



'Remnants of an Ancient Teapot Monument', 2010, big leaf maple, burned, 12.7 x 15.2 x 8.5 cm



'Inga', 2009, big leaf maple burl, ebony and acrylic, 14 x 18 x 9 cm

Art Liestman

COMPOSITIONS IN TEXTURE, FORM AND COLOUR

In the works of Art Liestman music takes form, with pattern and texture providing rhythm and colour combinations representing tonal variation. Profile by Kevin V. Wallace. Photography by Kenji Nagai.

THE relationship between music and the visual arts runs from primitivism to modernism, with a number of influential figures in modern art fascinated by the relationship between visual art and music. Vincent Van Gogh took music lessons from an organist with little success, as he constantly compared chords with pigments, such as Prussian blue and cadmium yellow, leading the teacher to question Van Gogh's sanity. Matisse led the way in looking to jazz music for inspiration, naming his 1947 series of paper cut-outs *Jazz*. Piet Mondrian played jazz music on a gramophone in his Paris studio, claiming that both his art and the music were 'life realised through pure rhythm'. Stuart Davis believed that all of his painting

bore some influence of jazz and Jackson Pollock's work was fueled by an improvisational approach which echoed jazz stylings. Abstractionists Kenneth Noland and Morris Louis experimented with a series of "jam painting sessions" inspired by the informal and spontaneous musical gatherings of jazz musicians.

In a similar manner, the sculptural work of Art Liestman is dependent on feeling and improvisation and there is an undeniable relationship between the music that inspired the process and the resulting works. Liestman's output is autobiographical, in that it exposes early influences with music, conjuring memories and experiences.

The impact of music came early in Liestman's life, as both



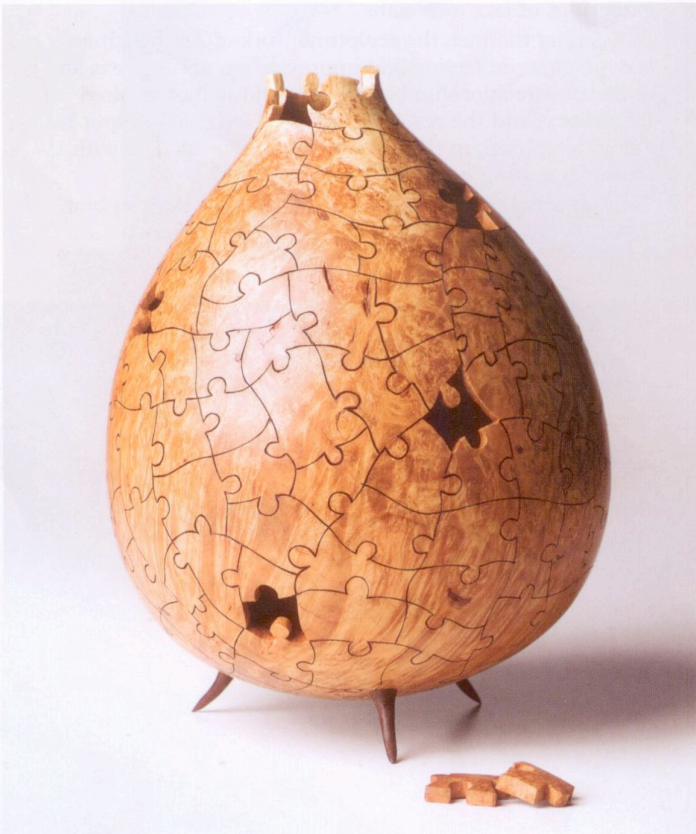
'Oscar', 2008, big leaf maple burl, walnut compwood, pyrography, 12 x 30 x 9 cm



'Solitary Pillar of Privacy', 2010, big leaf maple, bleached, 49 x 10.6 x 5 cm



'Isolated Pillar of Humility', 2010, big leaf maple, burned, 50 x 10.7 x 5 cm



his mother and grandmother were piano teachers, the latter playing organ to accompany silent movies in cinemas. 'I learned a bit of piano at an early age, but then rebelled and studied guitar, then double bass, then percussion,' he says. 'I studied African percussion for many years, with teachers from Senegal, Mali, Guinea, Ghana, and Nigeria. There were also a couple of years spent studying tabla from India, as well as gamelan from Indonesia. I also spent quite a few years making odd experimental musical instruments. It was the most ambitious of these, with the unusual title of *The Hunka Hunka Churnin' Wood* programmable automated xylophone, that helped to establish his career as an artist working in wood.

