

{ meet John McAbery }

ELEMENTAL LIVING

BY SARAH BRADY

Working alone in a hand-built cabin on the rugged Pacific coast, wood sculptor John McAbery embraces his wild environment – and finds that it loves him right back.



IT'S NOT BENT OR LAMINATED. *Hand-carved from a solid block of California bay laurel, "Egret" measures 13" x 14" x 29".*

John McAbery doesn't have to go far from his doorstep to find inspiration. Nor does he need to wander for solitude, peace and fresh air.

The wood sculptor lives on a remote stretch of Northern California beach, in a cabin he built by hand. Constellations, ribbons of seaweed, and shells deposited by a roaring Pacific Ocean serve as templates for his sculptures, over which he labors uninterrupted.

"It's wonderful," he said. "I don't have a phone or a connection to the Internet. I have one solar panel and a

wind-up radio. It's very peaceful."

John's one luxury is the time he lavishes on his intricate, gravity-defying wood sculptures. He carves eight

or nine hours a day, 330 days a year, resulting in about 10 finished pieces every year. A typical day starts at about 5:30 a.m. with coffee and a walk on the beach, and work commences a few hours later.

"Sometimes if I'm working on a piece I'm really excited about, I'll work until dark," he said. "When I'm into a piece that's really giving me a hard time or confusing me, those are the ones that I just stick with and stick with. I'm curious about what's going to happen. It's like reading a good novel."

PHOTOS BY GRETCHEN BUNKER

| meet John McAbery |



JOHN MCABERY WORKS ON "OPUS 31" in his cabin. He uses only a small number of hand tools including rasps, chisels and a Japanese keyhole saw.

A simple plan

A McAbery sculpture almost always begins as a large chunk of naturally fallen California bay laurel. (You might also know this species as Oregon myrtle – especially if you live in Oregon.) In the minimally populated valley where John lives, most people know who to call when a bay laurel falls on their property. When he receives word, he limbs fallen trees and lets them age about three years before chain-sawing carving blanks that weigh as much as 100 lbs.

"I like using this wood because it's local," he said. "I don't want to use exotic wood; I don't want to destroy anyone else's environment. I never have to cut down a tree to carve a piece of wood."

Bay laurel has tightly interlocking grain that makes it ideal for carving light, thin elements. It's a hard wood, along the lines of oak or maple, John said, with streaks of grays, blacks, purples and even oranges. The wood can be

unpredictable, but that's part of the fun.

"A bay laurel growing on a hillside will have totally different properties from one growing down by a creek. There are a lot of different properties, even within one log," he said. "I'm still learning new things about the wood. I don't know that I'll ever figure it all out."

After hauling a heavy blank to his cabin, John sketches on his design and starts the heavy work of cutting the rough shape. It's physically challenging – "I have to be Paul Bunyan with the keyhole saw" – but provides a necessary starting point. He chooses the best placement for his design within the block of wood, working with or around knots and defects.

"It gives me a place to start," he said. "It's basically a silhouette of the piece inside and outside that gives you an idea where to head next. You keep surrounding the piece until you get into it."

Aside from the saw, he uses a few

other simple hand tools: a hammer and chisel, a bracing bit for drilling starter holes. He owns a few gouges and makes extensive use of Microplane rasps. To avoid checking and cracking, he periodically moistens the blank in his wood-fired steam room.

The process continues with an ever-lighter touch. McAbery thins down a ribbonlike design, defining its curves and solving its geometry.

"I like the ones with places I can't figure out," he said. "I hardly ever give up on a design once I get it in my head. I had one I was working on that I really liked, but I put too much pressure on it and broke it. The next one checked. Eventually I'll get it."

"There's a balance there, a lot of tension. That's one of the things I enjoy about working with wood. It's very unforgiving; if you make a mistake, you have to start over."

Once the near-final shape emerges, McAbery begins the two-week process of sanding. Now that the piece is thinner and lighter and most danger of checking has passed, he's ready to move out onto his porch, breathing in sea air instead of fine dust. He sands down to 600-grit with adhesive-backed paper, which conveniently sticks to his fingers and saves them from abrasion.

JOHN MCABERY BUILT THIS 288 sq. ft. cabin – without power tools – on the rocky Pacific coast in northern California.

“Sometimes my heart almost stops. You’ve spent two or three weeks on a piece, then you have to make a cut that could ruin the whole thing.”

“When I get to the sanding process, I start the next piece so I don’t have to do either one all day long,” he said. “The sanding gets tedious and the rough work gets really hard. I kind of balance my day out.”

Most of the bases are bandsawn to rough shape at a friend’s house, then sanded by hand. The entire piece is polished with a blend of beeswax and carnauba.

The finished sculptures are 15"-33", and usually weigh only a few ounces.

“Generally, I put in my eight or nine hours every day. I really enjoy it; I don’t know why I enjoy it,” he said. “Sometimes my heart almost stops. You’ve spent two or three weeks on a

piece, then you have to make a cut that could ruin the whole thing.”

