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By: Elena Kadvany



Photos by Lance Iversen / The Chronicle

A return to her roots

CRAFT

Elizabeth Lundberg explores a longtime love and puts her wood art on display

By Elena Kadvany

Almost every available surface in Elizabeth Lundberg's Benicia studio is covered with wooden utensils, bowls, vases and sculptures of all shapes and sizes. Wood shavings, from the fallen trees she crafts into practical pieces and objets d'art, litter the ground.

She explains the process of turning tree into art via a slideshow on her iPad, propped up on a desk in her studio.

"Here I am in all my glory," she says, pointing to a photograph in

which she is bent over a huge trunk, slicing through the wood with a chain saw half her size. Lundberg is short but sturdy; she has a commanding presence that emits a sense of both physical and emotional strength.

The photograph and digital introduction capture much of who Lundberg, 61, is: longtime tech professional, passionate artist, independent woman.

Woodwork continues on M6



Lundberg uses felled trees to craft artwork, such as a vessel that's been carved to resemble sea coral, left, and a walnut bowl, above.

American Craft Council show

Elizabeth Lundberg is one of more than 230 artists participating in the 2012 American Craft Council show Friday-next Sunday at Fort Mason Center's Festival Pavilion in San Francisco. Hours are 10 a.m.-8 p.m. Friday (\$5 admission after 5 p.m.), until 6 p.m. Saturday and 5 p.m. next Sunday. \$14, \$20 for two-day pass; free for children under 12. Tickets available at the door or in advance at www.craftcouncil.org/sf.



Artist's woodworking a return to roots

Woodwork from page M1

Lundberg, who will showcase her art for the third year at the American Craft Council's show Friday through next Sunday in San Francisco, works with trees felled by storms or tree-service companies. She describes what she does as "taking a former life and being able to then give it a second life."

In a way, trees have done the same for her.

Childhood love

She spent much of her childhood around woodworkers and machinery — to be specific, playing under a table saw in her grandfather's Swedish cabinet shop in San Francisco. She would go there with her father, an architect and furniture designer, and help both men work.

"As a little girl, I got this opportunity to be involved around machinery. So it has never been something that I was afraid of, and in fact I enjoyed it," she says. Although Lundberg grew up in San Francisco, her father disliked city life and spent a lot of time in areas like Lake Tahoe and rural Walnut Creek. "I spent a lot of time out in the country. I had this huge love for trees and the outdoors."

Having an architect as a father instilled in Lundberg a love of "putting things together and taking things apart," she says. So in the early 1970s, she went to the University of California at Berkeley to study engineering. But her other early interest in working with wood stayed with her, and she eventually switched concentrations to the School of Forestry.

However, Lundberg's upbringing granted her a level of comfort and encouragement that she soon found was lacking for a woman in such a male-dominated profession.

She recalls an excursion with a forestry team her sophomore year. She was sent out to statistically sample a forest in Mineral (Tehama County) with two men.

"They would do things like send me up a shale hill, knowing it would slide," she says. "The whole idea was to show that a woman is a liability."

Toward the end of the job, her male co-workers sent her to chop down vines of poison ivy, thinking she didn't know what it was. She wore enough clothes to protect herself, chopped down the ivy,

and then left said clothes on top of the men's belongings.

When Lundberg graduated, she found that employers were more interested in her engineering-related skills, especially computer programming, than forestry.

For the next three decades, she worked long hours in the tech world for a wide range of companies, from Oracle to an ice cream manufacturer.

"Application engineer, systems engineer, database designer. In those days, we did everything," she sighs. She describes people with her job as "brains on a stick."

She was one of the few women in this profession as well. "All my work life, it's been elements of that," she said. "In technology it's the same thing. You could only reach up to a certain level, and unless you played golf with the bosses, you didn't get the inside track."

Working with wood



Photos by Lance Iversen / The Chronicle

Lundberg uses a variety of tools, below, to make her custom wood bowls and art, including a burning tool that can make detailed patterns on the exterior of a bowl, above. The woodworker also modifies tools.



