

"A Quarterly
Published Strictly
Quarterly"

Works & Days

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Spring 2012

No 2

Against Specialization

by Luke Cissell

No, this is not a fascist call to conformity. Quite the contrary. It just so happens that in today's Looking-Glass world, *specialization* itself is that great conformer – a sort of religion that everyone has been baptized into without realizing. Our world, now so crowded with highly-trained specialists, is short on breathing room for any seeking a bold new platform from which to say, "I am here." {Cont'd}

"At dawn get to your fields, and one day they'll be full." - Hesiod



MY OWN PRIVATE BAYREUTH

by Arturas Bumšteinas

After enquiring at the Bayreuther Festspiele box office, I was sent a letter explaining that the wait list for tickets is currently nine years long. {J}

Sierras

by Johnny Williams



Tidal Basin

by Michael Hodgson



A Call to Practice

by Sarah Marriage

Ten years ago, when I began to dream of becoming a woodworker, I didn't know exactly what that would mean. I didn't know, not for certain, that I wanted to work with wood in particular: I was drawn to the scale and to the accessibility of the material and the tools it requires, but I didn't even know what working with real wood felt like, what wood smelled like, outside the formaldehyde spiked aroma of a Home Depot lumber aisle. {Cont'd}

Chain Study

by Penelope August



Building Three:

*Strata Comma Philo
Gamma: On What is
Emergent*
by Eric Bland

Cosmography

by Luke Cissell

Gears

by Prue Hyman



Our Trespasses

Part Two of Three

by Cara Marsh Sheffler

The bar three cornfields from Downtown was called The Manger, so named because it stood where the Nativity Scene was staged during Prohibition.

The pair arrived around 10pm and confusion was instantaneous: Gabe was mistaken for his high schooldoppelganger, who had—of course—stayed local, granting the couple immediate, completely misplaced intimacy. It also allowed for the commotion that Nat's conspicuously urban presence provoked to be put to words... {Cont'd}

Recipes:

Seasonal Ingredients,
Perennial Methods

by Ashley Suzan and Eric Wines

Teeth

by Rebecca Bersohn



Prism Series

by Field Kallop



Madrone Box

by Sarah Marriage



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But skill is part practice. And practice, if it is to widen experiences, is part discipline. Knowing how to do something well can be binding, yes, if we resign ourselves to method alone. Yet more and more we modern creative individuals are admitting that if we are to express what we want to we have to be able to do it. With the right spirit, skill is the true beginning of freedom.

- James Krenov, *The Impractical Cabinetmaker*

Ten years ago, when I began to dream of becoming a woodworker, I didn't know exactly what that would mean. I didn't know, not for certain, that I wanted to work with wood in particular: I was drawn to the scale and to the accessibility of the material and the tools it requires, but I didn't even know what working with real wood felt like, what wood smelled like, outside the formaldehyde spiked aroma of a Home Depot lumber aisle. I could frame a ceiling or perform other tasks with inexpensive, pre-milled lumber. I had made things, structurally sound things, but I didn't know what it was to be a woodworker.

I now have an inkling.

Currently, I am a student at The College of the Redwoods, a school that is widely known in the woodworking community, but seldom heard of outside it. There are 18 of us first-years (with experience ranging from novice to expert), and five second-year students, stationed at workbenches learning and working eight (or more) hours a day, six days a week, for an all too short nine months.

Our learning begins with exercises: sharpen irons for hand planes, build three hand planes, cut and join a series of joints, build a small cabinet. From there we continue our education through making our own work, side by side.

What concerns me is the nature of work and learning. How does one come to know about a particular work?

For example, this publication is not specifically marketed to woodworkers, and as such I imagine there may be readers who do not know what a hand plane is, or what exactly I mean by an iron.

