

Immersed in Community:

ELIZABETH WEBER'S CREATIVE JOURNEY

Randi Aiken

Elizabeth Weber may not come from a family of woodworkers, but the threads of her family history are nevertheless woven into her work. Born in Jackson, Tennessee, in the early 1980s, Elizabeth was a shy and studious young person. She enjoyed spending her time quietly reading or embroidering, but she was a tomboy at heart. She loved being around her two brothers and would try to tag along on their adventures. Elizabeth wasn't always welcomed. She grew up dreaming of living in France as an artist and following in her grandfather's footsteps at Dollfus-Mieg

& Compagnie (DMC), a renowned embroidery thread manufacturer known for its quality and its extensive and iconic color palette. For the novice embroiderer, those wondrous threads became the hues of her imagination. With each successive stitch, she began laying the foundations for her emerging artistic voice.

A mathematical-artistic mind

By the time Elizabeth was grown and ready for college in 2002, her artistic interests had become more pragmatic. The threads she sewed had



Fully immersed, Elizabeth poses in the woodshop at Pratt Fine Arts Center, Seattle, Washington, 2019.

Photo: Kim McIntyre

given way to grids and measurements. The colors from her youth faded into numbers. She liked the practicality of math—the concrete and logical answers it offered. She was entering Civil Engineering at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville to study structures, like the bridges that fascinated her. But as her studies progressed, Elizabeth felt increasingly constrained by the program. There was a part of her that wanted to let go of the rules and the tight tolerances that civil engineering demanded, so she shifted her area of focus to site development and water resources in hopes



Tiger Bowl, 2021,
Carved mahogany,
4" x 15" (10cm x 38cm)

of finding more leeway. In her new program, she traced the contour lines of the landscape with her mind and with her steps, translating the rise and fall of the terrain into two-dimensional plans and back out again. The bounds of her artistic vocabulary expanded into new territory.

Discovering woodworking

In 2015, Elizabeth's engineering interests drew her to woodworking. A friend had recently bought a table saw and had been building her own custom furniture pieces. Seeing another creative woman working with power tools helped Elizabeth to envision herself doing the same. She knew it was possible. And she understood from her days as a teaching assistant in engineering just how important such representation could be to others like her. She was emboldened.

When she and her partner, Rick, bought their first house—a fixer-upper in the Seattle area—Elizabeth purchased a table saw of her own. Safety-minded, she wanted to learn to use the equipment properly. So she started taking classes. According to Kim McIntyre, former Wood Studio Manager at Pratt Fine Arts Center and the thoughtful craftsman behind McIntyre Furniture, Elizabeth took over thirty woodworking classes at Pratt ranging from hand-tool woodworking to chainsaw safety. By August 2018, Elizabeth was building her own Greene and Greene style furniture with the help of Darrell Peart's book on technique.

Her mind was open to experimenting and exploration. For fun, Elizabeth decided to turn her own furniture parts, so she signed up for her first woodturning class. For the next eight months, she would play at the lathe on and off, occupying the turning studio when it was available with increasing frequency. By the end of that period, she was devoted. The sound of her

gouge could be heard in the neighboring room amid staff meeting discussions, Kim recalled fondly. With the mounting of each new blank, Kim listened with covert delight to the evolution of Elizabeth's skill and confidence.

Finding her way

It was at Pratt that Elizabeth met Tom Henscheid, one of the woodworking department's regular instructors and a highly accomplished master craftsman. His clientele and his knack for wacky puns are the stuff of legend. As Elizabeth continued to develop her turning practice, Tom became one of the first people she would turn to for lessons on technique or advice when she needed help. When she was unsure about the path forward, Tom could be called on to offer her ideas, encouragement, and a digestible dose of constructive criticism. "It's so easy to be critical of the work we do," Elizabeth shared, "and having another set of eyes to look at something is helpful."

