

ICON

NOVEMBER 2022



INSIDE: Ezster Balint & Julie Benko & Jason Yeager



SLUGGER

A FEW MONTHS AGO, I painted woodworker Mark Sfirri in his studio. While we knew of each other, we didn't meet until we both had concurrent shows at the same venue. Mark is known for his wood turning, which is very different from the bowls and vessels that come to mind when you hear the term. He is proficient in other mediums, too, but wood is his thing.

If you've been to the Michener Museum, you might have seen his *Rejects From A Bat Factory* on display in the main hall. It depicts a set of baseball bats doing decidedly un-batlike things. He's made many of those. Most have been turned and carved from ash, some from exotic woods, and all with a wonderful sense of humor.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 28

Robert Beck is a painter, writer, lecturer and ex-radio host. His paintings have been featured in more than seventy juried and thirty solo gallery shows, and three solo museum exhibitions. His column has appeared monthly in *ICON Magazine* since 2005. www.robertbeck.net

He is also well known for his extraordinary multiple-axis turning techniques and the way he incorporates carving and turning with seamless craftsmanship. The multi-axis pieces require a lot of calculation and planning. Mark turns what can begin (and end) as a large piece of wood, cutting from the areas that conform to only the first axis. Then he repositions the block in the chucks, sometimes adds counterweights, and turns it around that axis for the next portion. This has to be done slowly, as the wood is off-center and hard enough without the lathe hopping all over the place. Portions of the block that aren't solely of one or the other turned part are hand-carved to bridge the composition or create an independent form, but it all flows naturally, which is impressive in itself. A visit to his website, www.marksfirri.com, will give you an idea of what I mean.

Mark uses this technique to create furniture, sculpture, and even figures. These geometric forms seem to have an inner life. Mark has an exquisite eye for curves, proportions, rhythms, and relationships, and a lot of that is that is math-based. But it's the kind of math that's associated with organic forms.

Mark has work in the Museum of Art & Design, The Renwick, The Carnegie Museum, The Minneapolis Institute of Art, The LA museum of Art, and the Yale Art Gallery. It was a treat to paint him working. We gabbed. We made art. It was a good day.

It reminded me of my friend Jeff, who was not only a woodworker but had mastered many other construction crafts. He knew how to plaster, using techniques that few people still use today. Jeff was on vacation one year in Istanbul, walking through a market district with his wife. She went to look at rugs, and he was taking photographs. Jeff wandered into a shop that was under repair. When his wife circled back and found him, he was working side by side with the Turkish

shop owner, helping him finish his plaster walls, and showing him some ways to deal with tricky problems. Sometimes people do things for others simply because they can. It's a most human of reasons, and perhaps the best. Mark Sfirri is like that. A helper. A teacher. A mentor. Someone who doesn't keep score.

The Center for Art in Wood in Philadelphia acquired a set of Mark's bats last year. Karen Schoenewaldt, manager of collections and registrar, contacted the Baseball Hall of Fame to see if they would be interested in borrowing and displaying the Center's set. Instead, the HOF selection committee decided they would acquire a set of their own for their permanent collection.

Mark is pleased about having a set of his bats in Cooperstown. "It is the biggest stage for the sport," Sfirri said. "My father would be proud." The president of the Hall, Josh Rawitch, was excited to add it to their permanent collection. "Our museum continues to display and collect one-of-a-kind artifacts and objects that help tell the history of our great game," Rawitch said, "and Mark's work certainly falls into that category," along with other baseball-related art by artists Norman Rockwell, Armand LaMontagne, Elaine De Kooning, Alexander Calder, and Andy Warhol.

At the moment, Mark has gone off in another direction. His son was getting married in a museum, and they often don't allow flowers (due to the pollen), so Mark created two large floral arrangements out of various kinds of wood, painted and not. He turned each blossom first, then carved the petals into them. He also made the bride's bouquet, the groom's corsage, the boutonnieres and additional flowers, turned two large pedestals, and threw the ceramic vases. It all looked fabulous, was collection-friendly, and will last a lot longer than garden variety flowers. ■

don't"). (15 N. 4th St., slightly north of Northampton Street, Easton; 610-252-0711; lafayettebarjazz.com. Shows run 9 p.m. to around midnight. Bobby Kapp Meets Meant 2B Trio, Nov. 19; Steve Fidyk Quartet, Nov. 26)

I like trails that keep making me disappear and reappear. Monocacy Way is a civilized wilderness that contracts and expands, making Bethlehem seem invisible and more visible. A narrow corridor along the Monocacy Creek, canopied by elderly trees and shrouded by overgrown vegetation, opens vividly to a lavish kitchen garden sloping up to Burnside Plantation, a restored estate created in 1748 by Moravian missionaries and once the home of a renowned pipe-organ builder. Hikers, bikers and dog walkers pass impressive weeping willows, railroad tracks, a limestone quarry, a meadow sloping up to a dog park and woodsy wetlands with paths winding to the creek. The journey ends with a blast in a park with serrated stone walls, stone picnic pavilions and a cantilevered waterfall erected by government relief workers during the Great Depression. (Union Boulevard over Schoenersville Road to Illiek's Mill Road. Park in lots by Illiek's Mill Road or by Route 378 overpass. bethlehem-pa.gov)

The folks who run Lehigh University's galleries specialize in public-service public art. Their latest community booster shot is "What Mat-

ters Most," an outdoor display of images and app-activated talks illustrating such critical concerns as housing security, racial equity and trauma. Two-sided billboards along the South Bethlehem Greenway pair works from Lehigh's permanent collections with bar-coded lectures by leaders on and off campus. Hear Lisa Jordan, Touchstone Theatre's artistic director, stress the value of listening while puzzling over a photograph of a communication between Buddha-esque and bear figurines. Plug into the power of education in Diego Rivera's lithograph of an open-air school in Mexico, a poster for a healthy open-air mission. (Greenway runs between 4th Street and 3rd Street/Route 412 from South New Street to the Wind Creek Casino; parking in ArtsQuest lots; luag.org; bethlehem-pa.gov)

The Greenway is a gateway to Café The Lodge, an extremely vital restaurant and occupational school/home for people recovering from mental-health challenges. Clients make and dish fresh, refreshing soups, salads, quiches, egg scrambles (try the feta/sundried tomato combo) and paninis (the Cuban is hard to beat). Cheery, spic-and-span dining rooms are enlivened by paintings by recovering artists. And everything tastes better on the long, lovely backyard patio, a sanctuary with carnival-colored chairs, shrouding oak and dogwood trees and a lily-pad pool. (427 E. 4th St., Bethlehem; 610-849-2100; cafethelodge.org) ■