



JULY 21 – 27 2005

Falls Church Artist Finds Herself in the Grain

BY DARIEN BATES

The shapes always seem to form easily before Lynda Smith-Bügge when she works crouched over a piece of knotted oak with a small saw, making cut after cut in decisive strokes, she clears away the bark and superfluous material to reveal the heartwood beneath. It is something that after years of practice, she can trust, working with wood underneath her hands, solid yet fluid, the lines of the grain becoming a map for both her art and life.



Epiphany

Sculpture and woodworking has long been a part of Smith-Bügge's life. An art major at Hunter College in New York City, she started off as a painter but found the direction of the art not to her liking. It was during the seventies and the styles were all minimalism, single white lines on black background, or white painted on white. For her it was devoid of the life she wanted to express.

Sculpture was different. There were fewer rules to follow about color or form. Instead, in the three dimensional

arts, she was allowed to be creative, to let the forms grow and be themselves. It was during that same time period she discovered a love for working with wood.



MENDING

After college, Smith-Bügge started teaching woodworking in the Catskills in upstate New York to students from Manhattan. For stays lasting several weeks, the students would come out to the mountains and Smith-Bügge would teach them about sculpting wood.

Continued



THUNDERSTRUCK

For the students, it wasn't just about teaching them how to slice wood or how to turn it on a lathe to form beautiful shapes—Smith-Bügge made it about getting to know the entire nature of wood, starting at the source, trees.

Over the period of a couple weeks she would take the kids out to understand the trees from which the wood came, requiring them to use all their senses in the discovery. She would read to them from a poem describing the way differing types of woods burn, some woods smelling sweet and pleasant, others strong enough to draw tears.

She showed them how different types of wood looked, their color, shape, size of grain, and she made them touch and weigh them in their hands, feeling how a piece of poplar weighs less than the same-sized piece of walnut. She even

talked about the sound of the wood, how some people knew trees so well they could tell just by hearing the sound of a tree being cut down what kind it was.

*“You realize you
can't make a mistake.
Whatever you cut
something is going
to be revealed.”*

All this knowledge, she felt, had to come with the craft of woodworking. By the end of their stay in the Catskills, the kids would return home, carrying a new baseball bat or other item they had made themselves, along with a new perspective on the natural world.

For three years Smith-Bügge worked there until the program had to be shut down due to a lack of funding. But instead of finding a way to continue doing her art, she drifted away from the craft, first taking a teaching job in a children's museum, later working at the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian, helping out on several exhibits. Though she remained surrounded by art, she gradually stopped practicing.

Behind the curtailing of her work was more than just a lack of time or resources. Her decision to identify herself as an artist was not as simple as whether to do it, instead it was weighted with the values she had grown up with about utility and service.

Smith-Bügge grew up in the mountains of Colombia, her parents both missionaries in the city of Popayan. Her upbringing was focused around practicing religion, reading from the Bible several times a day, and above all, being of service. For her parents that was the key to life, expending your gifts in the service of
Continued

others, and they made sure that their daughter knew it.

With this as a foundation of her beliefs, art was not an easy thing to undertake. It seemed frivolous, wasteful, and selfish. So instead of choosing to do her art she worked in teaching, getting her masters degree in Museum Education from the Bank Street College of Education in New York. By 1984 she had completely given up practicing art.

Smith-Bügge believes that one of the primary principles behind her art is balance, a balance between taking and ceding control of the subject. While artists from metalworkers to painters might be able to completely dominate their art with technique and talent, Smith-Bügge identifies her job as being much more about seeing what is given, rather than creating something.

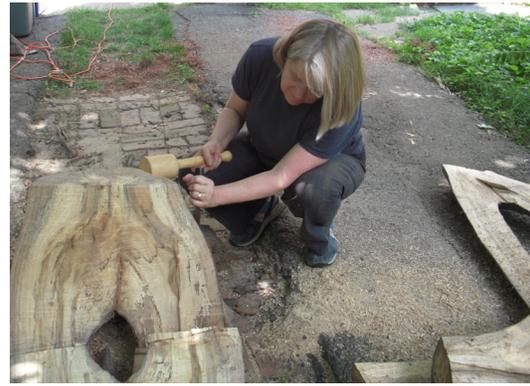
She pointed out that to her, her work often feels much more like found art than a specific craft. Rather than having an idea when she starts, the beginning of the process for each piece of work is, at its essence, dumb luck.

“It really is just stumbling my toe on the shapes,” she said.

Of course part of luck is being able to see it when it’s there, and to make one’s self-available. Every day, Smith-Bügge is surrounded by wood. The shelves of her studio are stacked with small-pieces of various kinds; ash, boxwood, maple, oak, all waiting to be explored. Behind her house, a shed her husband built for her overflows with larger branches and logs and there is always more coming in.

But sorting through the wood to find the right piece is an effort in itself. It takes an eye to see the curves and convolutions in a root structure or knot; or to glimpse the life of the wood that might lie buried beneath the dull-gray exterior bark.

In 1998, 15 years after she gave it up Smith-Bügge returned to woodworking



Smith-Bügge chiseling a sliced fork



Smith-Bügge sanding oak

for reasons she still doesn’t quite understand, taking a class at the Corcoran School of Arts to reacquaint herself with the work, to take another look under her own exterior. She remembers being scared at the time, afraid of being an artist again and what that meant about her.