As a member of the Pacific Woodworkers Guild, Liestman began taking part in its annual 2x4 contest. The idea of the contest is to make something using only a standard construction length board, glue, and finishing products, with the constraints forcing the participants to think creatively. 'I have always been passionate about music, so it's only natural that I came to woodturning from music,' Liestman says. 'Once into the project, I realised that to complete the instrument, it would be helpful to have some turned parts. After consulting with my brother, who makes bagpipes, I obtained my first lathe and learned just enough about turning to make the parts. The *Hunka Hunka Churnin' Wood* programmable automated xylophone turned out to be a big hit, winning the contest that year and generating a surprising amount of media coverage.

On completing the project, Liestman decided to learn a bit more about woodturning. He began to concentrate on bowls and small functional items, and came to view himself primarily as a woodturner, rather than a woodworker: 'Turning quickly stole my interest away from flat wood-working, with all that tedious mucking about with joinery.' He began to consider the possibility of making more artistic work after seeing an inspiring demonstration by Frank Sudol that opened his eyes to the possibilities of expression in artistic woodturning. An Educational Opportunity Grant from the American Association of Woodturners enabled him to study with Jacques Vesery.

This proved a pivotal experience, beginning the search for his own voice and continuing to affect his work today. 'It provided not just much needed technical information, but also the confidence to try the things that I had in mind. Since that time, Christian Burchard and Clay Foster have served as great teachers and mentors, repeatedly giving me insight into their views of the world,' says Liestman.

The influence of indigenous cultures is understated, but undeniable. From the Maori carvings Liestman encountered while visiting New Zealand, to a piece of Tapa cloth from Tonga that is part of his collection: 'It is obviously handmade and there are numerous variations in what at first appears to be a symmetric pattern.'

In Canada, the indigenous peoples are referred to as First Nations, and living in Vancouver, Liestman is exposed to a great deal of local First Nations art. These works include totem poles, ceremonial bowls, masks, and other carved work. Liestman's interest in world music has been a major influence on his work, leading him to be knowledgeable about West African art, particularly woodcarvings.

His experience with tribal work is much more expansive than that of contemporary work, although he frequents museums and searches out public sculpture in the cities he visits. His application of line and colour brings modernist painters Paul Klee and Piet Mondrian to mind, so it's not surprising the works begin in drawings.

When embarking on a new series, Liestman does sketches first and works out as much as possible on paper before