To this day, Tom offers her a valuable fresh perspective. "Elizabeth has a natural sense of design, of color and form," he said. "She has worried about a lack of formal education in the arts, but her abilities are in her DNA. Couple these abilities with an extraordinary work ethic and the patience to spend countless hours of focused discovery, and success is assured." Tom warns that it can be tempting to rely on beautiful materials and great technical skills to define the creative process, but he believes his mentee is able to transcend this: "Elizabeth, rather, [uses] her extraordinary skills to tell her own story ... She realizes skill is just the starting point to create a personal experience. This approach requires a certain bravery, and perhaps it is this that describes her the most."

With the onset of the pandemic, the world—including Pratt—temporarily closed its doors. Elizabeth was suddenly without access to a lathe or to the woodshop that was fast becoming her second home. In those times of ▶



Box Family, 2023, Various woods (carved and textured), milk paint, acrylic paint, Largest: 5½" x 3¼" (14cm x 8cm)

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Spoons, 2022, Various woods, milk paint, Various sizes

uncertainty, familiar creative practices like carving allowed Elizabeth to tune out a lot of the external noise—or perhaps eerie quiet—of the world around her. She kept her hands and mind engaged with spoon carving in particular, an activity she had grown to love over the course of her wood-working explorations and her dialogues with Tom, a fellow avid spoon carver.

It was by way of spoons that Elizabeth first began her carving practice and her experiments with



Jubilee, 2022, Carved and textured maple, acrylic paint, 6" x 8" (15cm x 20cm)

Poppies for Dad, 2023, Carved and textured maple, acrylic paint, 4½" x 10" (11cm x 25cm)



milk paint. Shaping a wooden spoon requires her to look at things from all angles and to think in more sculptural terms. With each spoon she made, her carving skills became more defined; her courage to experiment with different textures and colors grew. Like other frustrated turners around this time, she found further consolation in the live online presentations the AAW was offering. She recalls resonating very deeply with a particular talk by Merryll Saylan while carving spoons one day in her basement. When Elizabeth took a closer look at Merryll's work, she was amazed by what she saw. At Tom's suggestion, she also began exploring the work of the late Liam Flynn as well as Helga Winter. Another world of color and texture in wood opened up before her. She decided to pick up some unfinished bowls she had lying in the corner, and she started to play. Isn't a bowl just a big spoon without a handle?

Elizabeth was intent on learning as much as she could about carving, texturing, and coloring her work. Focusing her mind on this goal, she signed up for an intensive online workshop led by Donna Zils Banfield. The week-long workshop demonstrated several techniques that Donna uses to create deceptive surfaces, including woodburning, power-carving, airbrushing, and the use of milk paint and gilder's paste, all meant to disguise the true nature of an underlying wood form. Elizabeth

soon added a wood burner and a power carver to her tool set to facilitate these new techniques. A workshop with Art Liestman on dry-brushing followed. With her technical repertoire broadening, she turned her attention to developing her expression and presence as an artist. Graeme Priddle and Melissa Engler, in collaboration, shared their ideas about how an artist can bring their voice into their work. Elizabeth has been finding hers in color and movement. She explained that her work is colorful and highly reflective of natural motifs: "It would say, 'Don't be afraid to be different and bold.'"

Using milk paint and acrylics, her vibrant yet functional forms explore emotion through their use of color—"nature's smile." Such storytelling begins in the turning process. "Each decision and method builds on the story, using shapes and surfaces to draw on a variety of experiences," she noted. *Poppies for Dad*, a very special piece she created as a retirement gift for her father (a former history professor), wears a frill of delicate poppy petals in all their red brilliance. The piece is fragile yet resilient, as much a symbol of remembrance as one of hope for a peaceful future where every choice we make has the potential to create a ripple of positive change. "I've spent most of my life following the rules, so playing around with colors allows me to start challenging some conventionally accepted norms in woodturning and begin conversations."

As the form of her practice became clearer, Elizabeth sought opportunities to develop professionally. She applied first for the AAW's Professional Outreach Program (POP) Artist Showcase, an award granted each year to two wood artists that showcases their work at the AAW's Annual International Symposium. The recipients—either experienced artists who have made significant

contributions to the woodturning field or emerging artists who have the potential to make significant contributions—take part in two demonstrations and a moderated panel discussion about their work. Elizabeth was one of the awardees for the 2023 AAW Symposium in Louisville, Kentucky.

