

CULTURED

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"Fabiola Beracasa and I share an interest in the fantastic. I knew she'd be perfect for some thematic costume and narrative ideas I've been excited to try out."
—Will Cotton

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VOIDS AND VOLUMES

Christopher Kurtz's handcrafted
sculptures achieve the perfect balance.

BY LINDA O'KEEFE PORTRAIT BY KIRSTIE TWEED



Christopher Kurtz with *Singularity*, 2013.



Christopher Kurtz thinks spontaneously with his body and hands. There are no heady concepts behind his delicate, rigorous sculptures; no preliminary sketches behind his masterfully constructed studio furniture. Instead, he intuitively makes things that occupy and displace space and that pursue a dialogue therein. Just as the human body is a means of transforming energies, Kurtz's work stands as an autobiographical residue of the time he spends cutting, sanding, bending, planing and paring. "In a Proustian way," he says, "each piece triggers a memory of where I was when I created it."

His father, an artist who specializes in calligraphy, reckons he could base several lifetimes of work on just 26 letterforms; Kurtz has developed a similar fluency with walnut, oak, ash, sycamore, maple and pine. In fact, Ian Wardropper, director of The Frick Collection, personally commissioned Kurtz because of his "innate sense of and respect for the properties of material." Wardropper adds, "Christopher's skill and perfectionism allow him to create refined and imaginative objects that have a rare balance of elegance and tensile strength."

Born in 1975 in Excelsior Springs, Missouri, Kurtz earned a BFA in sculpture and studied landscape architecture at Harvard before going on to assist the sculptor Martin Puryear for five years. In 2004, Kurtz held his first solo exhibition, which consisted of eight carvings based on an exaggerated scale of origami. Four years later, he launched a furniture collection to support his art; but the two practices cross-fertilized and pollinated one another. "Christopher seamlessly bridges the often-perceived gap between functional design and fine art, and the connecting thread is line and form," says Steven Volpe, founder of Hedge, the San Francisco gallery that currently represents Kurtz's portfolio.

Kurtz lives with his wife, glassware designer Deborah Ehrlich, in New York's Hudson Valley in an 18th-century stone house. The bucolic surroundings surely have a lulling effect, but Kurtz is anything but mellow. He thrives on deadlines, and built environments have always inspired him more than nature. Kurtz grew up perceiving country furniture as folksy and friendly, but after he reproduced a set of 19th-century birdcage Windsor chairs and found it to be a formidable task, he re-evaluated things. In fact, a single section from any of his seating pieces is more complex than an entire table. He apparently agrees with Mies van der Rohe, who famously thought chairs were harder to make than skyscrapers.

Although his heart is in Modernism, Kurtz's respect for traditional craftsmanship is obvious in one of his more iconic sculptures, an ash and oak rendition of two intertwined Windsors that will be included in group exhibition at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts next year.

Kurtz sees himself engaging with the world as a quiet observer, a lone wolf who skeptically associates collaboration with compromise. Despite this, he is exploring another medium with Artworks Foundry in Berkeley, California, that allows him to conceptualize work that lives outdoors. The firm just produced one of his wood sculptures in patinated bronze using a lost-wax technique. The design was taken from a series where he sharpened thin sticks of tightly grained basswood until they elongated into pointed quills; once he joined several together, their individual fragility and pathos transformed into poetic sinew.

He also paired up with E.R. Butler, a manufacturer of bespoke hardware, who distilled the geometry and joinery in several of Kurtz's sculptures and devised custom tooling to invent a taxonomy of parts in bronze. "Christopher's ability to reduce solidity to a moment of evaporation is nothing short of supernatural," says Butler.