

Thomas Dunne

EDGEWATER GALLERY ON THE GREEN, MIDDLEBURY

"I NEVER CUT DOWN A TREE FOR WOOD ...

PEOPLE REACH OUT TO ME, THEY LET ME KNOW WHERE A TREE HAS COME DOWN." — Thomas Dunne

Thomas Dunne's wood-turning studio is tucked away behind his home on South Street in Middlebury. Most days he can be found bent over the lathe, sawdust floating up around him as he scores away coils of fresh yellow maple from the block spinning under his nose.

"I never cut down a tree for wood," Dunne said. "People reach out to me, they let me know where a tree has come down." Earlier in the week, he had gotten a call and driven an hour up to Chittenden County with his chainsaw to salvage a downed tree, and liked the wood so much he'd gone up again for a second load. Now a pile of maple burls (irregularities in the

BY ISABEL LOWER

tree's growth), roughly basketball-sized, were stacked in the center of the small room.

Dunne's awe for the beauty of wood, as a material or a live tree, is evident in the type of pieces he is known for. From the bubble-like growths stacked in his studio, Dunne will carve out a series of vessels; the knots and natural-edged holes in the surface caused by the burl become a part of the pieces' beauty because it shows the living specimens individuality. He isn't alone in this feeling; often, he is asked to memorialize a special tree for a client by creating several pieces, a practice which began before he and his wife Sarah moved to Vermont, and were still living in New Orleans year-round.

Dunne said that during the hurricanes of the mid-nineties, "People would lose a tree, maple, pecan, and ask me to make something of it." But he didn't have time to cure the wood from these trees that were blown down. So Dunne taught himself green-turning, the method he

uses most now. Before this, he did segmented wood-turning, which he said, is like "engineered wood turning as opposed to spur of the moment turning."

Comparing the two methods, Dunne said he liked the trigonometry of segmented wood, wherein you plan and cut each rounded piece to fit together like a puzzle. He certainly had the right background for it, with a math degree from University of Michigan. But, he said, once he began green-turning, "It's like a switch in my brain: you can't do both." A few of his segmented pieces are on display at Edgewater Gallery on the Green, but they are not recent. "Those pieces at the gallery," Dunne said, "Are at least 12 years old, probably 2002. After Katrina, 2005, those were the last segmented pieces I did."



What he loves about green-turning is how you aren't "locked in" to a plan; "I just stand there at my lathe," Dunne said, "and say, what do I do? And if I don't like something, I can change it."

A lot of the big changes in Dunne's life came through his wife, artist Sarah Ashe. After Dunne's first wife passed away, he reconnected with his old friend Sarah from his days in the Peace Corps. "We met in Ecuador," he remembered. "I had always admired her."

When he married Sarah, his three children were already grown and he was nearing retirement. He had been turning for many years by then, ever since a friend sent him an industrial Navy lathe from 1940, purchased at a flea market. "I'd had a shop, made things to give away," Dunne said, but when Sarah moved to New Orleans from Boston she encouraged him to begin turning full-time. "I wouldn't have had the courage to do it on my own," Dunne said.

His reverence for Sarah's creativity shows in the way he points out

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DUNNE

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her sculpture, paintings, and pottery around their home. "The lamps," he said, referring to the whimsical paper lamps that light up Edgewater Gallery on the Falls, "Are more recent for her. She's so creative, always exploring." He gestures to a small sculpture, perhaps a figure on a bicycle, she made with wire and citrus rinds.

After Hurricane Katrina, Sarah decided she didn't want to live in New Orleans year round anymore. "She'd had enough. She hated the humidity, and hurricane season. I'd always said when a storm came, 'Let's stay and have a party,' but she'd had enough." Which was how they ended up in Vermont.

"We kind of lucked out in Middlebury, we didn't have a big budget. We liked having the college, and all the professors," Dunne said

as he pointed to the backs of the houses adjoining their property and named their occupants by their academic discipline. "Here, Sarah finally got a decent studio." Tom's wood turning shop is on the ground level of the building behind their house, which they built over an existing foundation in the back of their small yard; Sarah's is the entire upper floor. "She's always exploring and

encouraging me to look for new things," Dunne said. "We definitely work together."

Tom Dunne's natural-edged turned bowls are currently on display at Edgewater Gallery on the Green and part of the October group show "Of the Land."

— Isabel Lower works for Edgewater Gallery.



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