

Max Brosi

Roger Bennett

THE STATIC BECOMES DYNAMIC

Ireland's Max Brosi is one of the most inventive and eye-catching woodturners to emerge in recent years. The range of his work is quite remarkable, from fantastic abstract sculptures to deliciously tactile full-bellied vessels. He is a deep thinker about his craft and is renowned both for the ingenuity of his designs and for having the technical prowess to bring them into being.

Early experiences

Max was born in Germany; at the age of two, he moved with his parents to the northwest of Ireland. An only child growing up in the countryside, he remembers carving walking sticks and

making bows and arrows with his penknife, and arrowheads from roof slates, "learning how materials work." At age four, Max was playing with a hammer and saw at his grandfather's workbench.

After school, he enrolled in Letterfrack Furniture College in Connemara. He loved the place, reveling in the hands-on designing and making. There were three installments in his education there, as he progressed from certificate to degree to a teaching qualification. In the periods between each stage, he did a lot of living, including travels in Central America and training as a diving instructor in County Kerry. He worked for a local furniture maker, producing one-off



At age four, Max Brosi was already intent on bringing his ideas to life.

Photo: Kurt Brosi

furniture pieces, built-in wardrobes, and fitted kitchens. This was good experience and he enjoyed it, but he longed for the opportunity to develop and create work to his own designs.

Woodturning was not on the curriculum in Letterfrack, but Max found a video of Mick O'Donnell turning thin green bowls and was amazed by his work. A photo in a library book of a sculptural piece by Michael Peterson, carved and sandblasted like the layered rocks in California's Sandstone Canyon, opened his eyes to what could be made from wood. He had a go on an old Graduate lathe in the Letterfrack workshop, grinding gouges to profiles he had seen in the video. His first bowl, he says, was "abysmal," but undeterred he later bought his first lathe with the initial idea of making three-legged stools to sell in the local market.

The business he started after graduating was very different, however. Combining his two loves of surfing and woodworking, he set up Cedar Surfboards, making "retro-shaped" hollow boards from Canadian cedar. These were beautifully made, "like a Bentley, not a Ferrari," and he targeted the connoisseur market. Again, this was valuable experience, but when he was hit

by the economic recession, he decided to qualify as a woodworking teacher.

It wasn't until Max started teaching woodturning that he really began to give the craft proper attention: "You have to be so clear in how you communicate it." It was mostly self-instruction, gradually acquiring and refining skills and techniques. A one-day lesson with master turner Glenn Lucas was highly informative, showing him in particular how to position his feet and body correctly. Unlike Glenn, who produces beautiful salad bowls in batches of hundreds, Max focuses on one-off pieces: repetition does not appeal to his restless spirit, and he relishes the challenge of experimentation.

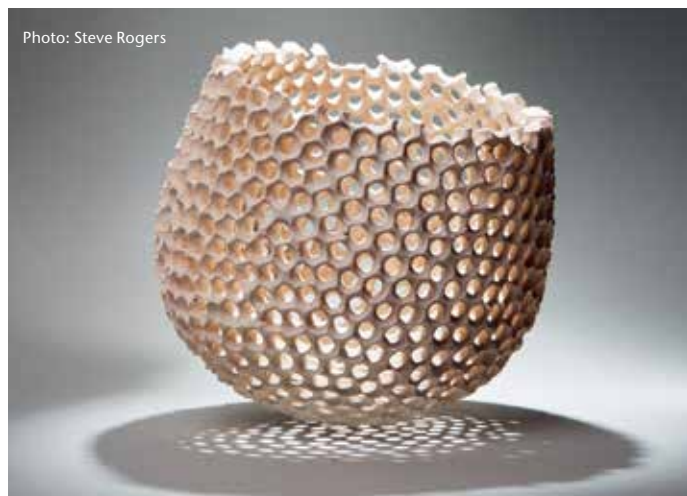
Finding his voice

Linking all of Max's diverse forms is his preoccupation with texture. He uses locally sourced woods—ash, spruce, oak, cypress, leylandii—which he turns green, excited by the movement in the wood as it dries. Max values "the honesty of turning a form and leaving it to develop, without forcing it to conform to what is expected." He loves the textures created by the drying process, how natural irregularities in the wood become accentuated. For example, in green oak: "The little pips and the rays in the sapwood become three dimensional rather than remaining a smooth flat surface." In contrast to this minimal approach to

surface treatment, he made an early series of delicate pieces inspired by the texture of coral, which he turned, carved, sandblasted, and bleached.