Keeping that momentum going, Elizabeth said yes to all opportunities that came her way. She submitted another application for a bursary for entrepreneurial women woodturners that was being offered by professional Irish turner and teacher Glenn Lucas. All of Elizabeth's persistence and hard work was paying off; she was selected alongside eight other promising women turners to study in County Carlow, Ireland, in August 2023 at the *All Women's Woodturning Week*. Here, she would focus on improving tool control and continuing to build her own style, all while learning the ins and outs of running her own woodturning business.

Student and teacher

The line between Elizabeth the student and Elizabeth the teacher is rather fuzzy. For the daughter of two history professors, learning—and sharing her experiences—is very much a way of being. “Education is empowerment,” Elizabeth asserts. It equips people with knowledge and skills that inform their choices; it opens the door to opportunities, regardless of a person's background. To her, a life that embraces learning is one enriched by a mindset of growth and critical thinking. The student seeks to evolve. In this way, Elizabeth understands learning as a process that unfolds over time, not just as an end. Like life itself, this process requires a certain grace as its lessons manifest. “I see a lot of beginners get caught up in the final product and throw technique out the window.



Shell Bowl, 2023, Carved maple, Waterlox, 6½" × 10½" (17cm × 27cm)

Feeling Blue, 2021, Carved and textured birch, milk paint, 5½" × 11½" (14cm × 29cm)



Learn the correct process and allow yourself some grace when things don't go according to plan. Eventually the process and the product catch up to each other,” she reassures.

And just as there are lessons to be learned from the practices and ideas of those who came before us, Elizabeth believes there is insight to be found in our own histories. Accordingly, she looks to art history and historical events to inform her work as much as she draws from elements of her own personal experience and education. The stories that emerge from her work explore the relationships between these facets of the past and the conditions of the artist's present. With each piece, her sense of self and how she wants to be in this world become

clearer; with each piece, she searches for signs of how to move forward into the future in more positive ways. In a contemplative offering, she asks the same questions of her audience.

With such a connection to education and learning, it is not surprising that Elizabeth embraced an invitation to begin teaching at Pratt, even in the middle of her own turning studies. She was given permission to audit as many woodturning classes as she needed to help her understand the class from the perspective of the instructor. “Not too many people can go from a new student to instructing in such a short time period,” Kim observed, “but, without a doubt, Elizabeth put in the daily effort to improve and then master her skills. She embraced ▶



Elizabeth (third from left, back row) was one of nine women chosen to receive a bursary to attend Glenn Lucas's All Women's Woodturning Week in Ireland.

Photo: Glenn Lucas



Rocky, 2022, Carved sycamore, graphite, 3¼" × 5½" (8cm × 14cm)



Green as Grass Bowl, 2021, Carved and textured birch, acrylic paint, 5½" × 11½" (14cm × 29cm)



Sea Urchin, 2023, Carved walnut (body), dyed madrone (lid), 5½" × 8" (14cm × 20cm)



Snakeskin Bowl, 2022, Carved and textured birch, acrylic paint, 6½" × 10" (17cm × 25cm)

mentorship along the way and built a community of support and friendships as well."

When Elizabeth submitted her official application to instruct at Pratt in September 2019—approximately a year after beginning her turning journey—she was an active member of the Seattle Woodturners and soon to be the chapter's liaison to the AAW's Women in Turning committee, a group dedicated to supporting women woodturners. She was also a co-founder of the Seattle Spoon Club, a carving group for local spoon carvers that she founded with her mentor, Tom, and her friend and fellow craftsman, Mary Vu Tripoli, in January 2019. Both clubs meet monthly in the spirit of community, learning, and inspiration. In these communities, Elizabeth has found an important space for connection and sharing where fellow enthusiasts can exchange resources, ideas, and

advice—or just a good conversation. And in these communities, members are invited to be a part of something bigger than themselves.

