The Vital Nature of Judy Kensley McKie

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There are many ways to describe Judy Kensley McKie and her immensely significant body of work. In my mind, one specific descriptor rises above others: *vital*. Whether she is working in basswood or bronze, linocut or ColorCore polyethylene, the menagerie of flora and fauna that emerge from her hands and mind have countenances, bodies, and lives of their own. Her goal is to make "inanimate objects that are animated."[1] Get close to her work and you can almost hear hearts beating and leaves rustling in the wind. While the wood she shapes was once alive, it is no small feat to conjure such vigor from materials that have been so thoroughly and intentionally shaped, incised, and sanded.

In this current exhibition at Gallery NAGA held in the artist's eightieth year, we see the range of her mastery of form, material, and concept on full display across decades of her work. The rounded edges of a green-patinated cast bronze bench made just six years ago make a perfect canvas for the sharp teeth of a crocodile whose body, demarcated in bold lines, snakes around each side of the work before being swallowed at the tail like an ouroboros.

In work from the early 1990s, we see birds and fantastical creatures take shape from woodcuts and linocuts. In two magical headboards from less than a decade ago the artist has coaxed toucans and gazelles from their basswood surfaces.

Stand-outs in this exhibition are the ColorCore Cabinets, a triptych from 1984 featuring expressive black-and-white sgraffito fish and animals. These were commissioned for a significant exhibition organized by the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service that went on the road in 1985. Called *Material Evidence: New Color Techniques in Handmade Furniture*, it was a collaboration between the esteemed (and no longer extant) Workbench Gallery in New York and the Formica Corporation. Nineteen contemporary makers including Wendy Maruyama, Tom Loeser, and McKie were invited to be part of this avant-garde exhibition in which "America's best woodworkers confronted a new material."[2]

The organizing curator at the Smithsonian, Lloyd Herman, noted in the accompanying catalog that these nineteen artists – including McKie – had produced work that, in his estimation, both tipped its hat to and transcended the checklists of earlier, seminal exhibitions.[3] *Material Evidence*, he argued, introduced a compelling new generation of contemporary American furnituremakers. McKie's work was thus positioned as part of an esteemed lineage of studio furniture even while she and her peers augured new ways of making and knowing in the craft field.

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Born and raised in Boston, McKie trained – as did so many important studio furniture makers over successive generations – at the Rhode Island School of Design, graduating in 1966. However, her studies there were in painting and she didn't really start working in wood until she

[1] See collections.mfa.org/objects/43075/leopard-chest
[2] Lloyd Herman et al., Material Evidence: New Color Techniques in Handmade Furniture, (Formica Corporation, Workbench Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 1985), 3.
[3] These earlier exhibitions included *Woodenworks*, his own seminal show which inaugurated the Renwick contemporary craft galleries in 1972, and the Museum of Contemporary Craft's *New Handmade Furniture* exhibition of 1979 in New York.

ended up with a home to furnish on a tight budget after graduation.[4] It was then that she joined a cooperative woodshop, and an important one at that: The New Hamburger Cabinetworks Co-operative Workshop (NHCCW) which was first located in Roxbury and then later in Cambridgeport, MA.[5]

The New Hamburger Cabinetmakers Workshop was a place where woodworkers of all grains came together, often collaborating on very practical jobs in homes and on construction sites. Their cooperative was part of a larger wave of collectives in the 1970s in the US, spearheaded by a range of groups including presses, bookstores, filmmakers, and worker-controlled food cooperatives. As writer John Curl points out, for artisans, a shared studio space meant controlling the means of production they needed to make a living.[6] This included the tools that might otherwise be expensive to purchase and maintain alone, as well as teaching and learning from one another.

It was there in the 1970s, a heady moment for the craft revival in the United States, that McKie learned about woodworking from the ground up. She experimented and made mistakes, tried things, pulled them apart, and re-did them when they didn't work out. Unlike her BFA at RISD, this was a deeply practical season of learning rather than an immersion in an academic study of the medium and its history.