Ideas started to flood in; Max says he was lucky to hit on forms that other people hadn't created. One of these, his multiaxis tubular series, began quite innocuously. Wanting to make something truly minimal, he turned a simple hollow cylinder. But, dissatisfied with its appearance (he thought it looked no more interesting than the cardboard insert of a toilet paper roll), he took to his sketch book. *How about a cylinder with another one coming out of the side?*

Rise of the Machines (2013) was one of the first of Max's multiaxis pieces ►

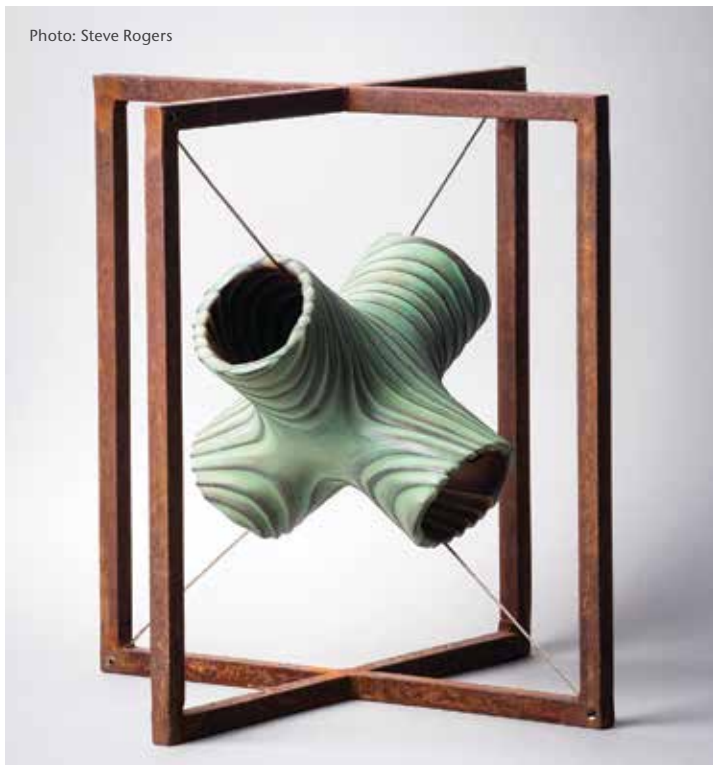


(Top left) *Small Coral Calabash*, Sycamore, 2015, 5" × 5½" (13cm × 14cm)

(Top right) *Rise of the Machines*, 2013, Sitka spruce, stainless steel cable, rusty mild steel, 12" × 12" × 12" (30cm × 30cm × 30cm)

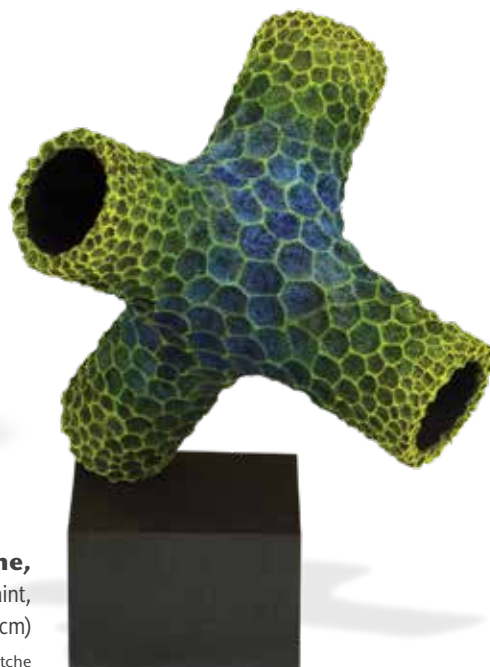
(Bottom left) *The Little Prince*, 2015, Sandblasted and color-waxed Sitka spruce, 7" × 6½" × 6½" (18cm × 17cm × 17cm)

(Bottom right) *Kraken*, 2016, Sandblasted beech, 7" × 14" × 13" (18cm × 36cm × 33cm)
Kraken was turned on thirty separate axes to create the individual tubes.