For a time, Elizabeth felt vulnerable sharing herself and her work with others. "It's difficult to do something that is so different from what is conventionally accepted because you're opening yourself up to more criticism. Putting yourself out there is already difficult enough." In fact, she still sometimes struggles with a sense of imposter syndrome because she doesn't have a traditional art degree. At times, this has led her to question whether she belongs. Fortunately, there are many supportive people in her woodworking community who have encouraged her to put herself out there and join them in the creative pursuit. And it is this kind of generosity and shared passion that compels Elizabeth to give back in the same way. "I've seen the power of community and how openly sharing

with others can really help everyone grow together. I try to carry that over into my woodturning and teaching."

An autumn spent observing woodturning classes—with some spoon carving demonstrations mixed in for practice—transitioned into winter. By November 2019, Elizabeth was instructing her first class at Pratt and had been invited to show some of her work on campus. Her classes focused primarily on woodturning fundamentals, turning bowls from green wood, and working with intermediate turners on individual projects. "The biggest thing I have learned from my students is that everyone learns so differently and faces their own challenges. This has forced me to think about how I communicate turning to them, which in turn makes me think more about the process. [It] has made me a much better turner."

In Elizabeth's search for student connection and strategies for communicating her message, she pays special attention to making sure all of her students feel a part of the class: "I try to divide my attention between [the students] equally. I know how important being part of a community is and how important it is to feel seen and heard." She noted that, while she is still learning the ropes when it comes to demonstrating, she comes prepared and tries to move confidently and at a

good pace for her students. “There is nothing more rewarding than seeing a student have an epiphany or a connection to what you are teaching.”

With only a few months of classes under her belt, the pandemic brought Elizabeth and everyone else back to square one, forcing us all to consider new ways of being together. In the scramble to figure out how to best adapt Pratt’s programming to a locked-down world, Kim was relieved to have Elizabeth on her team: “I heavily depended on Elizabeth during the pandemic, as she was willing to teach live online classes.” After a hasty immersion in Microsoft Teams and a crash course in videography and lighting, Elizabeth adapted her classes for the virtual realm. She was able to run some box and platter turning classes and an introduction to preparing bowl blanks; however, the inaccessibility of Pratt’s turning equipment proved a significant challenge to enrollment. With her partner Rick helping to keep her energy in balance, she also turned to the cache of skills she had collected throughout her time at Pratt and started running classes ranging from small wood-working projects, such as picture frames, simple cutting boards, plant stands, and garden boxes, to leather-work and saddle stitching. Her flexibility stood as a testament to just how far she had come.

Success as connection

Since those uncertain days as a new instructor, Elizabeth has returned to teaching classes in person at Pratt. And she continues to broaden the boundaries of her classroom. She now gives demonstrations in the community and receives invitations to teach at turning clubs and craft schools around the country. To Elizabeth, however, the true success in her widening reach lies in her ability to have an impact on her students. “Success to me is helping people find their voice and their place,” she offered. And like her parents before her, she stands to touch the lives of countless students during her career.

Elizabeth has learned that there is a whole community of people out there like herself willing to share their knowledge, encouragement, and even wood with those who are willing to take the risk of being seen. She encourages those who are just getting started to find this community. Not everyone will connect with their work, she cautions, but consider its originality and power. Their ideas may not always work out as anticipated, but this holds lessons too. If they can see these surprises as curiosities—the impishness of the wood, as Tom might say—then it makes it easier to laugh during those frustrating moments and sustain the spirit. And when an artist enjoys the journey and embraces their own evolution, they empower others to share



Demonstrating carving techniques for the Tennessee Association of Woodturners, October 2023.

Photo: Sonal Turner

more of themselves as well. Whatever plays out after that is as it should be.

For more, follow Elizabeth Weber on Instagram, [@icosawoodworks](https://www.instagram.com/icosawoodworks). ■

Randi Aiken is a member of the Seattle Woodturners and an active member of the board. She holds a BFA from the University of Western Ontario and studied woodworking at Pratt Fine Arts Center in Seattle. She finds inspiration in the forests of Bothell, Washington, where she lives with her partner and feral cat and all of their wildlife neighbors.



(Left) Pansy Bowl, 2023, Carved and textured alder, acrylic paint, 4" x 9" (10cm x 23cm)



(Right) Light Emanating from Within, 2021, Carved ash, 7" x 8½" (18cm x 22cm)