

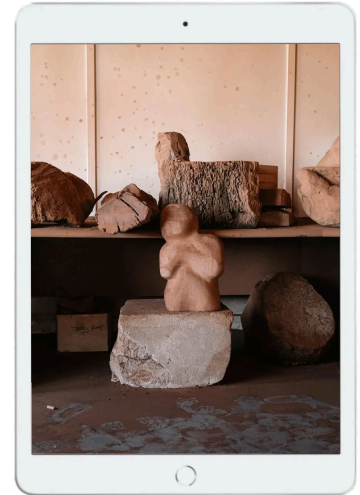
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## WEST AUSTRALIAN WOODWORKER ARTIST OLIVE GILL-HILLE GOES AGAINST THE GRAIN TO CREATE REMARKABLE, FEMININE FORMS

OLIVE GILL-HILLE | ELOISE FUSS, ABC ARTS, APRIL 15, 2024

In her Perth studio, Olive Gill-Hille guides a chainsaw over a piece of West Australian she-oak, fine red dust filling the air. It coats all the benches, her face and clothes, the walls and even the ceiling, giving her studio an almost luminescent glow. But while the warm-hued residue of WA timber is visually striking, there's downsides to the dirty, dusty work; getting a lift home at the end of the day can be tricky. "There's a lot of people that won't pick me up from the studio after I've finished a day of work because I'll ruin their cars! I'm totally covered in dust; it's full-on," explains Gill-Hille. "But I like that it's such an involved process, that it is so physical, that there is all of this kind of detritus, after the job.

"I like that my body is so involved. I think there is something really nice about kind of becoming one with the work a bit."





Gill-Hille says: 'I can find something that's really like gnarled, maybe ugly or dirty piece of timber, and I can transform it into a beautiful art object.' (ABC Arts: *Eloise Fuss*)



Gill-Hille said it's important to restrain from overconfidence in this art form, respecting that the tools of woodworking can be dangerous. (ABC Arts: *Eloise Fuss*)

As Gill-Hille expertly carves away at the timber, she's also making a dent in the history of this art form. For centuries, predominantly male wood carvers have fashioned the female figure from this fibre. "I think a lot of male sculpture has been in admiration of the woman, in a kind of voyeuristic way, where it's been creating the female form in quite a sexual way," she says. But she is reclaiming this subject matter, creating feminine forms that aren't suffused with a male gaze. "For me, when I create the work it's more about self-portraiture; it's more about my own experiences," Gill-Hille says.

"I feel like women know their bodies more than anyone so, of course, it should be us creating those shapes as well. "Conveying it in timber, or in sculpture, is a natural thing for me. It's about reclaiming our shapes again."



The artist spent several years in Melbourne studying woodworking, before returning to her home state of WA, where she works with local varieties of timber. (ABC Arts: Eloise Fuss)

Describing herself as an "artist working predominantly in wood", Olive has been creating work with this natural material for about seven years. She has been featured in major exhibitions, including last year's Ramsay Art Prize at the Art Gallery of South Australia, which highlights work by the nation's leading artists under 40.



This piece, *Nocturne*, an ebonised table made up of limb-like shapes, featured in the Art Gallery of South Australia's 2023 Ramsay Art Prize. (Supplied: AGSA/Sam Roberts)



Sculptures titled *Figure 1 & 2*. "Compared to metal work or something, wood is a really natural material. It's almost like an extension of our own sort of matter," says Gill-Hille. (Photo: Nick Fitzpatrick)

Gill-Hille has long felt connected to wood as a material. "I think there's something really warm about it. I feel like it's a texture we all can recognise," she says. "A big part of timber for me as well is that it feels quite connected to humans."

"I feel like it's, almost in a funny way, made of the same sort of natural material — it has been an alive thing."



"What I'm drawn to in my artistic practice is ethically sourcing the materials — mostly I will collect the timber myself if it's not salvaged from recycled materials." (ABC Arts: Eloise Fuss)



Large jarrah burls stored ready to be carved into sculptures. (ABC Arts: Eloise Fuss)

Gill-Hille mainly works with ethically sourced, native Australian hardwoods. She never cuts a living tree down, instead working with what she calls "roadkill timber". "So it's a timber that has already died, it's already started the process of releasing the oxygen and it's already started sort of curing. "It isn't so green that I can't use it, but also isn't habitat and taken by animals and bugs, white ants or whatever. It's about finding this sort of special area in between."

