



# Progenitor

Daniel Mercier  
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I would like to deeply thank:

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Although he took his well deserved retirement recently, his teachings and guidance have given me the skills and confidence I will need to be successful.

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My friends, family, and loved ones  
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fig. 1

Interior of Saint Jan's Cathedral, Maastricht

# Introduction

In the summer of '22, I was fortunate enough to land myself an internship at Studio Valentin Loellmann in the city of Maastricht, Netherlands. It was a life-changing summer and the experiences I had shaped the project that I am putting forth and desiring to develop further.

In relation to my career as a woodworker it was important for me to get studio experience. Seeing and being part of a process helped inform my decisions on what I would like to see and do for myself when I have my own studio. Valentin's philosophy on work and life was very influential and focused heavily on strong and simple constraints. Don't overthink, be persistent, adapt to accidents and new developments, you don't need complexity to achieve beauty and success, create a grand vision and learn along the way, a great team can turn fantasy into reality, build trust whenever you can, build something



fig. 2 Exterior of the factory at night

that people can love and they will reward you with their lives, build something that you love and you will reward others with your life.

These values were the driver of Valentin's design and fabrication process and he created a fabrication and design process that I found very attractive. Valentin works from artistic renderings and rough dimensions, and dives straight into the fabrication process, problem solving as the pieces are created. This is a process that he has honed over many years and has worked very well for him. What I enjoy the most about this



fig. 3 Daily studio lunch

process is the freedom with which he allows himself to create, that the window between conception and creation is very small, especially in comparison to my schooling where a design is created and planned over a few months.

The fabrication process is also something that I really admired and enjoyed taking part in. Valentin's fabrication process involves a lot of hand-work. Metal and wood pieces are all shaped and finished by hand. The metal parts of his pieces are all cut from sheets and welded and hammered into the shapes you see. The wood is also shaped by hand, and is where my involvement in the furniture was focused. Valentin would sculpt out the rough shapes and I would be responsible



fig. 4 Setting up a chandelier in studio



fig. 5 Finished benches



fig. 6 Finished side board



fig. 7 Sweeping the stage

for the refinement of the shapes and their finishing. The finishing process involved charring the wood, sanding it, waxing, and then polishing of the wax. The repetitive motions needed to refine and finish the pieces created an intimate relationship between myself and the pieces that I worked on. I can still remember how they felt as I shaped and finished them. The rounded edges and smoothed surfaces are still familiar to me. This intimacy was also extended to the metal bases I finished. The application of the patina was also done by hand and was applied in a manner that flowed with the shape of the metal and also created this same familiarity with each piece as I had with the wood halves.

In addition to aiding in the fabrication of the furniture pieces, I was also fortunate enough to be a part of some of the upgrades to the factory that the studio inhabits. I was able to do some welding to create a garden bed and cladding for a staircase. I aided in the construction and finishing of the stage shown above. I aided in constructing and assembling a negative

form for a concrete bench. And, I was also able to do some framing for residences that will exist on the second floor of the factory.

Each piece, although they may have been the same design, are all unique because of the handwork involved. The inconsistencies within each piece are part of the aesthetic that Valentin desires in his pieces. This aesthetic demand makes for a more liberating fabrication process as the demand for showcasing the hand-crafted nature of the pieces outstrip the demands for precision. This looseness also has demands of its own, namely the trust in the maker to adhere to the design of



fig. 8 Valentin making the profiles for a concrete bench

each piece and to not allow oneself to deviate too much from the design. Valentin puts a great amount of trust in his fabricators in this regard, however as a maker, it adds such a level of joy and allows for a greater level of identification and relationship with each piece and these relationships and aesthetic make for much more impactful work.

What I learned and appreciated the most about my summer as a woodworker was being able to find joy in a process that I hadn't been exposed to in my schooling, but also one that allowed for lower levels of tolerance when it came to inconsistencies.



fig. 9 Patinated steel and charred white oak dining chair



fig. 10 Copper and Walnut Staircase before patinating



fig. 11 Copper and Walnut Staircase after patinating





fig. 12

Exterior staircase, steel structure with brass cladding

## Valentin Loellmann

Loellmann creates both functional and non-functional works, as well as interiors. His work focuses heavily on lines and visual textures. The softness of the lines and the transitions through the joints gives his pieces a very relaxed quality. The transitions are not too sharp and not too drawn out, giving them a slender yet sturdy elegance. The hand shaping of each piece also adds to the relaxed feel as the honesty to the method of fabrication and the maker's touch shows a desire to create rather than a desire for clinical "perfection". The "perfection" comes from the uneven and this allows the pieces to be less monolithic and more approachable.