Baobab, 2015, Sandblasted oak,
9" x 5½" (23cm x 14cm)



Max Brosi and Bob Rotche,
Tubularis Brosii, 2018, Beech, paint,
9" x 7" x 7" (23cm x 18cm x 18cm)

Photo: Bob Rotche

exploring “the seamless interconnection of geometric shapes” to come from this “penny-dropping moment.” It was a tetrahedron turned from spruce, the product of much planning and experimenting. The surface treatment, too, was new for him. He tried sandblasting it, to little effect, so he then charred and brushed it, and took the final blackened layer off with sandblasting. The result was a lovely silky surface. Suspended in a rusty steel cage, the piece represents the negative consequences for the natural world of the rise of industrialization, with the feminine curves of the tetrahedron imprisoned in the harsh masculine cage. *Rise of the Machines* was a very significant piece in Max’s career: it brought him to the attention of the American turning community for the first time when it was selected for the *Rising* exhibition at AAW’s 2014 Symposium in Phoenix. The following year, it won first prize in the Open

category at the Irish Woodturners Guild annual seminar.

Other pieces followed, variations of this shape. *Baobab* is a stylized interpretation of a Madagascar baobab tree. He collaborated with Virginia wood artist Bob Rotche to make *Tubularis Brosii* for the AAW 2019 benefit auction. Max turned the piece from beech, and Bob covered its surface with an intricate pattern of carved recesses and colored it with acrylic paints. Mounted at an angle on a black block, it seems to be dancing and waving joyously. *Kraken*, a thirty-axis sculpture in green beech, was included in the AAW’s *Turning 30* commemorative

exhibition in Atlanta 2016. Evoking a mythical sea monster, it was very challenging to make: he had to devise a new tool and a holding device to enable him to turn each of the thirty little tubes.

Sometimes inspiration is subconscious. In 2014, Max suffered a sad loss when his father died suddenly from a heart attack. Only later did Max realize that a little spherical piece he called *The Little Prince*, which he initially thought of as an abstract sculpture with three short tubes emerging from it, was actually aorta-shaped, a working out of his grief.

Bolt series

In 2015, Max made his first piece in what would become his *Bolt* series: *Society*, a tube with side flanges turned from green oak, cut in half longitudinally, allowed to dry, and joined together with rusty bolts. As they dried, the two halves warped, so that when they were bolted together the join was anything but seamless, creating an underlying tension. The movement in the wood gives the piece life and dynamism, as Max explains: “It’s the energy of the two separate halves rejoined that interests me.”

He developed this idea brilliantly by turning components that each have two or more tubes interconnected at right angles; after they have dried, he sandblasts them and bolts the ring flanges together. They have to be turned precisely so that the sections will line up correctly. Max notes that “the aesthetic is strongly influenced by driftwood, and by rusty old ships’ boilers found along storm beaches on the Irish Atlantic coast.”

He often uses pieces in the *Bolt* series to suggest narratives that allude to particular societal stories



My work is in a constant state of evolution towards a more raw, honest, and calm aesthetic. Everything is in a state of transience, wood warps, metal corrodes. The static becomes dynamic, the perfect becomes imperfect. —Max Brosi

or controversies. The *Irish Water* sculptures (2015-) reference a debate then raging in Ireland over the introduction of domestic water charges by the government, the dysfunctional nature of the scheme expressed by the imperfect look of the forms. One of these, *Irish Water 2*, won the Established Maker Award in the 2015 Royal Dublin Society Craft Awards Exhibition. These pieces consist of two or three components, each turned on two or three axes. The minimalist sculpture *Freedom of Speech* is Max's silently eloquent response to the Charlie Hebdo terrorist attack in Paris, January 2015—a simple cylinder with two side flanges bolted together: “I laid out the piece in the log in such a way that as the wood dried, the annual rings would contract and the beak would open. The rusty bolts represent the attempted suppression of the freedom of speech, holding the beak shut.”

All of Max's multiaxis forms are carefully planned beforehand, the steps drawn and written down, the pieces already made in his head. His earliest tubular sculptures were initially turned from a cube (very dangerous); then he tried calculating and cutting a dodecahedron on a table saw; and finally he figured out how to use a sphere as his starting shape. The major problem was how to find the vertices of the tubes, and he spent days working out a mathematical formula to determine the position of the centers of the tubes on the sphere's surface.

Organic forms

In 2015, Max had a serious accident, when he fell twenty-six feet from a climbing wall and suffered multiple fractures. He spent several months laid up, frustrated but feeling lucky not to be permanently disabled. When he eventually got back to the lathe, with “some of the thoughts and ideas generated in a notebook in a hospital bed, slowly spilling out and taking

three-dimensional form,” he found that his shapes were becoming less geometric, more “curvy” and organic.

Alien Ocular, turned from green sycamore on four axes, is an early example of this more rounded abstract form. Six mouths agape separated by intersecting coves, hollowed with perfectly even wall thickness, it exudes a sense of other-worldliness. And from a technical standpoint, it is head-scratchingly amazing.

