

MICHAEL LEE

*Born in 1960 in Honolulu, Hawai'i
Lives and works in Kapolei, O'ahu*

Michael Lee's day might begin early, with surfing as the sun rises, a few minutes from his home in Kapolei. After the family's morning routines are fulfilled, and until he picks his children up from school, Lee works in his shop—half of a two-car garage. With children at home, Lee can return to work and, if conditions are good, surf again in the evening. Lee is, both literally and figuratively, totally immersed in the best of island life—with strong connections to family, to culture, to the natural environment—and it is those connections that provide continuing inspiration for Lee and his work.

Lee grew up in an island Chinese household, surrounded by art objects that his mother had brought with her when she immigrated from China. He remembers marveling at their craftsmanship, and sought his own opportunities to make things. An Industrial Arts class in middle school introduced him to working with a variety of materials, but it was the warmth of wood to which he was most attracted. In 8th grade he took wood shop, and worked on a lathe for the first time, but it would be many years before he would return to that tool and to woodturning.

Lee completed Associate degrees in Liberal Arts and in Data Processing at

Kapi'olani Community College and worked for several years as a computer operator in the 1980s. Looking for a creative outlet to counterbalance the routine of his work, he purchased a small lathe, some books and other tools, and taught himself the basics of woodturning. Within five years he had become skilled enough to sell his work and was able to transform a hobby into a profession. From 1990 to 1993, he also traveled to Tennessee to seek formal training in woodturning as an art form at the Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts. During those sessions, Lee had an opportunity to work with some of the best artists in the field, while also becoming increasingly aware of the fuller sculptural potential of wood that would take him beyond woodturning as the sole process of production. Today, Lee—who has since returned to Arrowmont as a teacher himself—has a well-established reputation in the world of wood.

Lee's time is divided between production work—primarily calabashes and other vessels—that provides a steady income, and the creation of unique sculptures in wood that reveal his personal sources of inspiration. To each form of work, however, he brings a consistent and high level of craftsmanship, acknowledging the precious nature of his material by investing it

with the best of his energy. In the production work, Lee has learned much from studying the traditional forms and materials used in the creation of the Hawaiian calabash or wooden bowls. The refinement of these objects, created using only simple stone adzes, still present a standard to emulate, even for craftsmen equipped with more sophisticated tools. Lee often uses native woods such as koa, milo, kamani and kou for the vessel forms, but may also use woods from around the world as well. As he notes, "When I use a wood from another part of the world I feel it's as if I am traveling there through the properties of the wood." In some sculptural work, including *Lagoons* and *Europa*, both of milo wood, Lee uses the turned vessel form, possessing interior space, as a foundation, while taking advantages of variations on color and texture in subsequent carving.

Woodturning is, by its nature, a process that insists on symmetry of form. As Lee began to develop his own vision of sculpture in wood, not bound by the vessel aesthetic, he understood that other means of shaping the wood would be required. Lee's recent sculptures thus rely more completely on extensive and detailed carving with both hand and small power tools

(continued on page 18)

M. LEE (continued)

to allow their complex contours and articulated surfaces to emerge. Those forms are most often inspired by nature, such as pods and fossils, but also reflect references to the world that Lee inhabits in and under the ocean. To a keen observation of nature Lee also brings a sense of whimsy, a sense of “what if?” As he has commented, “What if you crossed a crab with a trilobite, what would the result be? What if a seed pod were split open, what would its contents reveal? I’m much more interested in making things that are surrealistic, rather than realistic.” This spirit is evident in *Crab’s Nest*, a work in which a crab, carved of gabon ebony, rotates on a set of tagua nut bearings, resting on a petalled platform of yellowheart. The spirit of playfulness, in which the organic and the mechanical are gently combined, is characteristic of Lee’s work. Lee’s lightheartedness is also evident in *Hummingbird Pod*, in which a podlike form of gabon ebony, condensing the features of the bird, rests in a larger pod-nest of warm-toned yellowheart.

For carving, Lee uses a range of harder, denser woods including ebony, lignum vitae and cocobolo—woods that provide a definite sense of weight and presence even for smaller work, created on the hold-in-your-hand scale that Lee prefers. It is clear that Lee appreciates the distinct personalities of each wood, expressed through color, grain and working properties. These individual properties play a significant part in the composite works, those with multiple parts, that Lee has created.

Acknowledging that he was drawn to wood because it was a material with soul, Lee uses wood to give form to what is closest to his own soul—his family. *‘Ohana* consists of five small vessels, wider at the rounded base, narrow at the top and articulated with a band of detailed texture wrapping around the lip and curving down the side. Representing Lee, his wife and their three young children, this cluster of forms, linked but independent, is an eloquent family portrait.

In *Our House*, Lee again explores the metaphor of family, nested within an ele-

gant, freeform bowl of kamani wood, carved to retain the crusty irregularities of its outer layer along the rim. Within, in contrast, are five small forms—shaped somewhere between a wing and a teardrop. Lee’s embrace of his family is everywhere evident. As Lee has noted, “By using the pod forms as metaphors for my children I’ll involve them by letting them choose what wood they would like their pod to be. In this way, they become interested in the work as they see themselves ‘evolve’ and we are then able to develop a dialogue about the piece.”

In *On the Beach*, Lee brings together the worlds of nature and family. On a free-form slab of maple, its soft undulations suggestive of the patterns in the sand created by shifting tides, rest five pod forms, similar but not identical, as family members are by nature. Carved to suggest an inner layer, each is embellished with a section of metallic leaf. It is an elegant tribute to what Lee holds most dear.