At this early stage of her career, she was by no means *au fait* with currents in contemporary craft. As she later remarked, at that time she'd heard of greats like George Nakashima "because Todd [her husband] had grown up in New Hope, Pennsylvania … but I didn't really know what his work looked like." [7] She was aware of younger guns like Wendell Castle because "somebody had a catalog, and we passed it around" the co-operative woodshop where "everybody thought it was pretty nutty stuff." But, in general, she was by her own admission "very, very out of touch with the craft world."[8] Little wonder, then, that her work has always felt so deeply unique. Her dialect in wood is synthesized from formal training in two-dimensional surfaces married to her own informal explorations in pulling these flattened forms into the wider three-dimensional world.

She recalls that there was only one woodworker in the shop who had formal training when she arrived, and that the rest of the members were, like her, learning woodworking from books and by trial-and-error and sharing their knowledge.[9] She remembers it as "a true co-op, a very

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[4] As a child, McKie was also drawn into domestic DIY projects by her father.
[5] The Cambridge collective was an offshoot of an earlier group based in Plainfield, Vermont. There, the New Hamburger commune was founded by former members of the New Left Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the Peace Corps, as well as members of the women's movement.
[6] The Boston area was particularly rich in such worker collectives, including the Boston Women's Health Collective, and the Black feminist Combahee River Collective, the New England Free Press, Read bookstore, Newsreel Films, Walrus Woodworking, and the Cambridge auto co-op. In 1980, there were over 50 worker collectives in and around the city. See John Curl, *For All the People: Uncovering the Hidden History of Cooperation, Cooperative Movements, and Communalism in America*, (PM Press, 2012).
[7] Oral history interview with Judy Kensley McKie, November 22, 2004. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian institution. https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-judy-kensley-mckie-12483.
[8] Ibid.
[9] "Mostly they [her woodshop workmates] were Harvard and MIT graduates who had decided to do something alternative, who wanted to work with their hands. They weren't coming from any woodworking experience. But it was a very well-equipped shop. I started working there, and I learned things bit by bit as I needed to know them. It was so much fun that I kept on doing it. For me, going into furnituremaking wasn't a conscious decision. It just evolved." McKie quoted in Jonathan Binzen, "A Conversation with Judy Kensley McKie," exhibition catalog, November 10 – December 16, Gallery NAGA, Boston, Massachusetts, 2006, 4.
https://www.behemothmedia.com/download/mckie2006.pdf

socialist system" where people brought their children to the shop for communal childcare.[10] Members focused on wage-sharing through collaborative projects, building "furniture for the people" made from modest materials. As McKie noted many years later,

> If you made $3 an hour on a job, by the time we wage-shared it was about $1 an hour. But you could live for nothing in those days, and everybody was having a very good time … Our shop was almost the opposite context from a fine woodworking school.[11]

While tool sharing continued, the cooperative eventually disbanded the wage-sharing element of their set up as members started to express interest in moving in different directions, with some preferring house renovation and construction work while others focused on fine woodworking and furniture.

McKie was a pioneer in this respect, becoming the first member to leave the cooperative wage structure because she wanted to center her artistic practice. She had started to become known for her expressive furniture decorated with animal and foliage patterns and shapes and was ready to embrace the studio craft movement in full.

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While she was a relative novice when she arrived at the New Hamburger Cabinetmakers Co-operative Workshop, by the time she left to establish her own studio McKie had become a north star for many makers and artists in Boston and beyond. This history is important. It underpins the power and significance of her work as we view it today.

She became part of a "web of connections" in the postwar craft field in the United States, one that worked genealogically "in both direct and indirect ways" to catalyze experimentation and conceptual exploration in a medium that had long been associated – especially in the northeast – with much stricter approaches to material and form.[12]

Among others, McKie mentored Wendy Maruyama when the latter was at Boston University's experimental Program in Artisanry, and other students from that same program found their way into the New Hamburger cooperative space upon graduation.[13] They in turn brought with them

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[10] Interview with Ainsley Donaldson by the author, December 2021. Before arriving at the NHC, Ainsley Donaldson had been the only woman on her program in cabinet and furniture making at the North Bennet Street School and like several others within the NHC collective–including McKie and Carol Neville–had small children who often made an appearance in the wood shop during school holidays or when they were home sick from school.