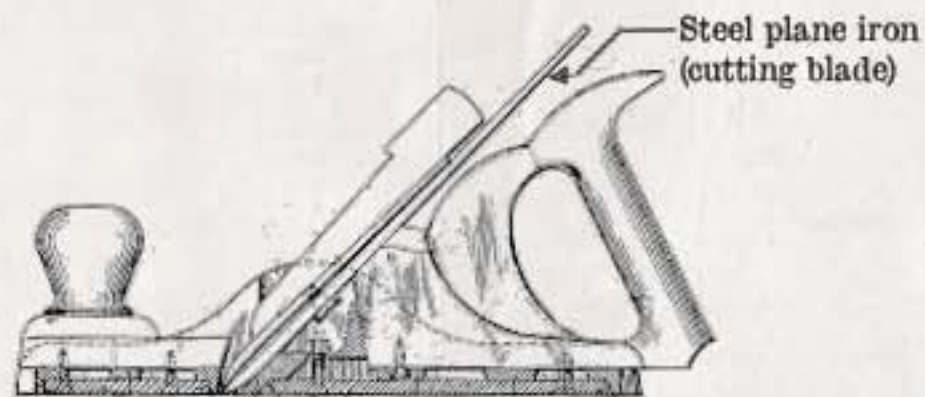


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It's easy enough for me to explain in writing that a hand plane is a tool that allows a woodworker to shave an ever-so-thin slice from the surface of a piece of wood. The word iron in this context refers to the blade in the tool. I can include a picture of an example of the tool:



Longitudinal section of metal hand plane

And I can embed video of the tool (here a wooden hand plane) in action:



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But with all the communication tools of an information age at my fingertips, and all the romantic language of sight and sound I can muster, I can not give you the feeling and knowledge that comes from pushing a finely tuned hand plane, with an iron so razor sharp your forearm has become a smooth monument to its effectiveness, along a finely grained hardwood, or softwood, or porous or curly or quilted wood, along interlocking grain or end grain, across the grain or against it. Nor is there an app for that, and a Wii hand planing simulator just wouldn't cut it.

One can't learn these things without doing them; one can't learn without working.

As you work, "the moves", as folks at my school call them, become easier and more refined. Your body learns more than your intellect is keeping track of. Your tools begin to become an extension of your nervous system. You can feel through them.

If I had been enamored of the idea of this work before, it was with the practice and doing that I found myself in love.

In 1877, William Morris described his age as a time "when the best school, the school of successful practice going on around you, is at such a low ebb". One hundred thirty-five years later, we can claim no better, and indeed, in the craft of woodworking, must claim worse. I don't write this to indict the woodworking world; it is home to many wonderful, hardworking, thoughtful craftsmen. Most of their work is purchased by wealthy patrons. Society as a whole is simply many generations past a time when successful practice of good woodworking going on around us was a part of the general, popular experience.

So how is a person to learn about craftsmanship? Is it by reading John Ruskin, William Morris, David Pye, Soetsu Yanagi, Lewis Mumford, or James Krenov? Going to museums and visiting workshops? Yes, definitely, yes. But I believe one must also do the work.

I know I'm not saying anything that hasn't been said before, but it needs to be said over and over, to be shouted from the bell towers that remain, painted onto the empty billboards of this recession, and hacked into the lights of Las Vegas. Hacking, I'm sure, has its great craftsmen.

One of the first exercises at my school was called The Perfect Board. We had to take a piece of rough lumber and turn it into a board with all sides perfectly flat, perfectly smooth, perfectly parallel to their opposites and perfectly orthogonal to their adjacents; and then we were to cut the board in half and rejoin it (glue it back together), perfectly undetectably. The task is impossible. Even if one were to perfectly complete it momentarily, the board will change shape over

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time. Wood is an organic material. It has cells and was alive. Those cells, like our own, change with moisture. Or as Jim Budlong, a fine woodworker and instructor, once put it, "It's wood...boy...it's alive till it burns...foom!"

But the exercise and the metaphor are powerful teachers. I suppose that can be said of most pursuits of perfection.

What I liked about the idea of the perfect board exercise is that there is no pretense of possibility. There is no romantic notion of some sort of actual attainment of perfection, just the romance of accepting the impossibility.

Some people find the exercise *extremely* frustrating, particularly in school where it might be a hurdle before doing your own work. But I think if you let it, the exercise allows you to revel in a game that is always a part of anyone's work: how finely to work and when to stop.

In Krenov's words:

It is satisfying now to look at that surface... somewhere on it- oh, one can find it if one looks closely enough, but for the sake of vanity let me say 'somewhere'- there is a joint.

Of course, he wrote that not about an exercise, but about a door he made for a cabinet.

And so in working we are exercising, we are ever learning to make decisions about our work, which has the direct result of producing an object that is the sum of our actions and decisions, mind and body necessarily working and learning together. At our best, Krenov might say we are developing a sensitivity; Yanagi might call it learning to see as well as to know.

I have joined these ranks considerably later in life than those who've worked in wood since entering the workforce, or growing up in a parent's shop, but I am learning to do this work, and more importantly to me, as has been important also to our craft philosophers, I am finding joy in this work, and the intricacies I have thus far glimpsed.



