



'Vessels that Dance Series', 2012, red oak burl, 25.4 x 18 x 9 cm



'Vessels that Dance Series', 2011, Bolivian rosewood, 11 x 20 x 16 cm

DEREK BENCOMO

A leading figure in the international wood art scene, Derek Bencomo's works have reinvented and redefined the lathe-turned wood bowl as an object of self-expression.

Profile by Kevin V. Wallace.

KNOwn for his fluid forms, Derek Bencomo offers an excellent example of how sculptural explorations and craft traditions are bridged and redefined.

Born in Los Angeles, Bencomo grew up on the southern California coast where he enjoyed the relaxed atmosphere of beach life and surfing. In 1984 the congestion of the city and the crowding of the beaches no longer suited his low-key life style. A business trip to Hawaii introduced him to the place he would come to call home.

'I still remember that first drive on Maui,' he says. 'I just knew that this was going to be my home. When I got back to Los Angeles I moved out of my apartment, sold everything I owned and bought a one-way ticket to Maui.'

Once he was settled in Hawaii, Bencomo set out to experience as much of the local culture as possible. One day he wandered into a gallery and saw a display of beautiful thin-walled wood bowls by Jack Straka and Ron Kent. He learned that turned wood bowls were part of Hawaiian culture and that people had been collecting them for over a century. While Jack Straka was a master of traditional Hawaiian wood bowls, Ron Kent's approach was contemporary and experimental. Bencomo was

intrigued and fascinated by the strong appeal of such disparate styles in exotic woods.

An interest in fine workmanship and the beauty of timber had begun years earlier, when Bencomo began acquiring restorable antique furniture for his own use. Exposed to exotic woods, the history and quality of Hawaiian craftsmanship and the work of Straka and Kent, he decided to become a woodworker and purchased a lathe.

Having almost no woodworking experience, Bencomo had to teach himself, with his life in Maui ultimately proving a greater influence than the work of other artists. He began exhibiting turned bowls in the traditional Hawaiian style using Hawaiian woods soon after he started. 'At the time everyone was doing traditional Hawaiian bowls and it was very competitive,' says Bencomo, who recalls getting a lot of flak for making so-called "puka" bowls (puka is the Hawaiian word for hole), out of old weathered timber with gnarled bark inclusions and rotted holes.

This was contrary to what the market-place wanted.

After three years, he began to exhibit in the juried "Art in the Park" craft fairs, just across the street from the Honolulu Academy of Arts. Self-taught, he devised a number of unorthodox techniques, which led to a



'Peaks and Valleys', 2001, maple burl, 38 x 133 x 15 cm



'Vessels that Dance Series', 2011, pistachio wood, 7.6 x 16.5 x 15 cm



'Hula Vessel', 2001, amboyna burl, 15 x 15.2 x 10 cm



'Come to Me Dancing', 2003, bay laurel burl, 33.2 x 25.4 x 25.4 cm

shows and galleries that exhibited his work improved, he continued exploring contemporary approaches that set him apart and established his identity as an artist. The influence of Bob Stocksdale, known for using a wide range of timbers, proved valuable.

As Bencomo moved deeper into the contemporary turned wood scene, the work of other artists offered new ways of exploring the bowl form. Among these were William Hunter, David Ellsworth and Mark Lindquist. However, it wasn't so much their designs that were influential, but that they were breaking rules at a time when it was safer to make a nice, high-quality bowl to sell.

Early in his career, leading collectors took note of what he was doing. The feedback and support proved important. In the late 1990s, Bencomo received a call from a gentleman who had seen his work at a gallery, explaining that he was a turned wood collector. When Bencomo asked what artists were in his collection, he mentioned William Hunter, David Ellsworth, Ron Kent, Ed Moulthrop and others – which made quite an impression. When the collector and his wife visited the artist's studio, they bought four pieces.

'He said that he wanted to support the field and wanted to see me still in business the next year,' Bencomo recalls. The collectors were Ron and Anita Wornick and his work was selected for inclusion in "Expressions in Wood: Master Works from the Wornick Collection" at the Oakland Museum in 1996. The couple, who continued to collect Bencomo's work, recently donated work to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

The following week another husband-and-wife team of collectors visited his studio on the recommendation of Ron Kent (whom Bencomo did not even know at this time). The couple also purchased three of his best pieces and inquired whether he would be interested in having Yale University Art Gallery acquire his work. The collectors, Ruth and David Waterbury, ultimately made a gift of his work to Yale as well as the Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

At the time Bencomo had no idea what constituted a "turned wood collector" and had limited knowledge of the wide-ranging work being created by the masters in the field. He believes that it was his fate to meet these major collectors and patrons of turned art.

'We first saw Derek Bencomo's work in a craft co-op in Maui in 1994,' Ruth and David Waterbury recall. 'At that time his work wasn't so different from what most woodturners were making – what we called classic round and brown – but the work was very well executed and his finishes were wonderful. After that, when visiting Maui, we'd check in with Derek and each time we found his work more distinctive. We enjoyed watching his work develop as he found his own voice. At the recent exhibition from our collection at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, people were drawn to Derek's work which is lyrical and joyous, with a vitality and life that one can feel.'

