

Seattle Artist Finds Inspiration in



URBAN TREES

AFTER HER “AHA” moment in the California woodworking shop, Yeats focused on learning everything she could about furniture making. Still working as a city planner by day, Yeats took evening classes in woodworking and weld-

ing at the local community college. In 1998, she returned to Fort Bragg to immerse herself in an intensive summer class—furniture making—at James Krenov’s Fine Furniture Program. During the late 1990s, Yeats continued her urban planning

Laura Yeats was an urban planner working in Washington state during the 1990s. In the summer of 1997, during a vacation in California, she completed a quick tour of an idyllic woodworking shop at the College of the Redwoods in Fort Bragg. As she walked out of the shop, she thought, “I’m going to do this!” Fifteen years later, in 2012, her dream of becoming a woodworker and wood artist has been fulfilled. The fact that she uses urban wood for her creations is just another part of her unusual but successful story.



Laura Yeats with “The Planet”, a 30” sphere made from the burl of a weeping cherry that was felled by a storm in the Washington Park Arboretum

Top Photo: With a “standing dead” Pacific *Madrone* in West Seattle. The massive tree went to Urban Hardwoods and Yeats created numerous bowls and vessels from the waste of cut-offs and upper limbs.

work, but enrolled in evening classes at the local Pratt Fine Arts Center. She followed up with immersion classes (“short stints”) at Penland in North Carolina and Haystack in Maine. Yeats says about her training in woodworking, “The model I followed was not the higher education model of going to a university for a degree in furniture design/studio furniture, but rather a self-directed model where I determined the skill I wanted to learn and sought out the teachers—typically at a destination art and craft school.”

FIRST COMMISSION

In 2000, Yeats was faced with a career-changing choice. She says, “I was offered a \$40,000 commission to build kitchen cabinets and bath vanities for a local fourplex. I had to decide if I was going to do woodworking full-time.”

Yeats’s decision was to drop her urban planning career and focus on woodworking as a full-time endeavor. “The problem with my first commission,” Yeats explained, “was that I didn’t have many tools and no shop space. So I teamed up with

an experienced cabinetmaker, used his shop, and split the commission with him.”

TRANSFORMATION

Between 2000 and 2005, Yeats Design did custom commissions—cabinets, vanities, dining tables, bookcases, coffee tables, and side tables. Yeats, however, felt she was getting bogged down in the customer service part of the job. She says, “I liked to problem solve, design, and build projects from wood. That was my passion—not customer service.”

After one year as an artist-in-residence at Arrowmont in eastern Tennessee—focusing on wood turning, bowl making, and chair making, Yeats found her calling. She returned to Seattle determined to thrive as a wood artist rather than a commission-focused woodworker.

WHY URBAN TREES?

Yeats’s goal—after shifting to the artist mode—was to reuse wood as much as possible. She says, “I used to go to a lumberyard or retail store to get my lumber but it was hard to

tell where the wood came from—perhaps an endangered tropical rain forest. Since I lived in the city and needed a resource, urban trees made sense to me. Also, as an



Student activity inside Yeats’s studio.

artist, I didn’t need big pieces of wood, so urban lumber scraps were perfect.”

Currently, Yeats sources nearly 100% of her wood from urban trees. She has her small shop located at the log yard and mill site of Urban Hardwoods. Urban Hardwoods provides Yeats with their jacket boards (slabs) and end cut-offs. She also obtains an occasional log—a small specimen tree—from local arborists.

Yeats notes, “As an artist I can make shallow bowls from jacket boards. My larger bowls come from the end cuts from logs.” Her past frustration of not knowing the origin of her wood has ended. “Now,” she says, “I know exactly where my wood comes from.”

She notes that not only is she using a recycled product in urban trees, but she is using the “waste” from these recovered trees. She says, “I’m an example of the ‘next one down the chain’ by turning a waste into something useful.”

EQUIPMENT

Yeats realized that a custom woodworker needed an array of tools including a planer, joiner, sander, band saw, and more. Also, if she

THE CHERRY SPHERE

A heavy snowstorm in 2009 downed several trees in the Washington Park Arboretum in Seattle, including a weeping cherry (*Prunus subhirtella*). This was an unusual tree since a weeping cherry branch was grafted to the rootstock of a small cherry in 1941. Over time, a burl developed at the graft site and after nearly 70 years the burl grew to approximately 36 inches in diameter. The huge burl was located about 3 feet from the ground and sat atop a much smaller trunk of about 15 inches in diameter.

After the storm, the park’s arborist called Yeats to inquire about her interest in finding a second life for the tree. She said “yes” and hauled the burl to her studio where it sat for over two years. Yeats says, “I wasn’t sure what to do with it. I was waiting for the right opportunity.”

