



ERNST GAMPERL

Seeing the Wood from the Trees

D Wood

Richard Powers' book, *The Overstory* (Norton, 2018), which won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2019, focuses on a cast of nine human characters whose lives become dominated by an element of the natural environment. As the novel progresses, we learn that trees of various species played significant

roles in the young lives of three of the protagonists, Nick Hoel, Mimi Ma, and Neelay Mehta. As these people age and link with others, the connections with trees amplify so that the reader is immersed in a veritable forest of plot lines devoted to evergreen and deciduous trees. While the narrative resides almost wholly



*Photos by Bernhard Spöttel
unless otherwise noted.*

in the United States, its message about our relationship with trees is universal: "You and the tree in your backyard come from a common ancestor. A billion and a half years ago, the two of you parted ways. But even now, after an immense journey in separate directions, that tree and you still share a quarter of your genes."

In an interview with environmental activist Bill McKibben, Powers states that one of his motivations for placing trees at the center of *The Overstory* is that between 95 and 98 percent of the earth's original primary forest has been cut and will never grow back. The book avoids statistics like this yet contains messages that convey the anthropocentric world view:

No one sees trees. We see fruit, we see nuts, we see wood, we see shade. We see ornaments or pretty fall foliage. Obstacles blocking the road or wrecking the ski slope. Dark, threatening places that must be cleared. We see branches about to crush our roof. We see a cash crop. But trees—trees are invisible.

Powers chose to make trees visible in the medium of literature by telling a story in which every fact in the fictional context is scientifically correct. The *dramatis personae* may be imagined, but details about the foliage are not.

Powers gives special attention to species such as American chestnut, sequoia (redwood), jacaranda, and oak as they relate to a character's development. For instance, we learn that the oak is a genus with more than six hundred species. When Dorothy Cazaly consults a plant guide, she muses, "Way more oaks than good taste would recommend. Red, yellow, white, black, gray, scarlet, iron, live, bur, valley, and water, with leaves that deny all relation to each other." And when future game designer Neelay Mehta falls out of an oak, incurring a life-changing injury, he lies on the ground contemplating the trunk and comes to the conclusion that it is "the most perfect piece of self-writing code that his eyes could hope to see."

German woodturner Ernst Gamperl knows what it's like to be preoccupied with oak. For ten years beginning in 2009, his life centered on a 230-year-old Bavarian oak that was 39' (12m) high and 8' (2.5m) in diameter. The tree overtook



Tree of Life Series, 2018, Oak, taller: 24¾" × 10" (63cm × 25cm)

Tree of Life Series, 2015, Oak, 23½" (60cm) diameter



Tree of Life Series, 2019, Oak, 42" × 12½" (107cm × 32cm)

his mind, his practice, his workshop and his worldview. Not surprisingly, he named the project *Tree of Life*, reflecting his background and creative ethos.

Master woodturner

Ernst Gamperl initially studied furniture making in his late teens. His teachers at the vocational school took no interest in the lathe that occupied a corner of the workshop. It seems strange that turned furniture parts were not part of the curriculum, yet, as is often the case with young people, the unknown was tantalizing. Ernst

wanted to try the lathe but, without instruction, he had no understanding of how to fix wood to a chuck. He says the machine "teased" him by making the wood airborne. Despite this early initiation into the hazards, he became enthusiastic about turning, purchased a small lathe, and used Richard Raffan as his guide. Raffan's *Turning Wood* became Ernst's "Bible" as he practiced the craft and became adept with its techniques. In addition to gouges and parting tools for the lathe, his workshop was outfitted solely with a bandsaw and chainsaw. ▶

Expertise warranted selling his product, with the result that Ernst spent about five years attending small craft fairs and markets throughout Europe. He attended the Frankfurt Trade Fairs, *Ambiente* and *Tendence*, the International Fair of Handicrafts in Munich and in Paris, *Maison et Objet*, assembling his booth at thirty to forty fairs at this stage of his career. He says, "When I was there, on my stand, surrounded by my pieces, I got feedback direct from my clients, and it was always very good for my ego and for my work." Nevertheless, Ernst wanted more from himself and his lathe and got in touch with a professor, who happened to be a turner and taught at a design school in Hildesheim. The professor trained Ernst for one year for the qualification of Master of Turnery and, undoubtedly, enhanced his design aesthetic. The German Confederation of Craft Skills oversees vocational training in more than 150 craft skills, including carpentry, stonemasonry, hairdressing, baking, tailoring, clock making, and shoe repair. Some, such as bricklaying, require a Master's certificate in order to be self-employed under the

Handwerksordnung (Trade and Crafts Code); in other crafts, Master is an indication of quality workmanship, business management, and safety standards. Ernst has that stamp of approval.

