

BIG SKY

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Jeff of All Trades

Art background enriches furniture maker's work

BY MICHELE CORRIEL

Sculptor, painter and furniture designer, Jeff Brandner is all of these. For Brandner it is all of the same cloth. Each discipline complements the other, adds another aspect to a piece, each way of thinking continues the dialogue within his work, expanding and contracting within his life.

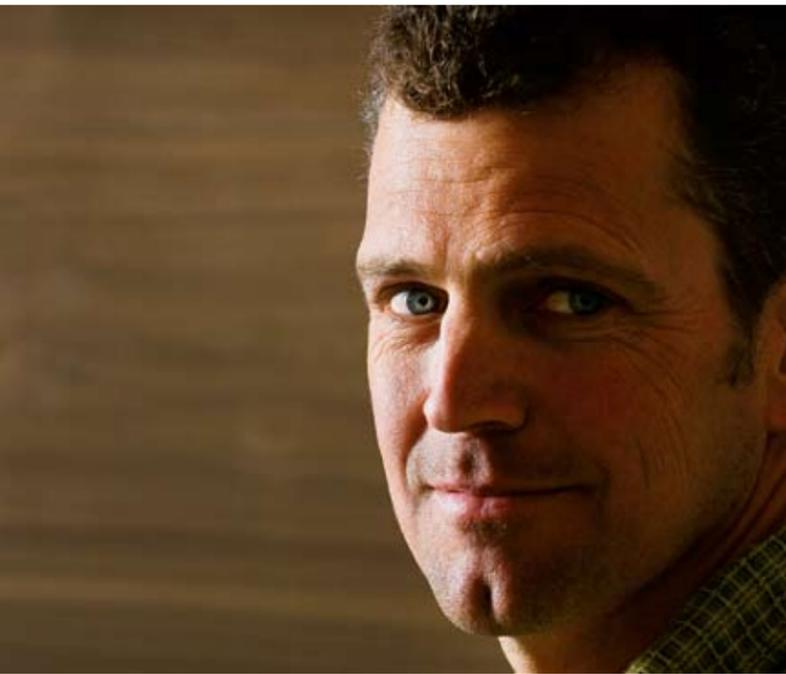
Brandner's studio reflects this diversity. At the moment his days are filled mostly with furniture — sculptural pieces referring to architectural lines, echoing the landscape. One large room is dedicated to the metalwork — an acetylene welder, a computer guided plasma cutter, sanders, polishers and various hand tools. The other room is strictly for the wood Brandner sometimes uses in his furniture.

The piece he's currently working on, a bathroom vanity for a home in the Yellowstone Club, utilizes three-quarter inch glass as a counter top with cold rolled steel for the base, a copper basin floats, encased, almost frozen, in the clear surface.

"I'm also going to use steel 'tiles' for the backsplash," Brandner says, picking up a large one-inch threaded rod that will become one of the legs the vanity stands upon. "All my furniture has an industrial flair, rather than the typical western furniture style. I use steel, wood and concrete, all organic materials, and if you look around Montana everything has to do with steel: horses, railroads, farming. Steel helped to build the West."

It is that kind of symbolism, a deep significance placed on pieces and parts, that separates Brandner and emphasizes his sculptural perspective.

The vanity itself is what Brandner calls an "I-beam" table, and it has a distinct feeling of something structural. But the four legs, made from geometrically shaped steel welded together, give the piece a distinct intonation. Metal rods fit through holes, like four legs of a horse, shod and standing. Strange how something so entirely created from man-made materials can convey something so alive and organic. But that is beauty of it.



artist portrait by Thomas Lee





She also appreciates the cross-discipline approach to his work.

“He’s a sculptor and a painter and his furniture does not have a slickly designed feel,” she says. “It has a starting place and an ending place. His structures are stronger and stronger. The way he mixes the wood with the steel, his work is grounded, but it has those interesting engineering elements and it feels great in Montana. There’s nothing inappropriate about it in Montana.”

Sandston, who also represents painters and sculptors as well as furniture designers, feels that everything Brandner does, in one way or another, is a type of sculpture.

“It’s all three-dimensional, and it’s all from the same strain of energy,” she says. “Right now he’s making more furniture, so that’s his focus. His landscape design is the same way. He’s influenced by nature. He’s doing whatever he needs to do to get to the place where he needs to be. I can see him doing large-scale installations — like a bench on top of a mountain.”