Curators from the Honolulu Museum of Art had taken an interest in his work as well. Much is made of an artist's vision, but it's important to note to what extent the role of collectors or museum curators can be in bringing that vision to light. Collectors and museum curators tend to devote more time studying art than the artists and it is their understanding of historical and symbolic art references that opens the door for an artist's development and place in the art world. It often manifests itself in less than ideal situations, but in the case of Bencomo it has been highly effective.

From the beginning, Bencomo always tried to show the natural beauty of the wood and utilise the organic "flaws" in its structure. Knots, bug damage, or whatever was in



'Hula Vessel', 1999, box elder burl, 33 x 22.8 x 25.4 cm

the wood, served the pieces in ways that appealed to him. The resulting work expresses his harmony with nature and life in Hawaii, reflecting the movement and visual rhythm he finds in the wind, the ocean and the mountains. Never figurative, the work balances mass and abstract lines, capturing a sense of motion while the sculptural aspects mirror the figure of the wood. Over the past decade his work has shown dramatic growth from the tradition of woodturning, where bowl or vessel is the norm, to a sculptural idiom that is distinctly original. Reminiscent of the fluid Cubism of Willem de Kooning's later work, Bencomo's works feature lines that curve and stretch out in three dimensions against the subtle backdrop of woodgrain. The form, line and pattern are all abstract, reflecting the natural beauty of a wave, stretch of beach and the horizon.

One of the reasons Bencomo's work attracts art collectors and museum curators is because the pieces fall easily into the category of pure sculpture, which is rare among those who have grown out of the turned wood movement.

'Hawaii has a history of wood vessel-making originating with the Hawaiian culture and many woodturners in Hawaii continue this tradition,' says Jay Jensen, Curator of Contemporary Art at the Honolulu Museum of Art. 'Derek Bencomo is one of Hawaii's most inventive wood artists, expanding upon tradition by using both native and non-native or imported woods, and by exploring abstraction of the vessel form. In his *Ocean Harmony* and *Come to Me Dancing* series for example, he responds to the character and shape of the wood and the inspiration of the ocean to create forms that seem to have a fluidity belying the hard and rigid material from which they are made.'

Although it isn't apparent, the lathe remains important for the execution of Bencomo's work. 'I am a woodturner,' he says. 'I remove most of the wood by turning and develop the outside shape on the lathe. I then carve what can no longer be turned. They start out as bowls, but what I do after the turning is done is not about a bowl, but about the material.'

As a woodturner, Bencomo is ultimately not as concerned with leaving the bowl form as he is with changing the context in which it is viewed by deconstructing it as a means of sculptural exploration. In his work we have a form of abstraction that is entirely natural, in which the artist's intention gives over to the material – a synthesis of his creativity and the natural characteristics and beauty inherent in wood. The end result reflects nature – and Bencomo's life in Hawaii – in an unexpected manner.

'Bencomo transmits his experiences in and on the water to his works,' says Allison Wong, curator at the Honolulu Museum of Art. 'When the artist begins a new piece he



'Vessels that Dance Series', 2012, manzanita wood, 20 x 17.7 x 12.7 cm



'Gift from the Sea, Rising Tide', 2002, milo wood, 40.6 x 23 x 23 cm



'Vessels that Dance Series', 2011, amboyna burl, 23 x 14 x 6.3 cm



'Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow', 2009, composed of 3 platter forms, 275-year-old oak, largest diam. 53 x 4.4 cm

has an idea of the shape, yet the nature of the grain often determines the final form. Each turned and carved vessel seems to flow and undulate as if it were a wave.'

The relationship between surfing and his work as an artist was not initially obvious to Bencomo. One morning while surfing early by himself he recalls paddling over the reef and looking down at all the sea life swimming below. The waves in front of him were cresting and peaking, a soft breeze blew ripples across the water. As he got out to the break and looked towards shore he noticed the palm trees swaying and rocking back and forth in the wind. All of these things were happening at the same time, and in that moment of heightened consciousness Bencomo felt that

he was somehow part of the whole scene. 'I realised that this is why my work looks the way it does – that my environment is what really influences my work.'

The epiphany brought to mind the ancient Hawaiians, who also worked with their environment and surroundings: 'In that moment, I understood how the Hawaiians felt about their own work and that I must be having the same feeling about being one with the land and sea. That is why the dance of Hula is so organic and swaying. Stories of the land and people are told with dance. The works that I am producing are vessels and sculpture that dance.'

The Hawaiians have a saying for this: *E Como Mai*, which means, come to me dancing. Bencomo adds, 'My works are very natural, as if they have always existed. I moved to Hawaii to surf, but this is where I came to work in wood and found my voice as an artist.'

