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Mark Lindquist comes out of his wood work for a rare show

Artist invents and re-invents, as interests take him from chain saws to Japanese art to photography

By Mark Hinson

DEMOCRAT SENIOR WRITER

For an artist who carefully guards his privacy and avoids publicity, sculptor and wood-turner Mark Lindquist sure can draw a crowd.

It's a muggy Friday night in mid-September and more than 400 people are crammed into the Gadsden Arts Center for the opening of a 40-year retrospective exhibition of Lindquist's art. The spacious, former hardware store on the courthouse square in downtown Quincy looks more like a loft in Soho in downtown Manhattan. Lindquist's abstract tree totems, deceptively complex wooden bowls, chainsaw-created "paintings" and digital photography command the gallery.

Even though Lindquist has maintained a studio in an old tobacco warehouse north of Quincy for nearly 30 years, it's the first major show he has ever had in his adopted hometown.

"I've been able to keep a low profile since moving here from New Hampshire — I keep my head down," Lindquist, 61, said as he smiled and surveyed the crowd. "People respect that. When I first got to Quincy, it looked like Key West with all the old cars in the square and the faded blues and lavenders on the buildings. I was taken by it. It was like a time warp. And it was just what I was looking for."

When Lindquist travels away from North Florida, however, he's usually given the rock star treatment in art circles in New York, Baltimore, Philadelphia and Washington, D.C.

What's that adage about never being a hero in your hometown?

'Hidden in plain sight'

Three weeks after the retrospective opening, Lindquist is standing on the front porch of Lindquist Studios, which is not very far from the tiny town of Gretna and also not very easy to find. He had just returned from Washington, D.C., where he was invited to speak on a panel at the Smithsonian Institution.

"We're sort of hidden in plain sight out here," Lindquist said. "We like it that way."

Lindquist Studios is actually a compound of studios, storage rooms and workshops tucked inside a rambling, four-story warehouse that was once a packing plant on a plantation that provided the smokeable products for Prince Edward Tobacco. It was a vine-covered ruin when Lindquist, his wife, Kathy, and their two young sons, Josh and Ben, arrived in 1983.

"There wasn't a pane of glass intact in the whole place," Kathy said. "It took a *lot* of work."

"Most people would have looked at it and said, 'No way,' " said Bob Bischoff, the director of Florida State's Master Craftsman Program, who first introduced Lindquist to the site. "It was really beat up bad. But he could see it (the potential) instantly."

If you pretend not to notice the computers tucked into every other corner and the musical sound system, a guided tour of the factory-like Lindquist Studios is akin to a trip back to the Industrial Age of the mid-20th century. Everywhere you look there are drills, power tools, band saws, table saws, sanders, scraping tools, circuit boards and gigantic metal lathes the size of sedans. Many of the machines have been refurbished or customized with robotics by Lindquist. It's part high-tech and part Tom Swift's laboratory.

"It's a dangerous place if you don't know what you're doing," Lindquist said.

But Lindquist certainly does know what he's doing, and he started doing it at a very young age.

From father to son

When Lindquist was 10, his father, Mel Lindquist, an electrical engineer and a pioneering wood-turning artist, put a chain saw in his son's hands. It was a natural fit from the start.

"He uses a chain saw like other artists use a pencil or a brush," Gadsden Arts Center director Grace Maloy said. "It's like his stylus."

The older Lindquist also taught his son all about the different types of wood, lathes, tools and equipment he would need as a sculptor who would push wood-turning into the realm of fine art.

"A guy at a conference once told me, 'You sure picked the right father.' And I did," Lindquist said and laughed.

Lindquist also picked up a love of tinkering from his father and a neighbor in Schenectady, N.Y., who happened to be a nuclear physicist. Together, they made scooters, motorized bicycles and go-carts.

"This all just advances go-cart technology," Lindquist said as he stood by an industrial saw that had been refitted with a small chain saw.

"He's done a lot of things mechanically that no one else can do," Bischoff said. "He's an inventor and a tinkerer on one level, but then he takes what he's invented and pushes it into the visual world. It allows him to do work no one else can do. He's just being modest when he calls it 'go-cart technology.' "

During his studies at New England College in Henniker, N.H., in the late '60s, the intellectually curious and ever restless Lindquist delved into everything from stone-carving to photography to pottery to Eastern philosophy. He also married Kathy, his girlfriend since high school, in 1968 when they were both under 20 years old. They've been together ever since.

"She's the glue that holds all of this together," Lindquist said. "I could not have done any of this without her. It's a team."