For the tubular pieces, Max does not have to do much carving, just smoothing the surfaces of the tubes where they ▶



(Above) *Freedom of Speech*, 2015, Sandblasted oak, rusty steel bolts, 9" × 4½" × 5¾" (23cm × 11cm × 15cm)



(Left) *Society (Bolt series)*, 2015, Sandblasted oak, rusty steel bolts, 7½" × 4¾" × 5" (19cm × 12cm × 13cm)

(Below) *Irish Water 2*, 2016, Sandblasted oak, rusty steel bolts, 11" × 11" × 11" (28cm × 28cm × 28cm)





Large Whalebone, 2018, Charred oak,
12" x 12" x 12" (30cm x 30cm x 30cm)

Photo: Steve Rogers

Alien Ocular, 2016, Sandblasted
sycamore, 5½" (14cm) diameter

Photo: Steve Rogers



meet using an Arbortech carver for the rough work and rotary burrs for the finish. The organic forms, on the other hand, are 80% to 85% turned, and the rest is carved, though the carving does take a lot of time, blending interior and exterior curves together. Max aims for an even wall thickness throughout, trusting his fingers to tell him when he has done enough.

Max reckons his head was full of bone imagery after his accident. Part of his childhood was spent in Easkey on the Sligo coast, and he regularly came upon whale vertebrae washed up on the beach. His *Whalebone* pieces certainly do conjure up such shapes, albeit heavily stylized—just as his tube pieces were never intended to mimic plumbing fittings, but are primarily explorations

of simple geometric shapes. They are pieces for the imagination to feast on. Max himself says of one such sculpture that depending on its orientation, he is reminded variously of whale vertebrae, or a samurai helmet, or a spaceship.

For *Traces of Atlantis*, exhibited and sold in the 2019 AAW POP auction *Traces*, Max set himself the challenge of turning the whole piece with no carving, “to create an organic form that resembles what I imagine past life forms from the lost city of Atlantis to look like. I wanted the form and texture to communicate age, erosion, and its organic nature.”

On texture and form

In addition to his complex multiaxis turnings, Max found himself drawn to “simple and straightforward woodturning” after his climbing accident, turning unadorned bowls and vessels from green woods. He usually prefers not to sand off the tool marks, liking their “honesty” (a core word in Max’s



What Planet Are We From Dad? 2018, Charred oak, Larger form: 12" (30cm) diameter

Photo: Steve Rogers

Traces of Atlantis, 2018, Charred oak, 5" (13cm) diameter

Photo: Tib Shaw/AAW



philosophy of making), as this shows the maker's hands at work. As always in his pieces, the tactile quality of the texture is very important. He remembers after a demo in Spain, noticing a woman who was cupping a brightly colored vessel in her hands and stroking it gently: he realized that for her, the main attraction was the feel of the piece, its shape and texture. Max consciously started a series of pieces that could be appreciated by people with limited or no sight. He decided sandblasted oak is not very satisfying to touch because the blasting leaves sharp bits on the surface, whereas woods such as cypress, Sitka spruce, or leylandii, charred and brushed, have both the look and feel of old leather—rich terrain for the fingers to explore.

And of course the shape must be good. When Max was young, he often accompanied a German artist friend to the beach on a pebble hunt. Lothar Göbel makes sculptures from pebbles, cutting them in half and gluing a band of glass between the two sections. The pebbles have to be perfectly elliptical, and Max learned a lot from these searches: he loved the feel of the pebbles, their textures and shapes.

Over the years, Max has refined his opinion of the “right” profile. The widest part of a pebble is usually in the middle and therefore it is rather static: having the widest point below the center elevates the piece, gives it a sense of dynamism. So, take the pebble shape, “pucker in the bottom, lower the wide point, taper the top.” The front-on profile of a Galway hooker, a traditional West of Ireland sailboat, excites him, and he will sometimes place one of his *Pebble Vessels* beside a photograph of the boat to compare their shapes.

Max particularly admires the shapes made by turners such as Liam Flynn, Christoph Finkel (“his calabash bowls—the proportions are bang on!”), Ernst

Gamperl, and Friedmann Buehler. Occasionally, he incorporates multiaxis techniques into his vessel making, as in the *Melting Pot* series, a four-axis bowl form with three semi-circular protrusions in the rim, like pouring lips.