Topless', 2008, big leaf maple burl, walnut, 30.5 x 16.5 x 16.5 cm



'Battered and Torn', 2009, recycled hemlock, burned, 121 x 28 x 18 cm



'Lone Pillar of Civility', 2010, big leaf maple, burned, 75 x 13 x 6 cm



'Ancient Tower', 2009, big leaf maple, bleached, 35.5 x 12 x 11.4 cm

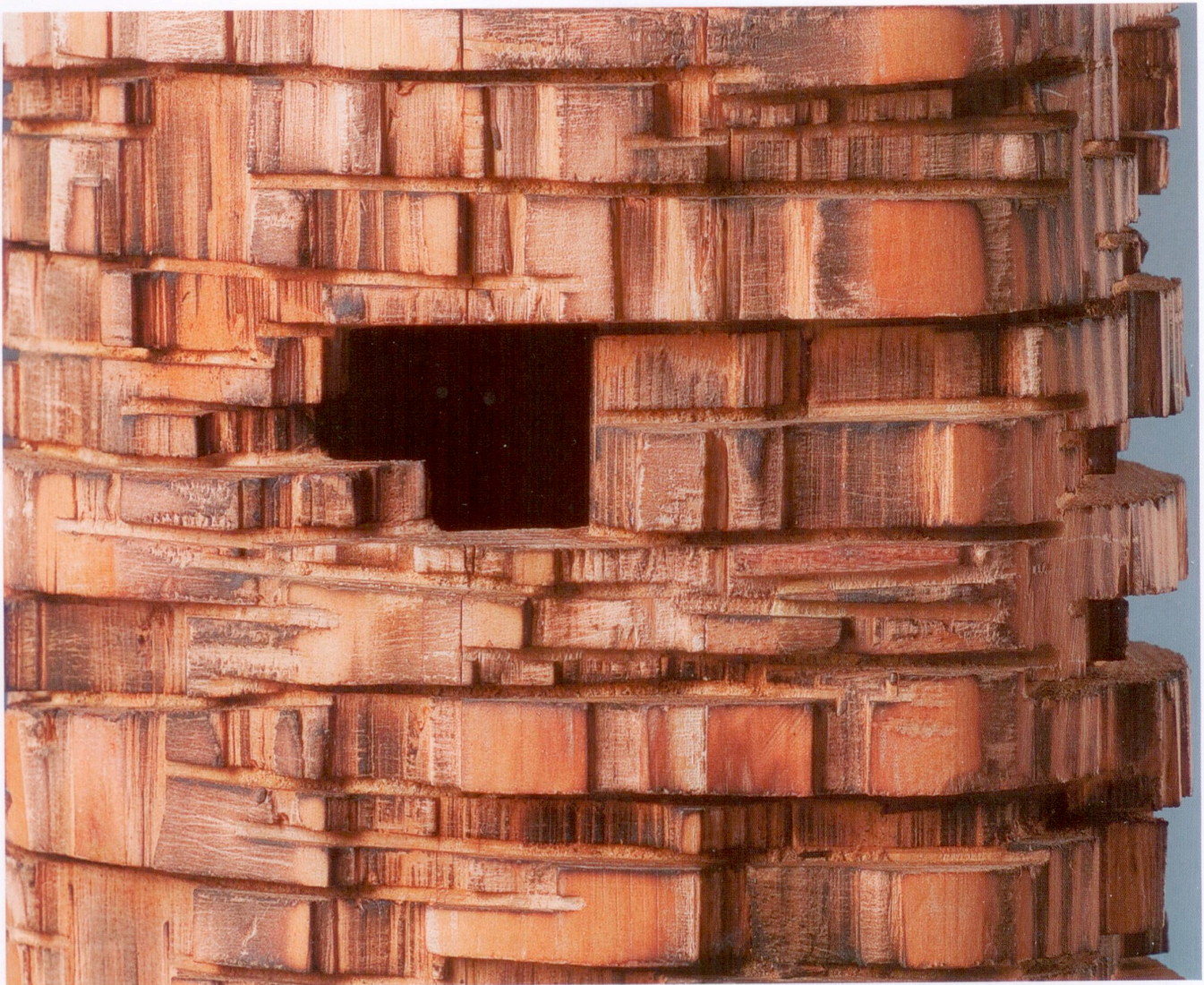
starting on actual wood prototypes. 'I like sculpture more than painting, as a rule,' he says. 'Having been fortunate enough to do a fair bit of travel in my day job, I always enjoy seeking out sculpture in public spaces. Some of my favorites are works by Jean Dubuffet, Alexander Calder, and the collaborations of Claes Oldenburg and Coosie van Bruggen. I remember being very excited when I first saw Frank Gehry's *Dancing House* in Prague. At the time, I didn't know who he was, but later became more familiar with his work and his curved forms directly influenced some of my explorations.'

Every autumn, Liestman attends the SOFA Expositions in Chicago, where he is exposed to an international array of makers working in a wide range of media. 'It's a very inspirational — and scary — art exposition,' says Liestman. 'It's wonderful to see what people are making in various media and I'm drawn to the different textures which are achieved and the wide array of colours that the makers use. Even though I might not know a great deal about how the objects in other media are made, there's a lot of inspiration to be gained by looking at the work.'