Show highlights

The American Craft Council offers a diverse profile of the arts and crafts world. Here are new categories for the 2012 show:

Bride-to-be: Highlighting built-to-last and one-of-a-kind items created with brides and wedding season in mind.

Men's department: Showcasing handmade items for men, ranging from accessories and clothing to home decor.

Footleware: Utilitarian designs for the artistic chef, including kitchen art and wares.

Local: Spotlight on San Francisco artists who present their innovative crafts on a national stage.

Blue Chip: Featuring luxury designs and stunning pieces valued at \$10,000 or more.

— Elena Kadavany

remained an alternative life, a creative escape from a demanding career.

Sanity saver

"Being in the technical arena, the woodworking for me was sort of a sanity saver," she says. "And any time that I was away from my technology work would be spent designing and making something out of wood." At the time, she worked mostly on "flat-work woodworking," such as benches, tables, clocks or pieces for a house.

Advancing her skills proved difficult. At the time, woodworking classes that were open and accepting of women could be hard to find, or once she was enrolled, fellow attendees would be openly hostile, voicing safety concerns in working with a woman. "It seems ridiculous now that those were the attitudes of the times, and I was usually the only woman in a class."

In the late 1980s, Lundberg took a class in wood turning — using a lathe, or a machine that rotates a wooden object on its axis to create a shaped, symmetrical piece.

"The minute I put a hunk of wood on the

lathe, I knew that's what I wanted to do in my other life," she says. Lundberg promised herself that when she turned 50, she would leave the tech world to focus on her art.

A Benician for 25 years, Lundberg is a well-established tree rescuer. Local residents, members of the Bay Area Woodturners Association or city park employees call her when a tree falls. She picks up the tree and brings it in a rented trailer to either her studio at home or a space in Benicia's industrial park that she shares with another local woodturner, Brad Adams.

Adams, 59, who met Lundberg at a Bay Area Woodturners Association meeting, says that she is more "detail oriented" in terms of decorating the wood she turns. "She's very artistic and very up for any challenge," he said.

Science behind art

And the process of turning tree into art can be challenging — a balancing act that can take six months to two years. It's all about understanding the properties of wood, Lundberg says.

The trees must be hard-

woods, such as ash, aspen, beech, birch, oak and hickory to name a few, which have a cellular structure that is appealing to a woodturner. They also must be large enough so that she can create something from half of its diameter.

Because much of the tools and machinery are designed for a larger person, Lundberg has had to adapt them. "Tools and techniques that would work safely for a medium- to large-sized person would sometimes be less safe and less successful for a small and short person," she says.

Wearing anti-vibration gloves to use one of her three chain saws, Lundberg cuts the log into cross-sections and then analyzes the growth patterns, grain and character. The next step: cutting out pith, or the very center of a tree, which, when exposed to air, begins the decay process. This helps prevent cracking and splitting.

Moisture is necessary to preserve the shape and character of the wood, so once the sections are cut, Lundberg coats them with wax to slow evaporation. Her studio is overflowing with stacks of wood pieces lined on shelves, drying, waiting to be mounted on the lathe and turned into art.

Lundberg's lathe, which was ordered with smaller legs to fit her size, is an intimidating piece of machinery that can spin a hunk of wood at various

speeds. As the wood turns, Lundberg uses tools modified to fit her grip to carve away bits and pieces, creating the desired shape.

With some pieces, the final step is embellishment, an outlet for her creative side. "I'm always experimenting," she says as she holds a 3-foot-wide bowl, decorated with carved and dyed grapevines, that she created for a show at a winery. Textured clumps of purple grapes and swaths of green leaves dance across the bowl's exterior.

Worlds intersect

Yet her best-selling item at the American Craft Council last year, a wooden touch-screen stylus, is a seemingly physical manifestation of the intersection of technology, nature and art at which Lundberg thrives.

"Because all of my education, all of my background, now I get to be able to take and represent that material in a way that you can't do when a sawyer sends a tree through a mill and cuts boards out," she says. "It opened up this whole new world."

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