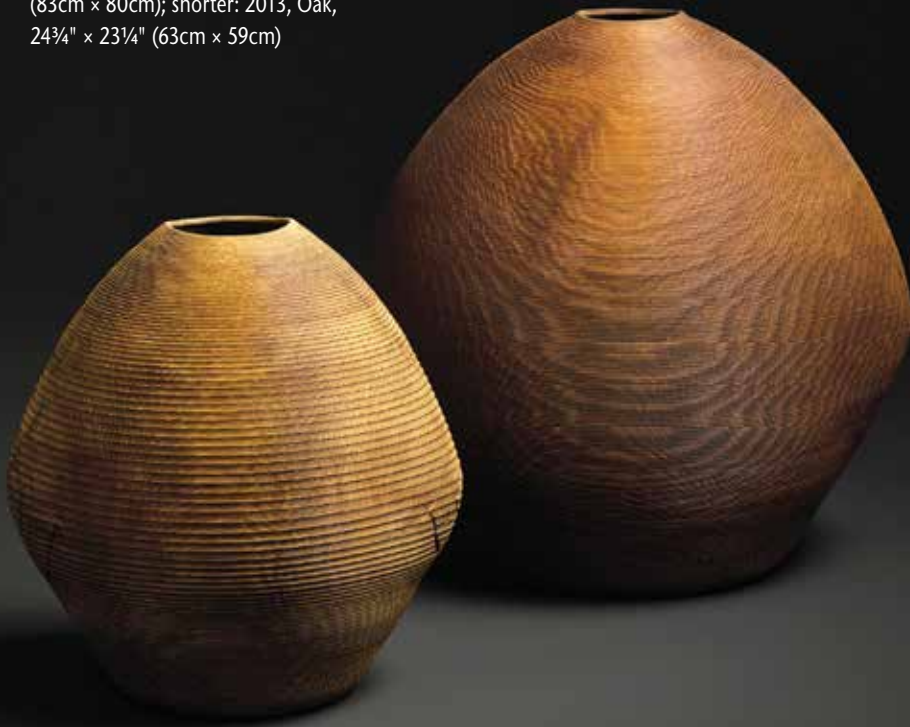
Initially, he was enamored of exotic woods but came to appreciate European species such as maple, beech, olive, and oak. Ernst's design sense and acute observation of the natural properties of a tree contribute to the minimalist beauty of his objects. Using only green wood, he turns a shape, then carefully controls the drying. He says, "In my career, I have found thirty different possibilities of how to take a bowl or an object from a trunk to get certain results. It's not like I do something and it happens by itself. It's a lot of control about how I cut the object from the trunk to get a certain form." Ernst's close attention to the inherent quality of the wood echoes the observation of one of the characters in *The Overstory*: "The grain under his fingers swings in uneven bands—thick light, thin dark. It shocks him to realize, after a lifetime of looking at wood: He's staring at the seasons, the year's pendulum, the burst of spring and the enfolding of fall,

the beat of a two-four song recorded here, in a medium that the piece itself created."

Mastery of woodturning

In a professional career that is now thirty years long, Ernst has reached a stage where he no longer attends craft fairs. He misses contact with the public and feels that his work has become "anonymous," even though each piece is inscribed with his mark, work number, date of production, and the age of the tree. The age of the tree is important—it is a subtle reminder of the humility of man relative to nature. Ernst's reverence for the arboreal realm influences his practice: "It's very hard for me to cut a living tree. Most of the time, I look for trees that are already cut down for some reason or they were uprooted by a storm or they are lying [on the ground] because of worms or parasites or whatever." He is currently working with Bosnian fiddleback maple that had an unusual source. A wood dealer specializing in violin wood contacted Ernst to say he had a huge trunk that was unusable because the interior was rotten. Ernst purchased the outside ring of the tree and is pleased to be