The opportunity came in 2011, when she was asked to participate in an ArtWalk at Dunn Gardens, a private arboretum. Yeats shaped the burl into a rough sphere with her chain saw. Using a chain-hoist, the chunk of green (wet) wood was mounted between centers on her massive custom-built lathe. The project required new modifications to the lathe to improve stability and safety during turning. Yeats turned the burl into a giant sphere for the arboretum exhibit. Yeats says, “It was beautiful, but yet a simple design. It didn’t sell the day of the ArtWalk, but it sold within one week at Urban Hardwoods’ retail store in Seattle. A person on vacation from Texas bought it!”

were to mill her own lumber for projects, then a sawmill, dry kiln, forklift, and log truck were important, if not absolutely necessary. Yeats's decision to focus on her "artist model" specializing in green (wet) wood did not require much equipment, including no precision equipment.

She says, "As an artist, I primarily use a chain saw—three of them—band saw, and wood lathe. In fact, I built my first wood lathe—a big one—with the help of a welder, machinist, and electronic specialist, saving \$20,000 or more in the process." The big lathe has enabled Yeats to produce her specialty product—monumental bowls.

PRODUCTS

Yeats produces bowls, vessels, spheres, and related wood turnings. Her specialty is the larger wooden bowls. She uses a variety of species, including elm, madrone, walnut, ash, cherry, and cedar. Commenting on her bowls, she

says, "My initial chain saw cuts reveal the nature of the wood, from burls to bug trails to contrasting color. When the log goes on the lathe, I carve through the rings with my chisel. Each layer is a discovery, and those discoveries inform the shape of the bowl."

She also makes furniture, but she now uses hand tools to cut, split, and carve the wood. As described on her website: "In addition to hand tools, I use a giant wood lathe. I first used it to make the monumental bowls, but soon discovered it works just as well to make side tables, stools, and ottomans (aka rounds and drums). I design each piece for a specific function or context, or as a celebration of the pieces of wood themselves."

MARKETS

Yeats has an exclusive arrangement with all three of Urban Hardwoods' retail stores in Seattle, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. She

says, "I tried retailing my art through smaller stores like boutiques, but it didn't work out. Urban Hardwoods and I have an obvious connection and the relationship has worked out well."

Another revenue stream—or market—for Yeats is workshop fees. In 2009, she developed a workshop to teach her methods of working with the wood from urban and fallen trees. Her signature workshop, called The Wood Bowl: From a Tree to Your Table, is a comprehensive immersion in design, materials, and craft. Yeats says, "Students explore the qualities and nuances of natural materials, learn principles of form and design, and of course, develop fine craft skills. Since the downturn in the economy, I found that fewer people were willing to spend their money on a luxury item—a wood bowl—but were willing to spend that same amount or more on themselves—on learning how to design and make a bowl with their own hands."

Currently, Yeats works in her Seattle studio crafting artwork from wood during the fall, winter, and spring. During the summer, she teaches her workshops at a destination "design+craft facility"—The Stables—on Orcas Island (northwest of Seattle). The workshops are taught using thoughtful and sustainable methods and practices. The primary source of wood for the workshops is from dead and storm-fallen trees from the island.

RELATIONSHIPS

A big part of Yeats's success has been the relationships she has built over the years. A key relationship has been her venture with Urban Hardwoods of Seattle (and their retail stores).

She has also built numerous contacts with other artists in the Seattle area. These artists are taking the waste from Yeats's operation and using it as a raw material input for their own work. Simply put, the urban tree resource is benefiting numerous entrepreneurs in



Yeats turning a monumental bowl in black walnut.

addition to Yeats.

One artist, for example, takes Yeats's band saw off-cuts and turns them into wood sculptures. Another artist takes her off-cuts (thin slices) and uses them as panels for abstract paintings. A third takes Yeats's wood shavings (specifically walnut, ash, madrone, and black locust) and extracts natural dyes for textile artwork and weavings. Some artists use her wood shavings in their raku firings (for varied effects on the surface of pottery). And, as might be expected, many landscapers and gardeners use her wood shavings as decorative mulch in garden beds and along trails and paths (including one woman who uses certain types of wood shavings for stall bedding for her horses).

FINAL THOUGHTS

The natural environment provides insight and inspiration for Laura Yeats's work. The characteristics of the wood she uses—color, grain, tex-



A nice selection of Yeats's bowls, buckets, and more—all made from urban tree cut-offs.

ture, even imperfections—inform the shape and size of her bowls, sculpture, and furniture. Everything is handmade using simple methods and tools. She strives to create products that are both a pleasure to look at and a delight to hold.

Her work has evolved over the years from strictly a woodworker using unknown sources of lumber to an artist using wood from urban and fallen trees.

"For me," says Yeats, "trees are col-

laborators instead of just materials. I can't imagine a better way to work." ■

Stephen Bratkovich is a forest products consultant in St. Paul, Minnesota. He also serves as Project Manager, Recycling and Reuse, for Dovetail Partners, a non-profit organization that provides authoritative information about the impacts and trade-offs of environmental decisions, including consumption choices, land use, and policy alternatives.