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Artist Profile: Miriam Carpenter



Photo by Bailey Fucanan

The anatomy of the feather is delicate. Each barb delineated as together they form both striated vanes radiating from the center. She grasps its fragile splendor by the calamus to avoid crushing the downy barbs. A single gust, a gentle breeze, seems capable of launching it skyward. Yet, however airy it appears, if her hold loosened, the feather would drop to the ground. It is wooden.

Artist Miriam Carpenter has carved the feather from white oak. Yes, she's heard the jokes: her name is carpenter and she works with wood — Meta Miriam. This rather young and wholly exquisite artisan creates such beauty from wood, that she was hired by George Nakashima Studio more than six years ago, only a year out from her studies of Industrial Design at Rhode Island School of Design.

At George Nakashima Woodworker, Carpenter is assistant designer to Mira Nakashima. Already, the Carpenter Coffee Table will debut, among 25 other Nakashima works, September 20 at Moderne Gallery in Philadelphia. The eponymous piece is the first named for her, but she has signed other pieces for which she has had a strong input.



Miriam Carpenter shows some intricate joinery she has done.
Photo by Bailey Fucanan.

Beyond the work she does at the prominent design studio, she is constantly exploring wood on her own. Even if that exploration involves a chainsaw, which she recently took to a 6-foot sassafras limb brought down in Hurricane Sandy. “The chainsaw was too slow. It wasn’t as aggressive as I thought it would be.”

Yes, this is the same long-limbed beauty who sings in a motet group with her parents and practices yoga complaining that a chainsaw isn’t aggressive enough. The same woodworker who double-turns bowls so flowing one is reminded of the sea. The same artist, who with Zen-based calmness, carves delicate feathers from blocks of wood.



Wooden feathers carved by Miriam Carpenter.
Photo by Bailey Fucanan.

Yet, surprisingly, Carpenter only carved her first feather in June of last year. Except for a block print, she had never even carved before. Her paternal grandfather, known for carving decoys from wood, (Yes, even Grandpa Carpenter was meta.) passed away in 2011. The family bestowed the young Carpenter with his workbench and carving tools.



The young woodworker sits in front of the workbench and carving tools that once belonged to her paternal grandfather.
Photo by Bailey Fucanan.

Carpenter was invited to show at the 2012 EMMA International Collaboration in Canada, a biennial event bringing together 100 artists from around the world. The show theme was “Decoy.” Her grandfather had carved decoys.



Miriam Carpenter admires a carving by her late grandfather.
Photo by Bailey Fucanan.

“I was thinking decoy, duck, duck, decoy,” Carpenter says. “Maybe I’ll just carve a feather.” She used a mallard feather for muse and a block of white oak with well demarcated medullary rays. She explains how the pattern between the late and early growth act like the warp and weft of woven fabric.

“The structure of each piece of wood is more fascinating to me than the subject,” says Carpenter. And she rushes to get a piece of white oak to pencil out how she’d find the feather in it.



Photo by Bailey Fucanan.

She says people often ask why she carves the curve of the feather and doesn’t steam-bend it. “That would defeat the whole purpose,” she exclaims. “Exposing the pores and the structure is the whole process.”

Perhaps born under an auspicious star, her initial attempt worked. “I was lucky because I did everything right,” she says of her first feather effort. “The second one took me a lot longer.” She positioned it wrong, causing tear out.

She also struggled with a piece of pine, a soft wood that didn’t lend itself to the lovely filigree effect of oak. Lace-wood did work, however.

It’s somehow soothing to hear she has struggled. She seems so successful for such a young person. And yet she hasn’t made any effort to market her accomplishment. She has absolutely no online presence. Still she succeeds.

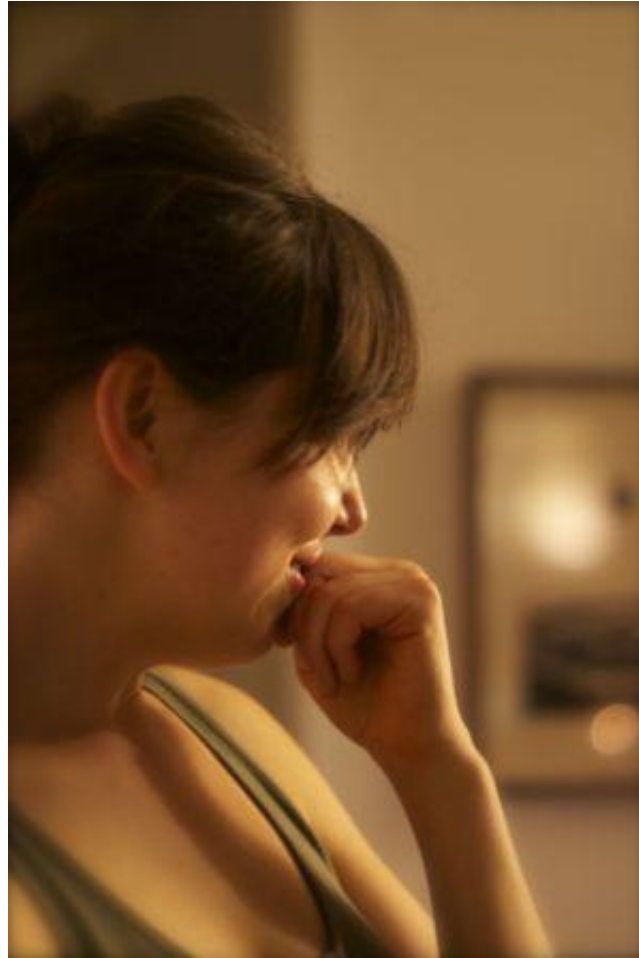


Photo by Bailey Fucanan.

She has scored her a two-month residency at Center for Art in Wood in Philadelphia in the summer of 2014. “I’m ecstatic,” she says with authenticity. “I feel unworthy.”

Her modesty is almost annoying, considering her substantial talent — not to mention youth and attractiveness — but she is able to dismiss any irritation with her slightly geeky zeal for new technology. She slides into a description of quantum dots and nanocrystals with ease. She launches into a mini-tirade about permaculture, which she has studied, and why it isn’t being done more when the research is there.

Permaculture design, music, yoga, quantum dots and nanocrystals! She admits her interests are varied. “I’m all over the place with what I’m doing,” Carpenter adds. But it is wood that ultimately woos her.

“I just love wood,” Carpenter says. “There are so many layers, so no matter how long you work with it, you discover something new.”