



Helga Winter in her studio, 2015, holding a “tea paper” vessel.

Photo: Betty J. Scarpino

HELGA WINTER

The Vocabulary of Experience

Betty J. Scarpino

POP SHOWCASE ARTIST

Helga Winter will be featured as one of the Professional Outreach Program's showcase artists at AAW's 2016 International Symposium in Atlanta, Georgia. For more, visit woodturner.org.

Helga Winter's artwork is colorful and vibrant, and at the same time, soothing. Its appeal has a lot to do with Helga's focused connection with her methods and on her materials while she transforms wood into art objects. Fully present, she expels shavings, saturates wood with dyes, applies paint, transfers images, waxes surfaces, discovers connections, and inks messages. Her restyling of plain-wood madrone vessels to colorful, dancing objects is synergetic. All dressed up, they invite closer inspection, reflection, and admiration.

Tennessee

Helga talks about Pacific madrone (*Arbutus menziesii*) as being “ornery,”

but I suspect she may secretly identify with that label. Getting to know her through phone calls, emails, and finally meeting her in person, I see that Helga is gently determined. While living in Nashville, Tennessee, shortly after graduating from Vanderbilt Peabody College with a graduate degree, she walked past a storefront and was immediately drawn in to investigate further. It was fine-furniture maker Paul Pitt's workshop and sales gallery. Experiencing a strong lure to wood, she asked Paul if he would take her on as an apprentice. He initially said no. Helga returned a week later and asked again, assuring Paul that she would learn quickly and work hard. He eventually relented

and so began Helga's lifelong association with wood.

In 1984, while in Tennessee, Helga studied woodturning with Rude Osolnik and David Ellsworth. Because of that association, she attended the first woodturning symposium in 1985 at Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, where some of the symposium attendees conceived of and started the AAW.

While taking a woodturning class from Liam O'Neill at Arrowmont, Helga began to fully realize the potential for local connections, so she wrote a letter to all the woodturners she could find in the vicinity of Nashville to organize a meeting. Among others, John Jordan attended. Shortly after helping start the Tennessee Association of Woodturners, she

moved to the Pacific Northwest, where a new perspective in woodturning awaited her.

Madrone

Perhaps I find Helga's vessels soothing because of the graceful undulations the wood takes on as madrone shrinks and moves during its process of air-drying. Madrone trees regally shade parks, homes, and streets on the Olympic Peninsula where Helga made her new home. That wood became Helga's canvas after moving to Washington State in 1987. Unlike in Tennessee, where locally harvested woods were varied, colorful, and highly figured, madrone was the primary hardwood available, but its naturally creamy, light color turns a not-so-attractive brown over time. Opportunities loomed.

Helga realizes this wood may even have lured her to her new life in Port Townsend, patiently awaiting discovery. She is open to what life provides and knows how to benefit from nature's gifts, so it is no surprise that Helga was the first woodturner to recognize, appreciate, and expansively take advantage of madrone's properties. She paid attention and became aware that she was concurrently releasing *and* taming the wildness of wet madrone. She writes, "Green madrone, a wood that is unpredictable, is my favorite. We are collaborators, each helping the other liberate the hidden experiences that shaped us. The mystical and meditative adventure of partnering with madrone puts me in touch with the essential character of the piece and myself."

Chainsaw adept, Helga harvests her own lumber and learned that turning bowls start to finish was not only possible, but also desirable. She utilizes all parts of the tree—branches, trunk, and roots.

Of madrone, Helga writes, "Being a turner of green wood allows me to look deep inside the tree and carry on a dialogue. The green wood is still full of movement, wanting to take back its own shape after I turn it into something that is only momentarily

round. Then I step aside and let the wood seek its own perfection."