Recognition

Recognition, both in Ireland and internationally, came quickly for Max. His designs are innovative, his techniques intriguing, and he is regularly in demand as a demonstrator, notably at *Jornados con La Madera* in Spain, and at the international seminars of the Irish Woodturners Guild, the Association of Woodturners of Great Britain, the Association Française de Tournage ►



Lothar Göbel,
Stone, year unknown,
Beach pebble, glass,
7" (18cm) long

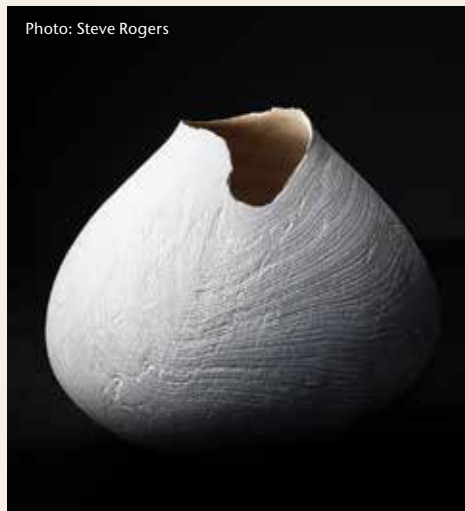
Photo: Lothar Göbel

Finding good form

Photo: Bob Quinn



Photo: Steve Rogers



(Left) “An American Mór,”
Carraroe Hooker, 1992

(Right) *Pebble Vessel*,
2018, Charred,
sandblasted, stained,
and limed sycamore,
10" × 12"
(25cm × 30cm)

The front view of a Galway hooker has inspired Max's sense of form. It encapsulates much of his thinking about well-shaped vessels.



Photo: John Carlano

Us...Here...Now..., 2017, Sandblasted oak, rusty steel bolts, 13" x 13" x 13" (33cm x 33cm x 33cm)



Max working on his 1950s-style lapstrake runabout, designed by Paul Gartside.

d'Art sur Bois, and the AAW (where he won an Excellence Award in the Instant Gallery in 2015). Max works as a Furniture Design Tutor at a third-level college, Cavan Institute, and his teaching experience is invaluable when demonstrating the intricacies of his turning techniques. His work has been included in AAW exhibitions, at SOFA Chicago (Collectors of Wood Art's *Why Wood* exhibition in 2016), and in exhibitions at Beatrice Wood Center for the Arts (represented by Kirsten Muenster). In May 2019, he had a solo exhibition with the online Wood Symphony Gallery.

Max lives in a most beautiful place, but it is quite remote, so he enjoys the opportunity to exchange ideas and techniques at seminars and demos, and also during his visits to and sojourns with other wood artists such as Jacques

Vesery and fellow multiaxis practitioner Barbara Dill. In 2017, he took part in the International Turners' Exchange (ITE) at The Center for Art in Wood in Philadelphia, where he was inspired by the other participants, the city environment, visits to the homes of woodturners and collectors, the variety of woods, the feedback from visitors, the positive attitude in America to wood art, and the openness and generosity of everyone involved. Max encapsulated the experience in the multiaxis *Bolt* sculpture *Us...Here...Now...*, whose components represent the participants, bolted together by the experience.

Other interests

Max has such a wide range of interests that he finds it difficult to get time for all of his projects. In 2009, with his wife Anna Marie, he designed and

built their home, a quietly dramatic timber house on stilts with a butterfly roof (see tiny.cc/Brosihouse). His social media followers are fascinated by his regular posts charting the progress of the 17' (5.2m) boat he is building, their vocabulary enriched with the poetry of nautical terms such as *sheerstrake* and *breasthook*. And now, there is Max Brosi the potter: he has added a ceramics room to his studio, dug a fire pit, and made some fine bowls and vessels using clay from his own land.

What's next for Max Brosi? At the ITE Exchange, Albert LeCoff wisely cautioned him against expecting instant epiphanies, and Max says it took several months for the new ideas he absorbed there to begin seeping into his work. One example is the use of milk paints and other methods of coloring. Max's interest in ceramics, especially the Japanese *wabi sabi* aesthetic, is starting to influence his thinking about shape and surface. But whatever he does, it is sure to be interesting, honest, and well done. ■

Melting Pot, 2015, Sandblasted and ebonized oak, 5" x 11" (13cm x 28cm)

Photo: Steve Rogers



Roger Bennett is an Irish woodturner and occasional writer. He specializes in making bowls, vessels, and jewelry, which he colors and inlays with silver. In a previous life, he was a teacher of English and French. For more, visit rogerbennettwoodturner.com.