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Tales from the wood

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Furniture artist Stephen Whittlesey's designs include salvaged lumber, which leaves a tactile tale about the wood's past.

Andrew T. Gallagher/Standard-Times special

By **Catherine Carter**
Standard-Times correspondent
December 21, 2007 6:00 AM

"There's always a story inside a piece of wood."

Furniture artist Stephen Whittlesey, whose latest series is currently on view in a solo show at the New Bedford Art Museum, believes his task is to tap into that story.

His work is fashioned from pieces of salvaged lumber that have been eroded by wind or water, or gnawed by creatures or insects. These natural forces leave a tactile tale about the wood's past that invites us to study and speculate.

"The history can be imposing," the artist admits, "but it's a challenge, a way of opening doors for me."

Inspired by texture and tone, Mr. Whittlesey assembles found elements into pieces of furniture designed to raise our awareness. His work encourages us to consider our relationships, with our surroundings and with one another. As the finished product is functional, we experience his message, not simply observe it.

The desktop in Mr. Whittlesey's office at UMass Dartmouth, where he is a professor of wood and furniture design as well as director of the university's Wood Studio, has an eerie past. It had been the door of a solitary-confinement cell at a Massachusetts correctional institution in the late 1800s, one of a set of 13 steel-faced doors that found its way into Mr. Whittlesey's studio when the state was updating the facility. Each door has a 5-inch-square slide opening at eye level, meant for food delivery and observation. A chilling history is carved into the surface; there are still marks on one side, where various inmates scratched at it in rage or despair.

Besides turning one of the doors into a desk, Mr. Whittlesey used them for "Inside-Out," an experiential installation made in 2004. Here the doors were lined up so that viewers could walk along the row and peer through the openings. With this arrangement, the artist posed questions about the physical spaces and emotional barriers we place between one another.

"It was a commentary on relationships, how they work or don't work," he says.

This note of solemnity is an unusual approach for Mr. Whittlesey, however; his work often takes a more light-hearted tack. His "Arm Rest-Trainer (for men with wandering hands)," for example, makes a wry statement on personal boundaries. Created in 2005, this piece is a corrective contraption made of salvaged pine that holds the user's potentially errant arm in place with a Velcro strap.

Mr. Whittlesey's story is as intriguing as the stories in the wood he uses.

Growing up in Norwood, he worked on local dairy and chicken farms. From the farmers, whose tradition of New England frugality was deepened by memories of the Depression, he learned the value of making

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due with whatever materials were on hand.

If a door or fence needed repair or replacing, "their first impulse wasn't to run to Home Depot," Mr. Whittlesey explains. "It wasn't a matter of pride; that was just the process." The farmers' innovative problem-solving left a strong impression on him and in time would inform his methods as an artist.

Mr. Whittlesey also discovered the benefits of resourcefulness at home. His father, who ran a printing business in Boston, made the household furniture by hand — benches, sideboards and bureaus. In 1950, he paid \$500 for a small parcel of land in South Yarmouth, then built a cottage of recycled lumber on the property, paying just \$100 for materials. Thanks to his humble investment and handy skills, the family enjoyed a summer home on the Cape for the next 20 years.

In junior high school, Mr. Whittlesey worked in a print shop, and in high school he started his own business, printing tickets and invitations in handset type on a small press. This experience was to serve him well later on.

Mr. Whittlesey began his college studies at Amherst College. Assigned "On The Road" in English class, he soon found himself pulled by the same sense of wanderlust that inspired Jack Kerouac. He left school to join the Navy and was stationed for two years in Virginia Beach, where he and three friends rented a studio and painted landscape views.

When he returned to college after his military service, Mr. Whittlesey earned a degree from Columbia University in creative writing and English literature, with a minor in studio art. Then he hit the road with a scheme to get rich quick in the casinos of San Juan. He bought a one-way ticket to Puerto Rico and boarded the plane with \$100 in his pocket.

Lady Luck was not with him, however. Several days later he found himself flat broke, nursing a beer in a San Juan club and wondering what to do next. Then he overheard two men at the bar speaking in English and realized they worked for the San Juan Star, an English daily newspaper. He introduced himself and soon had a new job, thanks to his printing experience and writing skills.

Mr. Whittlesey stayed in Puerto Rico for a year, working at the paper during the day and spending the rest of his time painting. He also began fashioning assemblages out of the flotsam and jetsam he discovered on the beach.

When he returned to the States, he earned a master's degree in painting and sculpture from Columbia. In this intense and rigorous program, he was taught by the renowned abstract expressionist Robert Motherwell.