Tree of Life Series, taller: 2018, Oak, 32¾" × 31½" (83cm × 80cm); shorter: 2013, Oak, 24¾" × 23¼" (63cm × 59cm)



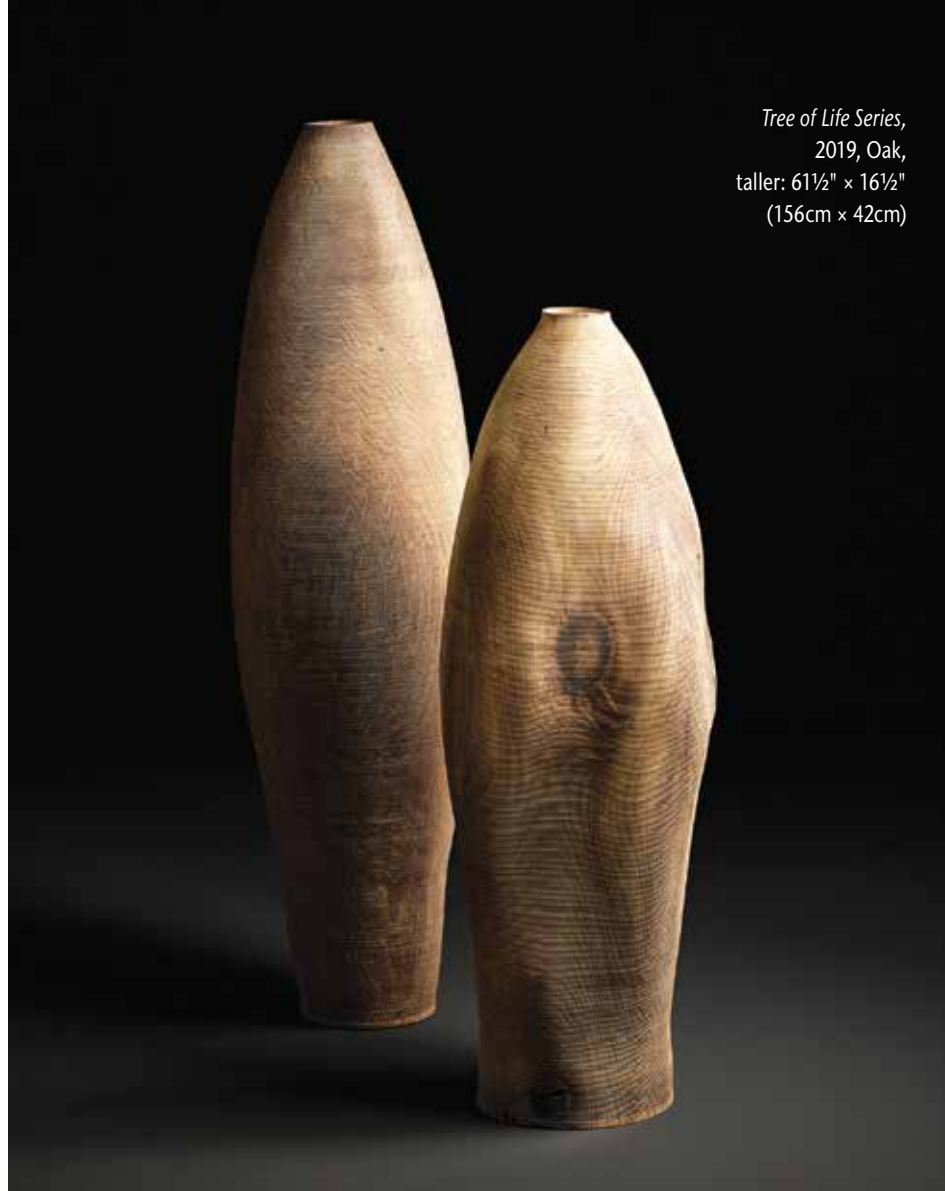
Untitled, 2018, Curly maple, taller: 21¼" × 8" (54cm × 20cm)

working with a different scent than that of his customary material, oak.