In the mid-1990s, Bencomo experienced a major breakthrough, setting aside his concerns for the status quo and the market. He would henceforth only create what he felt inspired to create, regardless of whether it was accepted by his fellow artists, collectors or curators.

At the time contemporary wood art was thriving, with new collectors entering the field and museum curators acquiring work for permanent collections. Bencomo's work had matured and he knew where his career was going and what he wanted to do. His *Come to Me Dancing* series had been well received and he was beginning his *Ocean Harmony* and *Shadow Dancer* series, in which he experimented with new forms by blending and merging styles.

However, in 2007, having found tremendous success with his work, Bencomo began to experience severe pain in his arms when turning and carving. Diagnosed with nerve damage in his elbow, the condition forced him to close his studio in order to avoid further damage to his arms.

The following year was a period of soul searching for the artist, uncertain if he was going to be able to work with wood again. During this period his life changed drastically. For the first time in over two decades he was single and living alone, with no one to take care of but himself. A chance conversation with Albert LeCoff, Director of the Center for Art in Wood, revealed that there had been a cancellation for its 2010 artist-in-residence program, which was scheduled to begin within a matter of weeks.

'I hadn't worked a piece of wood in over 14 months,' recalls Bencomo. 'The next thing I knew, I was in Philadelphia and for the rest of that summer I spent as much time as possible working in the studio, not knowing if my arm was going to give out, sending me home early.'

During his two months as a Resident Fellow in the 2009 '*Vessels that Dance Series*', 2012, palm wood, 20 x 18 x 12.7 cm



'Zen Vessel', 2011, koa wood, 28 x 18 x 4.5 cm





'Come to Me Dancing', 1999, ebony wood, 33 x 23 x 23 cm

International Turning Exchange (ITE), Derek tirelessly explored new designs and techniques while acknowledging his earlier forms', says Albert LeCoff. 'Prior to the ITE, Derek carved feet that flowed into longer fins surrounding his vessel forms. During the ITE, he greatly exaggerated the carved fins and they evolved into major new sculptural elements of his work. Also during the residency his keen appreciation of the tradition of calabash bowl making in Hawaii resurfaced. Early in his career, Derek learned to make as well as patch bowls in the calabash tradition. As a way of flashing back on this knowledge, he created a contemporary series with nods to the calabash tradition, entitled *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*. This set reflects Derek's reverence for ancient wood as well as his former practice of repairing bowls with patches in the calabash tradition. He also created a series of affordable traditional bowls in homage to the bowls that buyers bought early in his career. I remarked that he seemed to be bidding adieu to his past and that the bowls should remain a group. Fortunately, the Center for Art in Wood was able to acquire Derek's homage for the museum collection.'

By the time he returned to Hawaii, Bencomo was charged up and ready to run a full work studio again. The first new body of work was the *Zen* Collection, created out of unusable timber left over from logging a tree. These works capture a specific time and place in nature, and yet their exquisite beauty and sensual feel has an eternal quality, expressing a oneness with the land and sea. The *Zen* Collection served as a jumping off point in creating new work. In retrospect it seemed to Bencomo that over the past decade his focus had been totally concerned with creating work for exhibitions and meeting deadlines. In the process, he felt he had forgotten his roots. Looking back at how his career began – exhibiting at craft fairs with as large a selection of woods as possible and creating smaller works for a more expansive market – the *Vessels That Dance Series* was born.

Artists and curators alike have praised the quality and vision of Derek Bencomo. His works bear a distant relationship with the classic natural-edged bowls that have been created by woodturners from every corner of the globe, yet they have been transformed in a manner that make clear his own aesthetic.

'I think what has always been exciting about Derek's work is that he moved in a direction that focused on the sculptural elements of his work without being inhibited by the limits that the lathe obviously places on an object, namely that it only goes round and around,' notes David Ellsworth. 'To do this at a time when the rest of the woodturning world was focused intently on "lathe turned" vessel forms was particularly courageous.'



'Baby, Baby', 2009, ebony, 16.5 x 12.7 cm



'Shadow Dancer', 2009, koa wood, 16.5 x 12.7 cm

'Often in wood art a tension exists between works that are carved versus those turned on a lathe,' notes Nicholas Bell, Curator of the Renwick Gallery. 'Bencomo is something of a peacemaker between the two factions, blending the strengths of each technique into work that is at once mysterious and revelatory. To pick up a Bencomo is to embark on an adventure of the senses – to discover wood anew.' Today Derek Bencomo still lives and works on the island of Maui and is considered one of the top woodworkers in the US. As a self-taught woodturner, he values the freedom of strict approaches to form and considers himself to be still learning and developing new skills. It requires stamina for a tree to grow on an island and his sensitivity to the wood reflects his appreciation of the beauty of the exotic Maui timbers. Bencomo's works represent a delicate transformation – a synthesis of the creative energy of a man and the indigenous energy stored in the trees.

Kevin V. Wallace

Kevin V. Wallace is Director of the Beatrice Wood Center for the Arts and Happy Valley Cultural Center, California.