Lady luck

Not long after he started carving 10 years ago, McAbery met his girlfriend Gretchen Bunker, an artist, photographer and landscaper who has become a partner in his artistic ventures.

“She was hiking on the beach in the fall of ’95. I met her and she was kind of fascinated with my work ... she hung out and stayed around,” he said. “She started doodling and designed a piece for me, and did some sanding. She has a good eye.”

He only sees the occasional hiker, especially during autumn, so you could

fairly say it was chance that placed Gretchen at his out-of-the-way doorstep.

“I was living in Seattle, and I needed a change,” Gretchen said. “So I hopped in my sports car with my German shepherd. I was going to go up to Canada, but my heater didn’t work.”

She drove south instead. “I came to this isolated place called Shelter Cove, and I started hiking north on the Lost Coast. I was crossing a log and all of a sudden there was John in front of me.”

Gretchen put in a raised garden bed at John’s cabin so they could stay there for long periods of time and still eat fresh vegetables. She took up fishing in the ocean and helped John plant trees; one year they planted 900.

STEPHEN D. WALKER





“KAOS” STARTED AS A SOLID BLOCK OF WOOD with the design drawn on front and back. John defined and smoothed the shape over the

“She’s a real nature buff, as we both are. She’s kind of a recluse like myself and we get along real well,” John said. After their first year together, Gretchen



JOHN AND HIS GIRLFRIEND, Gretchen Bunker, collaborate on his wood sculptures.

moved to the nearby town of Petrolia (population 300). From her home there, she keeps in touch with galleries and clients and maintains a Web site (johnmcaberywoodsculptures.com).

“She’s been helpful in launching my career,” John said. “She was able to get ahold of some galleries, to get my work out into the public – and she’s a good artist herself.”

McAbery is represented by

Northwest Fine Woodworking in Seattle, and by the Stephenson Gallery in Santa Fe, N.M. He has a handful of regular clients and has carved some pieces on commission.

“‘Egret’ is custom, and somebody wanted a dolphin,” John said. “Someone hiking on the beach had found a whelk, a little seashell. They came by and said, ‘Can you carve this?’ At first I said no, but then I took up the challenge.”

To his surprise, a John McAbery sculpture can bring several thousand dollars. John enjoys meeting his clients, and figures he’s met at least half of them. He signs each piece and provides photographs of the stages of carving.

Aside from publicity, Gretchen also helps with the tedious work of sanding and finishing. And perhaps most importantly, she gives him valuable design input.

“There was an incredible storm the first year, and that inspired us to do more wild ribbons,” Gretchen said.

“Before I met her, most of my work was geometrical,” McAbery said. “It’s hard to say what comes out of my head, or Gretchen’s head. Sometimes it’s a found object like a piece of twisted seaweed that’s washed up on the beach, or a shell. Because I’m not a natural artist, I tend to find things that inspire me. Or I’ll play with a piece of clay or a ribbon. Something will appear, and I’ll say ‘I like that.’”

He has carved a dozen or so of Gretchen’s designs. “She’s got a very

artistic eye,” he said. “Things come so naturally to her – things that I’ll fight with for hours and hours will just come to her.”

The great outdoors

John’s cabin is on one of the few stretches of California coastline unmarred by road access. He is one of the handful of private landowners left in the King Range Wilderness. Hikers and tourists passing by his cabin have proliferated, from fewer than 100 per year in the late ’70s to thousands. They show up mostly in the summer, in large groups.

“This valley is about 300 people in Petrolia. Some tourists hike the coast, but it still really hasn’t changed significantly since I got here [in 1978],” John said. “It’s this little spot in California that’s just a backwater. In the central California area, everything is burgeoning, but out here it’s really relaxed.”

“Northern California is very different from the rest of the state,” he said. “My nearest neighbor is 11 miles away. It’s a great place to work, a great place to live.”

The rugged, sea-soaked landscape inspires McAbery’s work and provides him the isolation he craves, but he’s not entirely alone. Scores of migratory and local birds abound, as well as bobcats, coyotes, raccoons and the occasional bear. Seals poke their heads out of the surf, and you can even spot a whale from time to time.

“There’s a lot more wildlife than people,” he said.



course of several weeks, working out dimensional details. The result is a dancing ribbon of wood only about $\frac{3}{8}$ " thick, measuring 6" x 12" x 18".

An avid environmentalist, he strives to keep his life and dwelling from encroaching on the beauty of the surrounding land. He salvaged all the materials for his 288 sq. ft. cabin, and built everything by hand. A solar panel provides light. He belongs to a local restoration group that plants thousands of trees.

"I love hiking the hills with a bag of trees on my back, just planting them," he said. "I hike the beaches and pick up trash. I never walk the beach unless I have a bag with me."