While it is hard to trace Liestman's work to any particular visual artists, the impact of music is strong. Concerning this topic, he says, 'I listen to music pretty much constantly and my focus shifts between various types of music. I've listened to rock and jazz since the '60s, tending to listen to what might be called "art music" more than pop. One of my favorite composer/musicians of the past 10 years is Veda Hille. In fact, one of my two cats is named after

'Ancient Tower' (detail)





'Battered and Torn' (detail)

her, the other being named after Frank Zappa. Previous cats were named after Kate Bush and Jane Siberry. Liestman listens to different types of music depending on what he is doing in the studio. It's not surprising to learn that he listens to Jimi Hendrix while creating the rough surface textures on his recent tower and pillar pieces. The works suggest fractured and blurred guitar fretboards, torn up and scorched in creative bursts of energy. 'I like to listen to something a lot more sedate when doing puzzle illusion pyrography,' Liestman says of his other work. 'The bands Lambchop, Lali Puna or Halou work well for that.'

In 2006, Liestman was commissioned by a teapot collector to make a teapot using his puzzling illusion style. It provided a challenge that raised both technical and design issues. The resulting teapots feature a hollow vessel oriented sideways, allowing the spout and handle to imply a snout and tail, and the teapot to take on the appearance of a small animal. *Stretch*, with the body balanced on tiny feet, is an excellent example of this body of work.

Liestman's first departure from the *Puzzling Illusion* teapots was the *Helga Series*, which feature a four-sided body, shaped using a technique called "therming". This technique was used as early as the 1700s to shape table legs, but has been largely forgotten in recent years. Liestman has combined it with other techniques to produce teapot bodies and sculptural forms.

These works find their beauty in the highly figured wood and dramatic black lines of handle, lid and spout. The



'Oroshi', 2010, big leaf maple, oak, pyrography, 14.7 x 8 x 14.6 cm

first teapot in the series resembled a character from a popular comic strip about Vikings and was named after her. Other teapots in this series carry the names of Viking women. In the two most recent works in this series, *Ljufu* and *Kadlin* the bodies appear to twist when looking at them from the foot to the lid. The newest teapot series, represented by the works *Oroshi* and *Terimayo* are also themed. The texture is based on the traditional four-sided, cast iron Japanese teapots.

In the world of woodturning, the vessel is the primary means of self-expression. *Splay* brings to mind this tradition, married with Liestman's sculptural and architectural concerns. *Sprite* and *Sprout* are more sculptural, yet still suggest containment. Asymmetrical forms, they are oval in cross-section, with four-sided openings and pointy tops. Liestman is committed to using local woods and regards the choice of material as central to his work. Primarily he uses local big leaf maple, which is quite beautiful and pleasant to work. Occasionally he uses other woods such as arbutus, cherry, and walnut. Small pieces of ebony are used for collars and other accents.

