

# SPEAKING IN SPECIES

A North Carolina Perspective

To speak, in a formal sense, means to “give evidence or make comment on a subject.” In this incidence of speaking the clarity lies within the command of many species of wood from the exoticism of Black Limba to the banality of plywood. In *Speaking in Species: A North Carolina Perspective*, this command of subject takes form in a host of objects including tables, chairs, sculptures and the highest quality musical instruments.

The full range of speaking in species can be seen in the countless items crafted from wood around us. From cradle to grave, we interact, own and even inhabit things made of wood. From early on, we might encounter bassinets, spoons, bowls, ladles, beds, brooms, shows, boats, flying machines, and even walk bridges to houses in which we live before finally being buried in a wooden box under a tree. This list is meant to be a little extreme to bring home the vast array of wooden objects on our planet, mostly taken for granted in these days of mass consumerism. Since we stumbled out of the cave and began to wander, wood has been essential to our existence and advancement. It was kindling, of course, that enabled humankind to harness fire. Wood is ubiquitous, common and simultaneously complex. This broad range of abilities inspires the makers in this exhibition to create from wood.

*Speaking in Species: A North Carolina Perspective* centers on a presentation and understanding of the talents of those employing wood in their work. The vast majority of these makers work fulltime at their craft and play a part in our creative economy, making some of the most unique items known in the worlds of studio furniture, art and instrument making. Members of this group are known well beyond our state borders, some form building upon centuries-old traditions such as Elia Bizzarri or like Dustin Farnsworth, known for expanding wood’s sculptural vocabulary.

The artists in *Speaking in Species* are craftsmen working at the highest possible levels of accuracy in wood and those who understand the fluidity, rawness and pure chance relating to processes in wood. Within the work of Chris Abell, John Clark and Russell Gale, we see accuracy and tolerances that are simultaneously discomfiting and inspiring, evoking high regard and reverence. These are works that define what we think of as fine craftsmanship and top-notch woodworking.

Within the exhibition we also see examples of what I call “moments with the wood”; a way of being and the associated change of process. This isn’t to say that any of these artists are getting messages from the trees, but rather they move in an intuitive dance, carving a large log or constructing piles of small sticks. There is usually a plan or concept that is balanced with a sense of wonder and understanding for the openness of the process and materials. These moments add up to some of the most expressive sculptures in the exhibition, including the works of Elizabeth Spotswood Spencer, Mark Gardner and Sylvie Rosenthal.

Let’s not forget the likely unity of this group. With wood, whether your approach is one of precision machining and control or the openness and intuitive process of a chainsaw or a grinder, wood is responsive, immediate and rewarding to work. Image the smells and tactile experience in the studios of these makers—I suspect you would encounter spaces that can open to the outside, some very clean and some considerably more cluttered, but with all of these makers you would encounter a sanctum of sorts, a place of transformation, both for wood and self. Wood allows these artists to speak clearly and distinctly because it is natural, earthbound and alive in ways that conjure up countless moments in natures that are, in turn, rejuvenating both to maker and user/viewer. May you, as you view the exhibition, be intrigued, restored and inspired to *Speak in Species*.

Peace,

Brent Skidmore, Guest Curator