Starting in the early '70s, Lindquist began to break with other wood-turners of the time by introducing the concept of the "happy accident." While most wood-turners went to great lengths to make their strictly functional bowls and vessels look as perfectly shaped and polished as possible, Lindquist let the wood guide him. He began using spalted wood, which was discolored and marked by fungi in the early stages

of the rotting process. Where most saw flaws, Lindquist saw raw beauty. It was all very zen — and very new.

"The dominant ideology until the mid-1970s had been a streamlined modernism consistent with the 1930s machine aesthetic of Gilbert Rhode and Donald Desky," art historian Robert Hobbs wrote in the "Mark Lindquist: Revolutions in Wood" catalog. "Instead of working with nature, the practitioners of this craft were intent on harnessing and dominating it."

Lindquist changed all that.

By the time he was 29, he was included in the first exhibition of wood-turning ever shown at the Smithsonian. His work is also included in permanent collections at The White House, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the High Museum of Art in Atlanta and The Metropolitan Museum of Art in Manhattan. In 1996, Lindquist had his 25-year retrospective at The National Museum of American Art in Washington.

"In the art world, it's a Nobel Prize," Bischoff said of the National retrospective. "Without the money and fancy dinner, though."

Long trip back from Rumble Road

During the mid-'80s, Lindquist spent a lot of time on the highway. It took a long time to transport all the equipment, materials and art from the family's former New Hampshire studio to the one in Gadsden County. Lindquist's career was also in full swing with shows happening around the country.

One night in 1985, while on the road to a show in Baltimore with an assistant, Lindquist decided to get some rest. He stretched out in the back of the van atop his packed and bundled-up artwork. The assistant fell asleep at the wheel north of Macon, Ga., ran off the interstate and flipped the van down an embankment.

"The van rolled seven or eight times," Lindquist said. "I forget the exact number."

Miraculously, neither the driver nor the passenger was killed but Lindquist suffered serious head injuries and crushed hips.

"I met one of the state troopers who was there at the crash and he said, 'Are you the one they cut out of that crumpled Coke can?'," Lindquist said during lunch in his studio. "I said, 'Yes.' Then he said, 'You must have some kind of beaten-up guardian angel. He may not get in the car with you again.' "

The crash left Lindquist in a wheelchair until he regained the ability to walk and work. He still uses motorized chairs while working wood on his lathes. He also suffered from severe migraines for 15 years.

"You see that glass of water there?" he said. "You can knock it off the table, break it and put it back together. But it won't be the same. It probably won't hold water as well as it used to. The crash divided my life into two: Before The Accident and After The Accident. There was a drive to do the work before and there's a drive now. They're just different."

In 1987, Lindquist took a post teaching drawing and design at the FAMU School of Architecture. At the same time, he went back to school at FSU to obtain a master's degree and study with Penelope Mason, one of the world's leading experts on Japanese art history.

Around the same time, Lindquist began his large-scale, Japanese-inspired "Ichiboku Series" of totems, three of which are on permanent display in the lobby of the Gadsden Arts Center. The subtly manipulated pieces, some of which are 8 feet tall, were created from sections of single trees.

Considering Lindquist's post-crash physical condition when he started the series, it's an undeniably impressive feat.

"The most striking features of Mark Lindquist's wood sculptures is that they still have so much of the tree in them," critic Janet Koplos wrote in a 1990 review in *Art in America*. "In Lindquist's case, it is this regard which unites his crafts background and his interest in Japan: in both, respect for material as itself has been acceptable."

Once in a lifetime

These days, Lindquist is fascinated with "blur motion" photography. He uses a very high-powered, sensitive and expensive Nikon camera to photograph inanimate objects (he won't say exactly what they are, though). By moving the camera during the shooting, the resulting images come out as abstract color or patterns. It's the "happy accident" all over again.

"It takes a lot of stick-to-it-ness to master the technique," Lindquist said. "But the idea of motion has always been in my work. The people who collect the wood (artworks) don't have a clue and will never have a clue (about the photography)."

Earlier in the day, Lindquist used the same high-tech camera in his photo studio to shoot a non-blurry portrait of one of his intricately carved vessels. That's when "the question" came up. How long did it take him to create the bowl before him?

Lindquist began to factor in all the equipment he had built, the 10 years it took for the wood to dry, his education, his physical rehabilitation, his creative process ...

He finally answered simply with, "A lifetime."

Additional Facts

IF YOU GO

What: A 40-year retrospective of sculpture, photography and other artwork by Mark Lindquist

When: Through Oct. 23; gallery hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays

Where: The Gadsden Arts Center, 13 N. Madison St. on the courthouse square in downtown Quincy

Cost: \$1 for nonmembers

Contact: Call 875-4866 or visit www.gadsdenarts.org