One of the first pieces of wood she worked on, Smith-Bügge said, was just a mass of tangled roots, the base of a small tree, the wood covered in years’ worth of decay. Most people would have thrown
Continued



Smith-Bügge standing with her sculptures

it away as a piece of junk and chosen a heartier chunk. But there was something in those roots that resonated with Smith-Bügge, the tangle turning almost inside out with tension and anxiety.

So instead of trashing the piece, she moved into it, slowly removing the grit and grim, the age and decay, gradually opening up the life of the wood.

Slicing the wood is always the most dramatic part of the process; it's the point where a piece is often defined. Even when all bark is removed, it is impossible to know what one will find in a piece of wood until you make a cut. Then, as the chain-saw slices through to the core of the wood, the soul is opened up, the grain becomes visible, years of growth and development inside the bark is opened up to the light for the first time.

Now that she has been working for years at the craft, Smith-Bügge said she is never nervous about making those cuts.

“You realize you can’t make a mistake. Whatever you cut something is going to be revealed. It is a very forgiving journey.”

Despite the seeming intricacy of the work, the tools, at least in the beginning stages are anything but subtle; comprised of a selection of power tools. For the first cuts Smith-Bügge uses a standard chainsaw to get the piece down to a manageable size. Then she uses a band saw to slice with greater precision. Finally she breaks out a small circular saw, which gives her greater flexibility to mold the shape of the piece. Throughout it all, the cutting is seldom about controlling the wood, but rather about taking it where it wants to go.

But there is always a balance. Even as she works giving voice to the natural life within the wood, she also has to rein it in. In her art, geometric forms often work as counterpoint to the chaos. Too much control and the piece begins to feel cold and lifeless, too little and it's inaccessible, the meaning lost behind the

With that early piece, the tangle of roots, Smith-Bügge found herself struggling with how much control to exert over the wood. The original web was too complex mess. *Continued*



Detail of MENDING

With that early piece, the tangle of roots, Smith-Bügge found herself struggling with how much control to exert over the wood. The original web was too complex and she had to cut away many of the excess tendrils, simplifying the piece down to a core knot. From that center a single shaft sprung, straight and narrow, almost like a shaft of sunlight through a cloudy sky.



Detail of MENDING

Having cleared away the excess, she began to sand the piece down to smooth the rough parts. Afterwards she added oil to the wood, bringing out the grain and polishing the surface.

Smith-Bügge said that many woodworkers don't sand or polish the wood, enjoying rather the rough textures of the material. But for her, polishing is a necessity. She said that it speaks to something in her. "It brings out depth. I like the idea of looking deeply into a piece," she said.

Over the years, she has gradually begun to grind away some of her own resistance to being an artist, but it has been a process accompanied by constant tension and turmoil in her life. Despite getting back into her art she has continued, until recently, to teach, corking on a contractual basis.

Part of the reason she has had to continue working is that her husband, several years ago, was diagnosed with esophageal cancer and had to undergo chemotherapy and an operation to beat the disease. Although he has been given a clean bill of health, there were times when Smith-Bügge's life was consumed with fear and a sense of responsibility about taking care of the house alone.

And yet rather than inhibit her art, the struggles she has gone through seem to have been translated into the wood. Pieces like BEACON, a sculpture reminiscent of a cross, with hidden lights strung inside the body of the art, seems to be a lighthouse for somebody finding their way through a storm.

The names of her pieces evolve as she works, coming into being just as the wood does. She said she never has an idea of what she is going to create before she is finished. She just listens to her instincts and let's herself work, knowing



that at some point she will find what it is the piece is telling her. Often she works a piece to a certain point and then meditates on what it reminds her of before she starts taking control of the forms.

“It really is just stumbling my toes on the shapes.”

For the evolving tangle of roots, the final product was very clear to Smith-Bügge. She knew once she saw that shaft evolve out of the roots that it was going to flare into a sort of receptacle, though she was uncertain what that should mean. She worked out several ideas on how to make a bow-like attachment to the end, but she couldn't figure out quite how to bring it together. Then the solution came, and with it the name of the piece. She wove three pieces of wood together into a cone, using copper wire. The jagged wood, brought together into unified form. She titled the piece MENDING.

The piece received recognition by the late J Carter Brown, former Director Emeritus of the National Gallery, earning second place in Fairfax County's 1998 open exhibition. It was also made part of an exhibition at the National Arts Club in New York City.

In April Smith-Bügge made the decision to finally tie her entire identity to the role of artist, leaving her job to do the art full-time, a decision made that much harder as she and her husband recently started taking care of her husband's three grandchildren, after their mother was injured in a motorcycle accident.

The decision has forced her to take a look at the value of her work, the hardest part of the whole process for her. The idea of charging what her work is worth is very hard for a person who didn't even

think she should be creating art. As a result she has constantly under-valued her own work, while she has gained more and more recognition in the arts world.

Just this week, facing the possibility of either charging more or finding another job, she finally placed a price tag on "Mending" a sum of \$12,000, ludicrous to a woman who once sold a handmade table for just \$700, only \$300 more than the cost of materials.



BEACON

But buyers are already showing an interest, something that has shocked Smith-Bügge, but could also be the final bit of feedback she needs in the process of acknowledging her own value.

A series of Lynda Smith-Bügge sculptural wall hanging are now on display until the end of July at Fireflies Café, 1501 Mt. Vernon Avenue, Alexandria, Virginia.