Pieces in the fiddleback maple eventually will be shipped to one of the commercial galleries that represent him. The association with galleries began when Sonya Park, the owner of the design store Arts&Science in Tokyo, visited him in his booth at the Paris *Maison et Objet* and purchased items for sale in Japan. European design stores also bought pieces from the fairs, but that method of marketing ceased when galleries showed interest. Ernst's work is now intended largely for the art market, where he has attracted collectors from Germany, Austria, Switzerland, England, and Spain, as well as Hong Kong, Korea, Japan, and the United States. He concentrates on solo exhibitions or exhibitions that are staged in relation to a space requiring a design for the entire environment that includes his woodturning.

The work is selling in the range of \$40,000 (U.S.). This places obligations on the artist: "I am getting more and more critical of myself and recently I have more pieces for which I say, okay, it's nice. But I have done better ones, so I don't put them into shows. I do three pieces and one is a really good one that I give to shows." Rejection is not only of the turning. Ernst is cognizant of the wood grain and coloring, the foibles of branches and burls, innate cracks, and knots. Taking account of the tree is paramount, according to a note on his website: "Whether it is solitary or grove-growing, on fertile or hungry soil, exposed to wind and weather and outside influences—all these factors are engraved indelibly on the 'memory of the grain' and give the receptacle its final form." Ernst's experience provides a sense of how the piece will move in the drying process, and sometimes there are surprises when the wood warps in an ugly way. Those pieces go to the fire.

From forest to gallery, each piece is on an intensive trajectory that starts with considered extraction from the



Tree of Life Series,
2019, Oak,
taller: 61½" × 16½"
(156cm × 42cm)



Team members,
left to right:
Steeves Danguy,
Ulrike Spengler,
Ernst Gamperl

Photo: David Leonhard
Gamperl

tree and proceeds to turning, being wrapped to maintain moisture, having cracks repaired, more turning, brushing, hollowing, washing, drying, treatment with minerals that react with the natural tannins of the timber, oiling, and waxing. Preparation prior to drying, which lasts for about two months, takes

three to four weeks. For the last twelve years, Ernst has engaged freelancer Steeves Danguy as his assistant. For really large pieces, "we are hollowing together. We mix it up because it's too hard for one person all day. For one hour or two hours, Steeves is hollowing, then I am hollowing." Ernst is fortunate to ▶



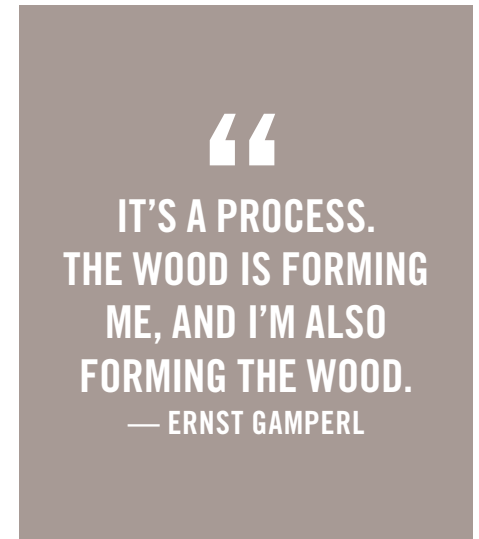
Ernst Gamperl applies texture to a *Tree of Life* vessel.

also have his wife, Ulrike, for administration, marketing, gallery contacts and contracts, and the many other tasks that take artists away from making.

Tree of Life

One phrase stands out from the narrative of *The Overstory*, particularly in relation to woodturning: “What you make from a tree should be at least as miraculous as what you cut down.” Although the Bavarian oak that was the provocation for the *Tree of Life* project was felled by a hurricane, Ernst Gamperl has created an astounding legacy for the over-two-centuries-old *Quercus*. Ninety-seven objects were crafted from the tree and its branches, of which sixty-seven were first shown at the Gewerbemuseum for art and design in Winterthur, Switzerland, in 2019. Its second iteration, originally scheduled to open in April 2020 at the Cheongju Craft Museum, South Korea, took the form of an online exhibition due to the impact of COVID-19. Subsequent shows will take place in England, Germany, and Korea, at the Amorepacific Museum of Art in Seoul, conditions permitting. This huge undertaking of ten years may not occur in Ernst’s lifetime again.

