bottle."

To call the process, with his 130 carving tools, time-consuming would be crass understatement. "I don't own any of my own work," he said. A single work might take a year or more to complete. "These things are so slow."

He added that while the larger works sell for six figures, "It doesn't mean I'm getting rich. I can't afford to do anything for myself."

But he's not complaining. He describes his art (the show at the W.M. Brady gallery runs only through Friday, but moves to the Munson Williams Proctor Arts Institute in Utica on Jan. 29) as taking an anachronistic and "unabashed delight in beauty and natural forms realistically portrayed."

His portrait of a lobster in one work, for a client in Maine, apparently led to an appreciation for crustaceans so intense he no longer eats the critters. "It's an irony-free zone. Most contemporary art floats in an ether of irony."

I'm not sure I'd agree with assessment that his work is unironic. When you're snubbing the mindless pace of modern life, when you've decided to devote months of time to capturing the sculptural beauty of a lobster, there seems something spit-in-your-eye ironic about that. Perhaps that flamboyant delight in process is what nearly brought me to laughter when I first set foot in the gallery.

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