Travel and communication with the outside world are rare. He makes an occasional trip to Portland to visit his daughter and grandson, but shuns the frenetic atmosphere of Los Angeles, where his son just finished college.

"I'm so comfortable doing what I'm doing, I don't even travel much. Out here, it's just me and the ocean. I don't want to build anything to get between me and the environment," he said.

"I couldn't think of a better life for me. The only stress I have, I create for myself with carving."

"He loves things very simple. He's a minimalist," Gretchen said. "The ocean and its environment and his carving go hand in hand. He couldn't carve anywhere else."

A brief history

John was born in the fall of 1944 and grew up in Oroville, Calif., a hot, dry rural farming community 80 miles

north of Sacramento. He has two brothers (one twin). His family moved to Salinas, Calif., when he was a junior in high school, and he attended Humboldt State. He never made a clear-cut decision about his profession.

"I started out in forestry, but I found out it wasn't about taking care of forests; it was about cutting them down," he said. "I had wanted to be out in the woods and be a forester from the time I

was about eight years old. When I found out what it was like, I was so disappointed, I didn't really have any other goals."

From about 1963 to 1973, he lived in Aspen, Colo., and made sheepskin coats.

"I had a very good business until I got bored with it," he said. "One day, I had been doing it for so many years, I said, I can't make another coat." His brother took over the business and he moved on to home renovation.

"I had bought some old dilapidated houses while I was making coats, and I was into building for a while. I liked the building process, but not all the other stuff that went with it: book-keeping, finances, running back and forth, dealing with contractors. It wasn't really my bag.

"The funnest building project I ever did was my little cabin there on the beach. I used no power tools, just crosscut saws, hammers and nails. That was a fun process. It was almost like doing something totally new. I really enjoyed that one."

John had first come across the patch of open coastline that would eventually be his in 1964 while hiking the coast. "I saw [on a map] a stretch of beach on the California coast where there were no houses and I had to go check it out," he said. The land belonged to a rancher; John bought 430 acres of it when he moved there in 1978. He and his wife had split up, and they shared custody of their two children (she remained in San Francisco). When the kids were school-age,



JOHN CHOSE MADRONE for "Ocea," which measures 7" x 9" x 17".

he moved to nearby Petrolia, buying and running a small local eatery while his son and daughter attended school.

Money troubles forced him to sell the majority of his land – about 400 acres – to the Bureau of Land Management, which was buying up parcels to create the King Range Wilderness. But he kept his seaside dwelling, and one day, stumbled across a piece of mahogany that would lead to his final career.

“It was kind of shaped like a foot. I carved it into a spoon with a foot inside it. I got hooked on the process and never stopped,” he said. “I carved 20, 30, 40 spoons the first year. They got so fine and thin you could hold them up to the light and see through them. They were hardly functional anymore.”

He carved some abalone shells and thought they were pretty neat. He carved the shape of a piece of twisted seaweed. He picked up a ribbon and twisted it around.

“I carve whatever suits my fancy, I guess. I tend toward the natural forms. I kept learning new things with each one I did. I got them thinner, thinner and

more ribbonlike. I try to keep challenging the wood.

“I like them thin because I can send them anywhere I want and they won’t crack or check. I can send them to New Mexico or Colorado and they won’t crack like a big, solid piece will.”

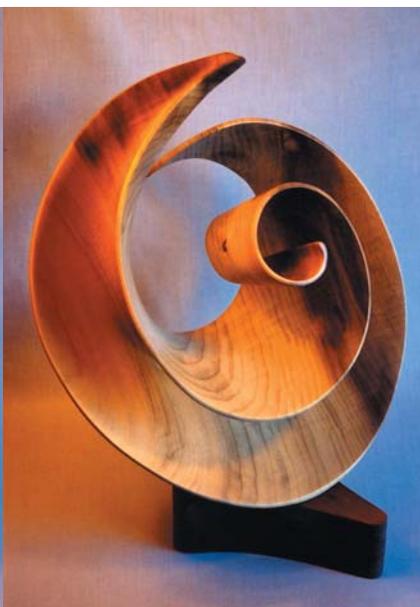
After a lifetime of restlessness, McAbery seems finally to have found his calling.

“I love being on the beach. I love carving. I have no plans to change, until my body parts start falling apart ... as long as I hold together, I’ll be carving.”



Sarah Brady

Sarah Brady is an amateur woodworker and associate editor of *Woodcraft Magazine*. She lives with her fiancé Matthew and their dog and two cats; she enjoys music, movies, gardening, cooking, reading, hiking and camping.



INSPIRED BY A WASHED-UP PIECE OF KELP, “*Andromeda*” (left) measures 8" x 12" x 22". The ribbonlike sculpture “*Scheherazade*” (center) measures 5" x 10" x 21". Like most of John’s pieces, “*Galaxy*” is carved of naturally fallen California bay laurel. It measures 10" x 12" x 15".