The diameter of the oak’s trunk and its weight required cutting it into blocks where the tree came down. At first, the tree’s owner assumed that only the trunk was wanted, but Ernst also retrieved the branches from a firewood pile. In order to accommodate the size of the raw material, Ernst’s workshop had to be expanded and two custom lathes built. Although his preferred timber is oak and he knows its idiosyncrasies well, this tree proved to be idiosyncratic. Looking back on the evolution of the project, Ernst noticed, “I was lucky because all the pieces I was working with were moving very well and smoothly. Everything looked good out of this trunk.” He recognized that “the whole project had some good spirit to realize it.” Visitors who saw the exhibition in Winterthur considered it special and were appreciative of close-up access to the objects as well as viewing the related documentary. Thirty smaller pieces from the oak were sold at the Gewerbemuseum to provide revenue to publish a book, *Ernst Gamperl: Zwiesprache Dialogue*. The exhibition gave the artist an opportunity to connect with the public again: he gave a number of lectures and guided tours, talking about



the process of realizing a unique and miraculous dream.

Tree of Life impressed not only museum patrons. In 2017, Ernst submitted two pieces from the project to the jury for the inaugural Loewe Craft Prize. From 3,900 entries, a *Tree of Life* vessel was chosen as the winner. The Loewe Foundation, established in 1988, is intended “to promote creativity, educational programs and to safeguard heritage in the fields of poetry, dance, photography, art and craft.” The website for the Craft Prize states that it “seeks to acknowledge and support international artisans of any age (over 18) or gender who demonstrate an exceptional ability to create objects of superior aesthetic value. By identifying work that reinterprets existing knowledge to make it relevant today while reflecting its maker’s personal language and distinct hand, the Loewe Foundation aims to highlight the continuing contribution of craft to the culture of our time.” The recognition is worth €50,000 and, in 2017, the twenty-six finalists were exhibited together in Madrid, New York, and Tokyo.

A video of Ernst was recorded following his receipt of the prestigious award. It provides a sense of the man, his workshop, and his process (visit tiny.cc/Gamperl).



Tree of Life Series,
2013-2018, Oak,
tallest: 26½" (67cm)

Tree of Life Series, 2018,
Oak, 30" × 30¼"
(76cm × 77cm)

In it, he talks about how craft is a necessary tool for obtaining a good result, but once the craft has become second nature, you must engage with “the higher spiritual level of the work ... If it’s touching you in a spiritual way, then for me it’s a strong object. And often I feel it with goose pimples.” He explains that while he creates forms that have not previously existed, he must interact with the wood in a dialogue. He knows, “I cannot put my will directly on the wood because then I overwhelm the wood and it’s dead. So I always have to work to combine my will of shaping, together with whatever the wood is asking for.” It is a balance between the artist’s ego and being sensitive of and sensible with what’s on the lathe. “It’s a process. The wood is forming me, and I’m also forming the wood.” Equally important is the craft and intellect of planning each step from the beginning, connecting all the individual steps, tools, and techniques to ensure a good outcome. Woodturning excellence doesn’t just happen, it’s an accumulation of know-how, experience, and perception.

Conclusion

The most resonant character in Richard Powers’ compelling book is Patricia Westerfield, a scientist who has dedicated her life to trees, their habits, habitat, character, and preservation. Her heart aches watching their demise because, “Love for trees grows out of her—the grace of them, their supple experimentation, the constant variety and surprise. These slow, deliberate creatures with their elaborate vocabularies, each distinctive, shaping each other, breeding birds, sinking carbon, purifying water, filtering poisons from the ground, stabilizing the microclimate.” She knows the major responsibility for dwindling forests lies with humanity and, despite her efforts to create a seed repository as an inheritance for future generations, she despairs.

Artists like Ernst Gamperl are able to use their talent and mastery to educate us about the splendor of trees. His woodturning is not only about objects on pedestals. It is about care for trees, to the extent of highlighting their

natural beauty as well as letting them speak for themselves. Seeing the entire collection of *Tree of Life*—and Ernst intends to keep the sixty-three items together as long as he can—is to see a downed oak brought back to life in a unique and challenging story.

For more, visit ernst-gamperl.de. ■

D Wood designed and made furniture to earn a Diploma in Crafts and Design at Sheridan College in Canada and an MFA at the Rhode Island School of Design. In 2012, she earned a PhD in Design Studies from University of Otago.