And in fact, Brandner has done some large-scale installations.

Shortly after September 11th, Brandner was commissioned to create two pieces of public art to commemorate

those who perished at the World Trade Center. One piece was commissioned by Morris City, N.J., a town that lost 190 members in that tragedy. The sculpture is made from three steel window sections Brandner recovered from the World Trade Center itself. He placed them in a circular setting, leaning toward each other, so it looks as if the sections are frozen in time, in the instant before the buildings collapsed.

“I went down to the site, while they were excavating the debris and picked out the pieces I wanted,” Brandner says. “It was very emotional.”

Brandner’s East Coast representative, Dennis Murphy, has known Brandner for a long time and has watched his work evolve.

“He’s a Jeff of all trades,” Murphy says. “Jeff is multi-faceted. Right now he’s doing some interesting work in furniture design and custom production, before that he did stainless steel design and creation. And I have one of his paintings in my house.”

Murphy gave Brandner his first commercial art gallery exhibition, in High Bridge, N.J.

“He’s a very physical person,” Murphy says. “He’s been in some Iron Man competitions. He’s high energy and I think that’s why he was drawn to the furniture and



colored patina sporadically, so it doesn’t look painted, for a more naturally weathered look.”

And so, like slipping into a comfortable robe, his painting background melds with the structural side of his work.

“It’s amazing where he’s going with his industrial style,” says Stephanie Sandston. Sandston owns Shack Up, the gallery in Bozeman that represents Brandner’s work. “I think his pieces have a kind of modern, industrial influence, but, at the same time, it almost has a vintage feel.”

Sandston sees Brandner’s pieces as if they’d been taken from another era.

“He has that old industrial, 1800s thing, that kind of crazy workshop feel,” she says. “Some of his pieces start to look like animals. Although the materials are industrial, and they don’t have animal

attributes, they actually have a lot of warmth for being such big pieces made from concrete and wood.”

And the pieces are easy to understand. The connection is immediate and personal.

“They’re accessible,” Sandston says. “Even though it’s hard-edged material he’s turned it into something that feels like a re-use.”

The steel itself prisms with subtle colors, and the acid burn of patinas splashed and brushed across its relentless surface adds a softness to the hard metal.

“The steel is heated to 200 degrees and then I paint on the patina,” Brandner says, turning the two-inch nut on the legs of the vanity, his fingers shadowed black from the metalwork. “Then I overlay that with another

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stainless steel sculpture.”

Murphy thinks he knows why Brandner is so interested in so many areas of the arts.

“He comes from a very large family and it’s all tied together because of his family background, in terms of the different experiences a large family brings,” Murphy explains. “Jeff is on a continuum for different ways of expression. I wouldn’t be surprised if he wrote a movie. He’s like the creative dike, when you stick your finger in one hole the creativity comes out another.”

In the studio, the smell of cut wood meshes with the sharp tang of metallic rust, a chemistry of industrial triumph. Machines randomly left across the concrete floor, various pieces in mid-finish, clamped and positioned for easy access. Piled in a corner of his studio/workshop stacked steel bases, holes cut out, look like a mound of giant dominoes.

“I’ve always incorporated aspects of sculpture into my work,” Brandner says, starting up the large computer plasma cutter. The hum of the machine as it moves on both axis vibrates the room. “And then I transitioned

into furniture.”

In his series of tables called Truss tables, Brandner borrows the image of the railroad bridge spanning high across the chasm below. The delicate embroidery of steel with the strength to carry a train is just the right mix for Brandner’s interpretation. Just enough reflection of the landscape and the interior needs of a home to cast the piece from ordinary to extraordinary.

Even his encaustic paintings resonate with an architectural theme.

“I like using the encaustic wax mixed with oil paint because I can peel away layers to expose colors,” he says. “And I tend to paint while I sculpt. They relate to each other in so many ways.”

Most of his paintings relate to his environment — older structures somehow affected by time and circumstance, altered from age.

“I love the transformation of forms,” he says. “Seeing something so everyday and functional, forgotten, yet recognizable. It’s important to take these older forms with us, they have so many stories that need to be told.” ◆

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