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## MATERIAL EXPLORATIONS

OLIVE GILL-HILLE AUSTRALIAN WOOD REVIEW, FEBRUARY 25, 2025



***Olive Gill-Hille applying an oil finish over the ebonised surface of Haptic.***

***Photo: Olivia Senior***

***Sourcing, jointing, stack laminating, shaping and sanding is hugely labour intensive work. What does all this mean to you and how do you make ends meet?***

I think with what I do you really have to love the process, the material and the end result. Most days I get up and look forward to getting into the studio. Although I have a wonderful community in my partner, family and friends who are invested and love to help me out, mostly I make these works entirely on my own, and at this time there is no studio assistant and very little outsourcing. It is a very personal process which heavily involves the artist's hand.

***Why have you chosen wood as your main medium?***

There's something about wood I find really warm. There is this wonderful familiarity that everyone has to the touch of wood, it's a texture we all know. I think there is a quality within wood that all humans connect with. As a natural material it feels like it's made from a matter not far from ourselves, it has been a living thing.

I think another element of wood I really love is that it's so transformative, you can source a gnarly piece of wood, something really unruly, and through working with the timber it can reveal a refined object. I love that it goes through this evolution.



*In the studio, the raw material. Photo: Nick Fitzpatrick*

**Which species do you prefer and why?**

I work with a variety of different timbers but I definitely specialise in Western Australian hardwoods such as jarrah. While I love working with imported timbers like walnut and oak because they're so malleable, they're quite removed from my process. There are times where exotic varieties will be right for a piece but typically sourcing the timber myself, from nature and as ethically as I can, has become a big part of the narrative imbued within the works.

**What does sourcing your own material give to the work?**

I think it means that the process of making my pieces begins earlier than most, the adventure and experience of locating fallen trees on properties and determining the quality of the timber, that's all part of the story of the work. Often the locations I go to will subtly dictate elements, there might be a curve or a particular form that references the landscape the material came from.



*Figures, two functional artworks/ stools, paulownia. Photo: Olive Gill-Hille*

***You've studied sculpture at the Victorian College of Arts and furniture design at RMIT? How have the two blended for you?***

I think VCA opened my mind to conceptual thinking, it allowed me to more critically analyse my process and the works I create as well as develop my knowledge of art history and the context of myself within that, whereas the furniture design degree was mainly practical and taught me so much about making. I really loved my time at RMIT doing the associate degree, I fell in love with timber there and I was happiest spending as many hours as I could in the workshop.

***What's your usual process for creating a new work? Do you draw or sketch first? Or do you work intuitively?***

There are two different starting points for my work, sometimes if a piece of wood 'speaks' to me in a particular way I will jump right in and work with the natural grains and shapes that are already there, intuitively carving. Other times, particularly with my stack laminated works and the more functional pieces, I will begin with sketches and watercolours to establish the design I like. My process definitely involves a lot of drawing, sketching and painting throughout as a way of working things out.



*Brace, Brawn, Knot, Guts, 2023, various salvaged softwoods. Photo: Olive Gill-Hille*

**Where do you sit within a world where the medium of wood is still mostly transformed by men? Has this influenced your work?**

It's not just woodworking that is dominated by men, to this day I think sculpture in general is still dominated by men. I remember very consciously wanting to bring my experiences as a woman to the realm of woodwork. I wanted to make forms that referenced my own experiences. It's a funny thing, because for centuries men have been creating almost voyeuristic sculptures of the female form, and I think in the last 80 years or so we have seen women trying to reclaim these shapes, me included. I consider some of my pieces as almost a form of self-portraiture.

**Do you use hand tools as well as powercarvers?**

I love my powercarvers but I do also use gauges, drawknives, chisels and rasps. It really depends on the material I'm using and what the design of the work is, whatever tool is most suitable for the job.

**Is your income primarily from gallery sales or private commissions?**

I would say it's a real mix of both and year to year this changes. My gallerist, Gallery Sally Dan-Cuthbert, has been wonderful while navigating these last few years and staging my first two solo exhibitions. I've been exclusively represented by the gallery since 2019. It's based in Rushcutters Bay NSW and specialises in functional art and high-end design from Australia and New Zealand.



*Conflux, 2023, Asymptote collection, jarrah. 'Joined shapes that create a single wall panel.' Photo: Olive Gill-Hille*

***How did the concept for Trunk originate, and what did it mean to you?***

Trunk was my debut solo exhibition, it explored themes of life cycles, death, the human body and the West Australian landscape. These themes came about in part as I had just moved back to Perth from Melbourne because my father had terminal cancer. It was a time I felt very grounded in Western Australia and I was rediscovering this world in the South-West. I felt connected to place and was also going through a period of lots of reflection and grief. Trunk was made from exclusively West Australian timbers, there was a lot of experimentation and exploration there.

***Tell us about your recent exhibition Asymptote – what does the title reference and how is that reflected in the works?***

Asymptote is a mathematical term meaning 'a straight line that continually approaches a given curve but does not meet it at any finite distance'. This exhibition was about exploring ideas relating to touch. It could be the touch between two people – those tender moments before two courting people first lay hands on one another – but also on a greater scale maybe the moment before an impact.

Finding a word for the very delicate and quiet moment before two people touch was quite difficult, and ultimately I liked the sound of 'asymptote' and the way a clinical word could be repurposed for something so romantic.

This body of work is made from jarrah, sheoak and eucalypt. Some of the works were salvaged from old bushfires or burn-offs from local properties and the charcoal surface of these was incorporated into the pieces. All the works went through a process of ebonising, with a mix of steel wool, rusty nails and white vinegar that reacts with the deep red tannins of the West Australian timber to blacken the surface. I love that this is a natural reaction rather than a straight-up stain and is almost like the timber itself is speaking.



*Brace and Brawn, 2022 Fremantle tuart. Photo: Olive Gill-Hille*

***Are you working on a new collection of work or planning any new directions?***

I am working on a new collection of work. I have never properly exhibited in my home state, and that has become very important to me in the last few months. I'm now looking at putting together a show to take place here next year. There are new things I'm currently planning and exploring, but I'm not quite ready to reveal those!

***What's your advice to other makers who want to pursue a sculptural path and make it work as a career?***

Never stop making, and try and make something every day. I think in lots of ways what is most important is being true to your own voice and establishing a unique style. People appreciate authenticity.

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*Learn more about Olive Gill-Hille: [@olivegillhille](#), [gallerysallydancuthbert.com](http://gallerysallydancuthbert.com)*

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