Far from dominating the process, Helga collaborates with madrone. She welcomes its movement, akin to her own life's rhythms. She works with what's offered: "Sometimes ►

Untitled, 2007, Madrone crotch, fiber-reactive dye, 4½" × 8" × 7¼" (11cm × 20cm × 18cm)
Photo: Frank Ross



Untitled, 1991, Madrone root burl, rock, 10" × 8½" × 7" (25cm × 22cm × 18cm)



Photo: Frank Ross



(Top left) *Suture*, 2010, Madrone, dye, madrone branches, brass shavings, 6" × 10" × 9½" (15cm × 25cm × 24cm)

(Top right) Untitled, 1997, Madrone, aniline dyes, wax resist, 6¾" × 12¼" × 11½" (17cm × 31cm × 29cm)

(Bottom) Untitled, 1988, Madrone, aniline dyes, wax resist, 5¾" × 12¾" × 11½" (15cm × 32cm × 29cm)



Mikado, 2010, Madrone,
fiber-reactive dyes, wax
resist, 4¾" × 13¼" × 11¾"
(12cm × 34cm × 30cm)

Photo: James Klose

Untitled, 1997, Madrone, aniline
dye, wax resist, 7½" × 12½" × 12"
(19cm × 32mm × 30cm)



*Connecting
the Dots*, 2015, Madrone,
fiber-reactive dyes, wax
resist, 4¼" × 9¾" × 8½"
(11cm × 25cm × 22cm)



African Sunrise,
2012, Madrone,
India ink, dyes, acrylics,
3⅛" × 9" × 8¼"
(8cm × 23cm × 21cm)



Madrone Spheroid on Seaweed Stand, 2012, Madrone, fiber-reactive
dye, acrylics, seaweed, 4½" × 4¼" × 2¾" (11cm × 11cm × 7cm)

Photo: James Klose



Dancing Dishes, 2009, Madrone, paper transfers,
acrylics, 2½" × 12¼" × 11¼" (6cm × 31cm × 29cm)

Photo: James Klose

cracks occur, sometimes fluid movements result. After the drying is complete, it is my turn to respond to the new shape, the cracks, the imperfections, so that they will reflect the reality of a less-than-perfect world instead of being viewed as flawed."

Helga's early vessels from madrone were gracefully light-weight, appearing to float and dance. Perhaps that implied motion was reason enough for anchoring them onto stone bases, a grounding of sorts. The wood's plain-brown presence, though, motivated Helga to begin using color, and she soon began turning vessels into dancers, adorning them with flamboyant costumes and nestling many of them in dried-seaweed bases.

Adornment and process

One of Helga's childhood memories is marveling at the vivid colors of tulips in her mother's garden, "...especially the black ones. A bee enters the differently colored interior, setting the whole plant into vibration. One of my surface-embellishment techniques is a batik-like process. I apply wax and dyes to my vessels, finishing with a layer of black dye or India ink. As I selectively rub away the wax, patterns and color reveal themselves and the vessels vibrate with life." I had not made the connection with tulips, but do so now, especially in Helga's earliest dyed-and-waxed vessels.

The colors and patterns Helga employs invite people to look closely and investigate. Her intention is "...to confuse, so that you come closer and verify your first perception or alter it: Is it glass? Is it a gourd? What is it made of? Is it wood?"

Helga combines a variety of techniques with years of exploration. A copious note-taker, she also documents her processes. While the techniques she employs are not secret, they are highly individualized applications of information widely available throughout the craft world. Her strong desire for discovery and abundant curiosity drive her to experiment; playfulness helps her imagine technique combinations others have not yet tried. She encourages others to simply "try it and discover what happens!"

With this sense of playfulness, Helga has explored encaustic wax, wax resist, inking, dyeing, acrylics, and paper transfers. She learned about them fully until they became part of her personal vocabulary. We can take from Helga this worthy example and discover our own style of embellished vessels.

We all have personal memories, dreams, and imaginations. Helga's life experiences flow through her and become evident in her work. Thoughts are revealed, joys shared. Helga explains, "I like the secret places, the mysteries, the stories behind, the inside of things, the dark side, the light side, the underside, the surface. Multiple layers on my work reflect multiple layers within human beings. I like the work to appear as if it grew into being, intriguing the eye and the mind, appearing sensual to the touch and radiating emotion." You will have your own way of infusing your life's experiences into what you make with your hands.

