

Super Natural

In wood, ceramics and textiles,
three locals bring art to life

BY TOR LUKASIK-FOSS
PHOTOGRAPH BY IAN POOL

John Koletic amid the raw beauty
of some of his burl wood creations

A JOHN KOLETIC burl is a round growth found usually on the bottom of a tree, filled with small knots and an iridescent grain that swirls like smoke. Burls are likely the result of stress or genetic abnormality suffered by the tree itself, and they've been prized by woodworkers for millennia. Since the 19th century, burl wood has been associated with luxury items: adorning everything from humidors, specialty book covers and the dashboards and side panels of high-end automobiles. The problem with burl wood is that it's difficult and expensive to harvest and mill, and is of such an unruly and asymmetrical shape that it is a real challenge to preserve its charm while trying to fit it into the right-angled world of furniture design.

John Koletic, proprietor of Koletic Designs, has dedicated himself to the seemingly impossible task of making elegant furniture pieces that manage to retain the natural edge of burl wood. He also designs pieces using large planks of wane edged timber (the unfinished bark edge of the wood). The results balance traditional craftsmanship, clean design and the rustic irregularity and beauty found only in the natural world. "What we're known for is using the bark edge or wane edge of the wood, and fitting that edge into a design that is contemporary," Koletic observes. "It's refined rustic – it doesn't look cottage-y, like that kind of rustic furniture that was popular in the '70s where the wood was chunky and finished with thick, horrible varnish that makes it look plastic. We do something

completely different."

Koletic moved into woodworking after years of employment as a precision instrument technician, working for firms like Spar Aerospace and most recently Nortel. In the mid-'90s, he began investing more and more time into the hobby of woodworking, following his fascination with burl wood, using it initially to make clocks. At the time when layoffs were imminent at Nortel, Koletic already had the basis of business established, selling these clocks and other small items through gallery shops and boutiques.

"I see the clocks as a kind of transition work, in so far as they contained precision instruments which was the world I was coming from, but also utilized this wood. I initially thought that the clocks and other kinds of giftware like candlehold-

ers, bowls and humidors would sustain me, because I managed to get my products into galleries and shops right across Canada. But a few years ago it started to change from smaller items into these larger pieces of furniture. Now I have diminished giftware entirely and focus exclusively on large, mostly custom-made works. I think 90 percent of my business is commission-based.”

Currently Koletic Designs builds furniture items that have a signature focal quality to them. The burl and wane edge tables for example generally feature a wide single slab of natural edged wood (including walnut, yellow cedar, redwood, box elder and other exotic woods) finished with tung oil and lacquer in such a way that it has the heft, complexity and presence of a slab of exotic stone, but with infinitely more warmth. These tabletops are supported by thin, gracefully curved legs of wood or metal.

Koletic salvages quite a bit of wood locally. He also purchases wood at auction and from suppliers in West coast (Port McNeil, British Columbia is home to the world’s largest burls, growing underneath giant redwoods – some average a diameter of over 20 feet). Burl wood can remain in the ground centuries after a tree has been harvested or fallen. And redwood is extremely rot-resistant; it is no surprise that they are often referred to as diamonds. This precious quality compels Koletic to build at the highest standard, making sure each that work is of heirloom quality, featuring time-honoured joinery (using locking or wooden pinned joints and a minimum of metal fasteners).

“You have to know how to work with these big boards. Wood is hydroscopic. It is alive to some extent, shrinking and growing with the humidity of the seasons. It’s so easy for these boards to crack if they are joined incorrectly, and I have taken every precaution to see that they won’t. You have to make adjustments depending on if you are building the piece in the summer or winter, depending on what kind of climate conditions the table is going to live in. I have a chart to calibrate just how much contraction and expansion is in each kind of wood. It’s precise work, and you need to be like those old European cabinetmakers who learned everything about harvesting, milling, building and finishing wood, because they wanted

their work to last hundreds of years.”

Despite that vast scope, Koletic Designs employs only one or two shop assistants. It’s a small operation, serving a client base mostly centred in the GTA (although Koletic does have clients in the United States). While the shop has worked lined up well into 2009 and shows no sign of slowing, Koletic has no plans to expand his operation. He doesn’t want to distance himself from the intensely hands-on nature of the work or sacrifice quality in favour of productivity. And that care is evident in every piece he crafts.

“When you’re working with wood that does not have a straight edge, it creates a real challenge to build with it properly,” he explains. “You don’t have a straight line to use as a point of reference. I could try and make exactly the same kind of table twice, but would still have to customize my technique each time. It’s tricky work, but that is the selling point of this business. What we are making here cannot be mass-produced because you can’t standardize the

building process. You have to do everything laboriously and on a case-by-case basis, and I see that as a real asset.

“We had a client for whom I made a dining room table from a single 4’ by 14’ slab of wood,” Koletic adds. “It was to be installed in a cottage on an island, and the client was so committed to the work, he had his architect redesign the building in order to extend the dining room so that the work wouldn’t feel cramped. That’s the kind of client I serve: people who understand the value of this kind of work.”

Ceramic artisan
Jocelyn DeBackere
cradles one of her
sculptural bottles.
“I generally want to
balance a very organic
sense of posture with
a strong architectural
sense of form.”