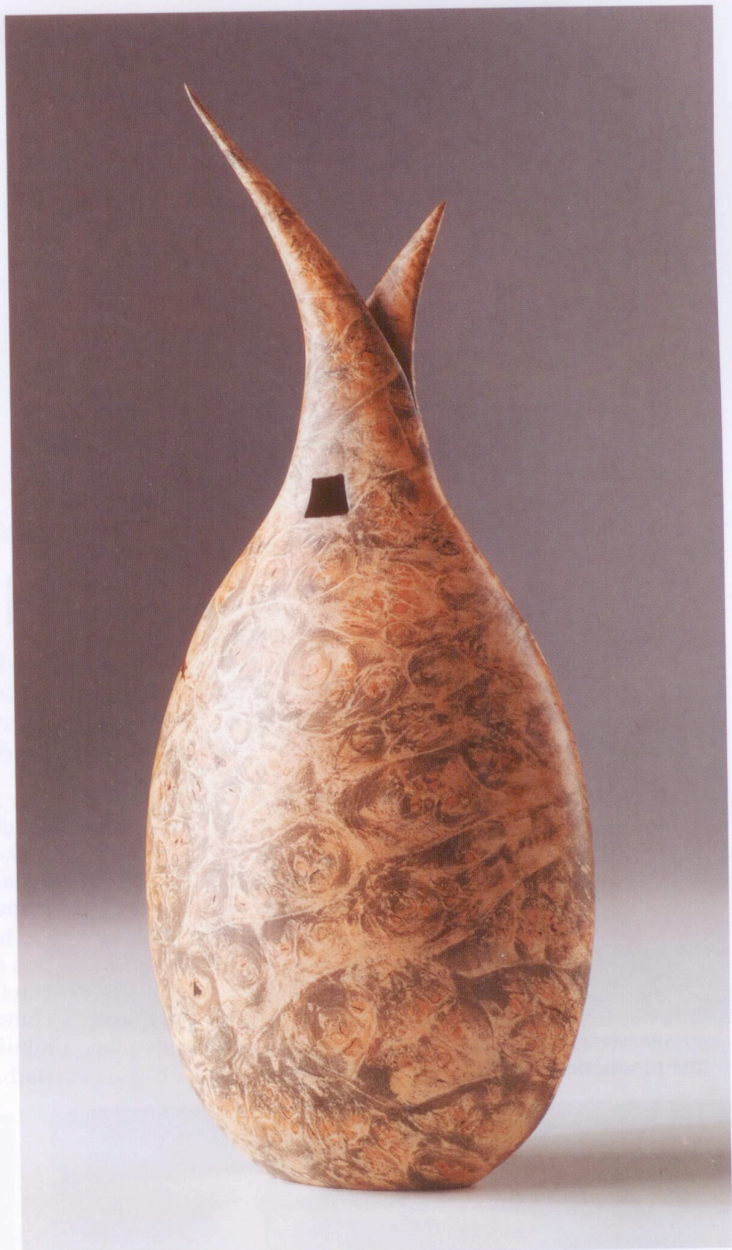
Early turned works were in a smaller scale, while recent works command a pedestal with confidence. His current focus is the *Tower Series*, which represents a major departure from his previous work. These later pieces celebrate the structure and texture of the wood by combining the lathe-turning process with methods of cutting and breaking off sections of the form. The breaking exposes a new surface, revealing the fibres in the wood. The effect is enhanced by charring the surface, or in the case of *Ancient Tower*, by bleaching the wood. Both the towers and wall pieces have a romantic naturalism and are evocative of ancient ruins or weathered geological formations. While Liestman makes passing reference to architecture, much of his recent work is indeed architectural. For instance, *Ancient Tower* suggests the remains of a ceremonial structure, while *Battered* alludes to a fortress that has endured a great battle. *Common Sense* appears to be a completely blown out structure, like a lone standing tower following World War II. The title of *Humility* nicely describes this new body of work – the forms are understated, eroded and beatific, yet still standing in a spirit of quiet resignation. *Ancient Tower* and *Privacy* are transcendent. These bleached works suggest holy relics from another place and time. Combining this body of work with his exploration of the teapot form led to the creation of *Remnants of an Ancient Teapot Monument*.

Art Liestman lives and works in Vancouver, British Columbia, balancing a career as a university professor with his life as an artist. He has also become in demand as an instructor of woodworking techniques and has taught week-long courses at the John C. Campbell Folk School and at the Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, demonstrated at many national and regional symposia and at dozens of local woodturning clubs.

Like many among the new wave of woodturners, Art Liestman looks outside of the turned wood field for inspiration. He finds it in music and mathematics, both of which have long been a part of his life. He also finds new ideas and directions in more traditional art forms and in the textures and patterns of everyday objects. His knowledge of computing, mathematics, literature and music provide him with diverse and unusual inspirations for his explorations in turned wood art. While some of his works utilise pattern and repetition, others explore reality and illusion. With this vast array of influences, it's difficult to say where his muse might take him – yet Art Liestman will surely take us along with him.

Kevin V. Wallace

'Sprout and Sprite', 2009, big leaf maple burl, acrylic, ht 14 x 8 x 6 cm



'Splay', 2009, big leaf maple, acrylic, 28.3 x 11.7 x 8.5 cm