As she explores her subjects in depth, a new element will appear ►



A Passion for Change, Repurposed books, pigmented and unpigmented beeswax, thread, eucalyptus pods, wire, 24½" x 20" x 3" (62cm x 51cm x 8cm)

“ The ease with which I handled the saw awakened a longing within me for the familiarity of turning. It is a feeling that is hard to describe and that surprises me again and again because it does not diminish in its intensity.

— Helga Winter



Thinking of Sushi, 2015, Repurposed books, pigmented and unpigmented beeswax, 6½" × 8" × 3" (17cm × 20cm × 8cm)

here or there. It may blend or might stand out, startling even Helga. As she works with and incorporates new elements, they become a familiar aspect of her vocabulary. She owns them.

Deconstruction

Storage is often a problem for artists.

We collect objects and materials to use in our artwork, perhaps to add

a decorative hinge to a box or to save bits of wood or jars of paint for later. While I was visiting, Helga revealed an unusual storage opportunity, a seldom-used refrigerator full of books. I couldn't help but wonder if they all had jackets. They may need them—there seemed to be a library's worth, which might take a lifetime to deconstruct. Helga periodically tears out pages for the construction of sculptural paintings—I want to read between the lines.

These stored materials fuel her interest in deconstruction and satisfy her need to use byproducts. Growing up in Germany after the war, she internalized the need to explore the use of things that might otherwise be thrown away: Half of a dried avocado skin makes the perfect-sized bowl for pins. Used teabags, washed, dried, and layered with wax as they are draped around the outside of a turned bowl, become light, airy vessels. Metaphors danced around in my head as we sat in Helga's studio, drinking hot tea, waxed-teabag vessels lined up on a shelf, eavesdropping on our conversation.

Helga's notes on deconstruction beg to be deconstructed, or perhaps reconstructed: "Provides



Common Threads, 2016, Tea paper, fiber-reactive dye, unpigmented wax, roots, thread (hand stitched), 4½" × 8" × 5¼" (11cm × 20cm × 13cm)

time for reflection. Quiet time. Gathering information from inside. Deconstructed trees, turned into vessels, shavings made into paper."

Sabbatical and return

As odd as it might sound, using a chainsaw brought Helga back to woodturning in 2003. Upon returning from Germany after a seven-year sabbatical while caring for her mother through her final stage of life, Helga found herself chain-sawing limbs for firewood. She describes the feelings that activity engendered: "The ease with which I handled the saw awakened a longing within me for the familiarity of turning. It is a feeling that is hard to describe and that surprises me again and again because it does not diminish in its intensity. I sometimes refer to it as 'a lining up of all my molecules in perfect order' and I felt that when turning my first little birdseye maple bowl in Rude Osolnik's and David Ellsworth's workshops in Berea, Kentucky, thirty years ago."

Life and work

Inseparable, Helga's work and life course together. Both are seasonal. She likes to turn in the fall and let the vessels dry during winter. In the spring and summer, she embellishes. Helga is "reminded of the seasonal changes a garden goes through, reveling in the flexibility and endurance that is mirrored there. A garden also brings my mother into my thoughts, and I marvel at the skills she had as a gardener and in general."

Helga lives near the ocean and works with the trees that grow nearby. She makes shapes that

are reminiscent of seashells and utilizes seaweed for stands. As she and I walked along the shoreline our last morning together, Helga scavenged several likely prospects for vessel stands. Neighbors and friends know of her work and they often deliver salvaged local woods to her driveway and share memories of their trees. In turn, she "...turns a vessel to present to them made of part of their tree. That connectedness to my surroundings feeds me and allows contentedness to enter."

Like her turned-and-dried madrone vessels, she transforms stresses into gentle movement as she gardens, walks the hilly streets of Port Townsend, sketches in journals, and sips hot tea. ■

More of Helga's artwork can be viewed on her website, helgawinter.com.

Betty J. Scarpino lives in Indianapolis, where she turns, carves, and embellishes wood. Her website is bettyscarpino.com.



Fanning Out, 2016, Tea paper, seaweed, thread (hand stitched), unpigmented beeswax, 7¾" x 16" x 4½" (20cm x 41cm x 11cm)



Movement Within Stillness, 2015, Madrone, dye, pigmented wax, 5¼" x 8" x 7" (13cm x 20cm x 18cm)