[11] "We are going to build furniture for the people … We shared responsibility for everything; we would have weekend-long meetings and talk about how we should work and what the social context of what we were doing should be. I didn't have the really strong political bent that everybody else did—I just wanted to be making things and this was a place to do it. But that was part of what it was all about, and some of that feeling rubbed off on me." McKie quoted in Jonathan Binzen, "A Conversation with Judy Kensley McKie," exhibition catalog, November 10 – December 16, Gallery NAGA, Boston, Massachusetts, 2006, 4. https://www.behemothmedia.com/download/mckie2006.pdf

[12] "The gap between East and West Coast institutions and between Canada and the United States narrowed. At the same time, those makers who worked near academic centers often interacted with students and faculty of those programs. For example, McKie mentored Maruyama during the latter's time at PIA, Maruyama encouraged [Garry Knox] Bennett to incorporate more painted surfaces in his work when she taught at CCAC [California College of the Arts and Crafts], and Bennett convinced McKie to cast her work in bronze." Gerald Ward, Edward S. Cooke, and Kelly L'Ecuyer, *The Maker's Hand: American Studio Furniture, 1940-1990* (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 2003), 96.

[13] The NHC were an early source of support for the Program in Artisanry, with one of the founding members of the NHC, Erland "Ernie" Russell, helping to set up the woodworking facilities at PIA in 1974.

the academic focus on solo work and the pursuit of individual self-fulfillment that, in part, galvanized McKie to strike out on her own.

Just before she left the cooperative, McKie's work was included in the Museum of Craft's 1979 exhibition, *New Handmade Furniture: American Furnituremakers Working in Hardwood*. It was an exhibition that set the scene for craft that was "expressed in a dozen different ways," according to its curator, Paul J. Smith (even as 95% of the works on display, 34 of 36 total, were by men).[14] McKie recalled it as "the thing that turned the tables for me,"[15] and Smith, too, noted the sea change of which McKie was such a fundamental part. Artists working in wood were finally able to "maintain their own studios, working full-time creating one-of-a-kind and commissioned pieces."[16]

Her work began to find its way into major museum exhibitions and collections, including the one I now steward at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. My brilliant predecessors are responsible for the MFA having welcomed in nine of McKie's works, including the stately *Bench with Horses* (1979), part of the longstanding Please Be Seated program. The MFA's *New American Furniture* exhibition of 1989, organized by Ned Cooke before he left to inspire generations of students as a professor at Yale University, invited artists to riff on historical furniture in the collection. McKie chose an early twentieth century painted trunk by Charles Prendergast as inspiration. The result is the majestic *Leopard Chest* (1989), still a visitor favorite any time it's out on display.

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Today, when we consider Judy Kensley McKie's oeuvre, it must be in the context of the history outlined above. We must acknowledge her position as a pioneer of expressive form, celebrate her unique, animated, colorful, and intricate visual vocabulary, and thank her for holding steady as a female woodworker in a field which was dominated by male teachers and peers.

In the oral history that she provided to the Archives of American Art in 2004, a project that I am endlessly grateful for as a craft historian, McKie recalled feedback she received in a critique as an undergraduate student. She was struggling with painting as a medium, unconsciously aware that it was not the method of truly expressing herself and her ideas most completely. "You're still doing an outline," her teacher noted, framing it as a fault. "This is still an outline. This isn't … you're not inside the figure."[17] I find it fascinating – and heartening – that the bold, spare, linear mark-making for which McKie would become so feted as a woodworker was there from the beginning. She didn't give up on it. She just finally had the right material in her hands when she found wood.

Judy Kensley McKie was and remains a beacon for many woodworkers who have come after her – and even her peers in their own time. The works on display here at Gallery NAGA today are not just testament to her prowess as an artist, but her cultural importance to the wider field of craft.

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[14] Rita Reif, "The Art of the Furniture Maker," *New York Times*, May 1979, Section C, page 1.
[15] Oral history interview with Judy Kensely McKie, Smithsonian 2004.
[16] Reif, "The Art of the Furniture Maker," 1.
[17] Oral history interview with Judy Kensley McKie, Archives of American Art, 2004.