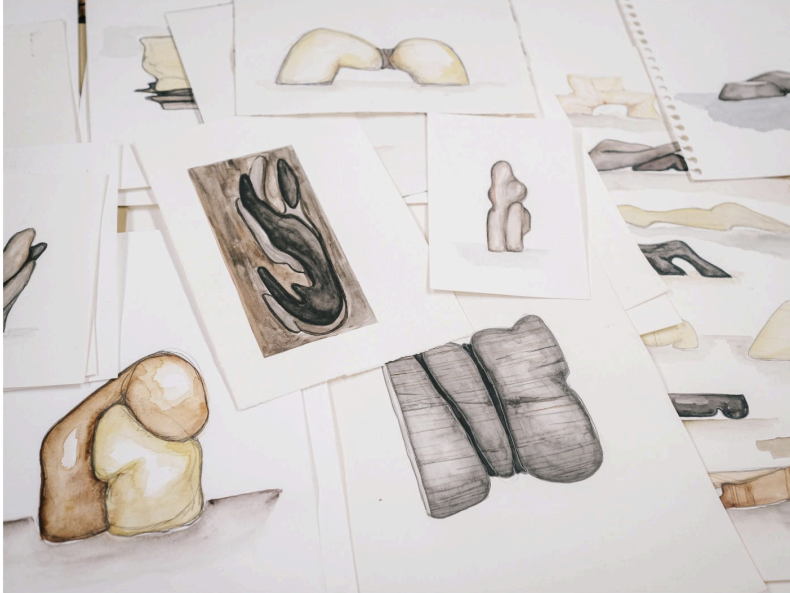
Mostly she works with eucalyptus varieties endemic to WA, like jarrah, karri and tuart, a "blondish timber", which Gill-Hille says she loves but is hard to find. "And I love she-oak — that's a really beautiful timber with quite amazing grain," she says. "But they're all Western Australian timbers that I source myself through farmland, that have trees that have needed chopping down, or have fallen down in bushfires on properties."



Pieces of salvaged timber, alongside a completed work, made from ebonised jarrah. (ABC Arts: Eloise Fuss)

The process of working with the wood varies. Sometimes, Gill-Hille begins with a watercolour sketch, mapping out highly planned sculptural forms. Other times, she's working more freehand, guided by the shape and characteristics of a particular piece of timber.

"Sometimes it might just be from finding a piece of wood that speaks to me in a certain way, and approaching it, just carving it and letting the timber direct me as to what's going to happen," she says. "It might be particular grains, it might be particular bits of forms in the timber that direct me in a certain way. "Sometimes it's a very intuitive process and other times it requires more thought and a little bit more planning."



Watercolour sketches, exploring forms and possible responses to different pieces of timber. (ABC Arts: Eloise Fuss)



The early stages of a sculpture. (ABC Arts: Eloise Fuss)

While Gill-Hille's sculptures appear fluid, creating them is a highly laborious and time-consuming process. Carving the wood, she's constantly moving her body and switching angles, using an array of tools — from chainsaws, to wood-carving bits on angle grinders, gouges and chisels.



Working in a free-carving style, body-like forms emerge from a piece of sheoak. (ABC Arts: Eloise Fuss)

But the carving is only about a third of the process. Once the rough shape is there and the artwork begins to emerge, there comes endless hours of sanding. "It's 10, 20, hundreds of hours of sanding, sometimes in the same position, doing the same thing over and over for hours," Gill-Hille explains. "That is the really arduous, laborious part of the process. In lots of ways, I think that I go through phases of kind of loathing it and then other times where I love it. "When I say it's like self-portraiture, it's me putting myself into the work in a visual sense, there's also blood, sweat and tears in the work for sure."



Gill-Hille's work often explores the interplay between humans and the natural world. Here the work in progress combines smoothly carved sections, with the original surface of the charred wood. (*ABC Arts: Eloise Fuss*)



The interlinked curved shapes of a piece from the artist's series *Asymptote* — a word describing a line that a curve approaches as it moves towards infinity. (Photo: Nick Fitzpatrick)

Woodworking has now become a very intuitive process for Gill-Hille, but it hasn't always been this way. A "naturally cautious person", Gill-Hille says she was extremely timid and nervous when she first began working with the tools during her furniture-making studies in Melbourne in the mid-10s. While it didn't take her long to become "obsessed" with the workshop, she says the residual caution now serves her well.



"I had had no experience with tools prior to this," says Gill-Hille, now a highly skilled woodworker and sculptor. (ABC Arts: Eloise Fuss)



The rich tones of WA timbers, in various stages of development. (ABC Arts: Eloise Fuss)

"I think it's like driving a car, or like people that surf, if you lose caution completely, it's when accidents happen ... the truth is the tools are dangerous," she says. "Being cautious and confident at the same time is important, but being arrogant or thinking that they're just there to serve you is not. Bad things can happen ... I had almost all my lecturers at furniture design school missing digits!" But, for Gill-Hille, the most insidious risk of this work is that fine red wood dust that moves through the air and coats the space. "Because of the type of work I do, where it's free carving, it's actually really hard to have any sort of extraction of the dust ... that's why I use the safety equipment like respirators," says Gill-Hille. "As much as I want my fingers and eyes, protecting my lungs is definitely the bit I care about the most."



Tools of the trade. (ABC Arts: Eloise Fuss)



Wood dust coats surfaces in the studio. (ABC Arts: Eloise Fuss)

Respirator and mask removed, tools switched off, Gille-Hille gets ready to head off — checking the blokes in the woodworking factory next to her have left for the day. Her work is intentionally connected to life and the environment of WA, but she reflects that working away from the bustle and momentum of bigger cities and their art scenes means you have to be self-motivated and "really passionate about the work you're making".

Tanned from the dusty remnants of her work day, Gill-Hille's complete investment in her unique approach to this art form is clear. "I think there is something really rewarding about this particular practice. I can find something that's a really gnarled, ugly or dirty piece of timber, and I can transform it into a beautiful art object," she says. "I think that has been really rewarding in the practice, to see things go through such transformation at my hands ... sometimes there is a moment where I step back, and I'm like, wow, I made that."