Upon graduation, Mr. Whittlesey taught at Parsons School of Design and Rutgers University, then received a Fulbright Grant to paint in Spain. "It was wonderful to have that time to forget what I had learned in graduate school," he says, "to rediscover my own voice." During this year abroad, he reveled in a newfound sense of color, painting landscapes illuminated by the unique Mediterranean light.

Back in Massachusetts, he moved to West Barnstable, married and started a family. To earn a living, he began doing carpentry work, everything from building tables to repairing chairs. He had no formal training in furniture-making, but he did have the experiences of working with the farmers in Norwood as a boy, and helping his father construct the cottage on Cape Cod.

Mr. Whittlesey's carpentry work led to jobs restoring old houses, where he found unusual pieces of wood. He started to build furniture from this salvaged lumber, and commissions soon followed once people saw his creations.

While the steady income from commissioned work was welcome, Mr. Whittlesey felt conflicted during these years. He wanted to push his woodwork in new directions by designing unique pieces, but there was good money in building traditional furnishings like dining-room tables. He also remained committed to painting, and continued to work on canvases and exhibit them regularly in Boston.

A career turning point came in 1984, when he sent slides of his one-of-a-kind pieces to the Workbench Gallery in New York City and was offered a show there. The exhibit was well-received and written up in New York Magazine. Encouraged, Mr. Whittlesey began devoting more energy to his creative work.

Distinctive home furnishings became especially popular with collectors in the 1980s, and Mr. Whittlesey's career flourished. He exhibited and sold work through a number of galleries nationally, including Gallery NAGA in Boston, the Snyderman Gallery in Philadelphia, and the John Elder and Heller galleries in New York City.

Mr. Whittlesey also returned to teaching, first coming to UMass Dartmouth as a visiting critic in the woodworking program and finally joining the faculty as a full-time professor in 1992. He finds the interaction with students and fellow teachers to be an enjoyable balance to his solitary time in the studio.

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In 1993, he was awarded a National Endowment for the Arts Individual Artist Grant, which included a four-month residency in the South of France. Without a traditional wood shop to create in, the artist found himself "forced to build stuff by hand and work within that restriction." It was such a freeing experience that Mr. Whittlesey continues to attend artist residencies and travel on a regular basis, using the time to renew his ideas and refresh his working process. Recent ventures include a month-long stay at the Vermont Studio Center and a two-week visit to Cuba.

After a creative career of more than 45 years, Mr. Whittlesey continues to work from his home studio in West Barnstable. The multiple scraps of wood he has collected over the years are stacked around the studio, making up his palette.

He begins working with a general direction in mind as he moves various pieces around — standing them up, hanging them from the ceiling, propping them up, twisting them around on the floor. He is influenced by the marks and shapes of the wood, but they don't direct his creative process. "When I'm working, the idea is the most important thing," the artist says. "If the material at hand doesn't do it, I change it or find another."

While he considers the look of the wood, he isn't overly entranced by it. "I am willing to do surgery if needed," he says.

His latest series on display at the New Bedford Art Museum is all about "lightness, mobility, impermanence." The 15 works in the show balance on slender legs, lean precariously or are joined with lengths of string.

With this exhibit, the artist returns to his favorite theme of personal interactions and how we relate to our environment. To sit down at his "22-foot Table for Two," with its narrow top, we have to consider carefully where to place our cup, and how to approach the other diner. To place items on his 17-foot-tall "Infinite Shelves," we have to think about not only what we are putting on all those shelves, but also how we will reach the top to put them there.

When he made this series, Mr. Whittlesey says, he was feeling "weighed by the baggage of possessions, stuff, including furniture, and the burdensome layers of complexity that they put on my life."

He implies that the old Kerouac wanderlust might be kicking in once again. "I want to create work that breaks down easily, transports, is made of materials that are free, and, looking down the road, can be used for firewood if I decide to uproot, jump in my truck, and go off to live in the wilderness "I maybe Seattle."

"New Work by Stephen Whittlesey: Tables & Shelves," curated by David B. Boyce, is on display at the New Bedford Art Museum until Dec. 31. Located at 608 Pleasant St., the museum is open Wednesday through Sunday, 12 to 5 p.m. For more information, call 508-961-3072 or visit www.newbedfordartmuseum.org.

Mr. Whittlesey also has a piece in the Fuller Craft Museum's Members Show, now on view until March 2, 2008. The museum is located at 455 Oak St. in Brockton, and is open daily from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., Wednesdays until 9 p.m. For more information, call 508-588-6000 or visit www.fullercraft.org.

For more information on the artist, visit www.stevewhittlesey.com. To contact the artist, email stevewhittlesey@comcast.net.

Catherine Carter is a painter, teacher and writer. Her Web site is www.CatherineCarterArt.com, and she can be reached at carterpaintings@aol.com.

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