fig. 13 Living Room Set - charred White Oak (2021)



fig. 14 Round Bench - charred Walnut (2021)

The choice of finish serves to enhance the lines and profiles that make up his pieces or to add an organic quality to his pieces. All of the wood Loellmann uses is either left in their natural state or charred to enhance the visual qualities of the grain as well as the shape of the piece. They are all waxed and polished to give them a more natural looking luster. The metal in his pieces are also either left in their natural state or patinated in one of two ways. The first way that his pieces are patinated is by applying the patina in overlapping streaks that complements the shape of the piece and to create a sense of movement with the patina. The second way, as seen in the interior of M. Frédéric D., is by applying the patina in a uneven and random manner to give the metal a chaotic and organic quality which adds an interesting visual depth.



fig. 15 Steps 2x6 - Copper and charred Walnut (2021)



fig. 16

Resin, Copper, and Steel coffee table (2022)



fig. 17

Interior of apartment for M. Frédéric D. (2020)



fig. 18



fig. 19

Walnut and Brass cabinet (2019)



# Case Studies



## Honggu Park

Park employs a unique carbonization method, involving a mixture that is applied and then burned, to create a visual texture to his pieces. They bring to life what would be more ordinary abstract wood sculptures and furniture. The softened shapes he uses to create his sculptures reminds one of ancient monoliths and the addition of the darkened visual texture adds another element of mystery and intrigue. What I enjoy most about the texture that he creates is that it distracts from the overall shapes and profiles of the wood. It begs the question of what one should be looking at and how what one focuses on gives us a completely different experience of the piece.



fig. 20



fig. 21



fig. 22

## Christopher Kurtz

Kurtz's works are a wonderfully balanced pieces that evoke a strong sense of elegance and beauty. The lines and shapes he uses, although they are refined, are very organic and feel very natural and approachable. It's difficult to tell from these pictures, due to the subtlety of the textures, but every surface has texture/tool marks on their surface that adds to their softness and makes them even more inviting to touch and interact with. The mix of positive and negative space makes the pieces very architectural and this is highlighted by how the light interacts with the overall shapes of the pieces as well as the negative space. Each piece is very well proportioned and there are no elements that feel out of place, or out of scale. The pieces are extremely well balanced and it's difficult to imagine what could be changed to improve on them. Every element feels resolved within itself and works harmoniously with the other elements to create these very beautiful and elegant pieces.



fig. 23

Morimoto Nesting Table



fig. 24

Park Avenue Table



fig. 25

Park Avenue Table Detail

## Eva Hild

Hild's ceramic sculptures are an excellent study of volume. Her pieces vary in size but they are quite large. This gives them an imposing presence, but what I am attracted to most is how much her pieces involve light and how much she plays with internal and external space. The question that I see her pieces begging, through her balancing of internal and external space is where do her pieces begin or end? Just like a mobius strip that folds back in on itself, if the 'internal' and 'external' spaces keep feeding into each other then light is what defines what is inside and what is outside and not the shape itself. Her pieces take up space but also feel empty, and there is a beautiful tension between the two that invites the viewer into the negative space but also allows for an appreciation of the positive space of the piece.



fig. 26



fig. 27



fig. 28

There are a few things that I found helpful about finding artists to write case studies on and writing about their work. The first being that I saw a lot of work done by a lot of different furniture makers, designers, sculptors, artists, etc. It was fun and exciting to see so many different ideas and techniques, and to see how different people have expressed themselves through the criteria that I set out for myself.

Another thing I found helpful about this exercise was to evaluate the work of others through writing, forcing myself to redefine my ideas for what I wanted to create in a written sense, but also to realise what elements I was identifying more strongly with in the work of others. This process of identification and attachment helped create a certain hierarchy of importance for each element and helped me refine the vague ideas I had for my own work. This refinement allowed me to more easily channel my desires in the aesthetic choices I made into my explorations and start the process of explaining the ideas expressed through these explorations and my subsequent work.

The case studies showed that not only was I not effectively expressing what my aesthetic values were, but that I also did not have a strong and clear sense of what they were either. The work done through my explorations was helpful for me artistically but what I was lacking the most was the ability to effectively tell the story of my work. Being able to effectively explain my work would not only allow people to understand the work but to connect with it in the way that I connected with my work. My making process was an important part of my thesis year but so was my ability to connect others through my work.



# Guidelines for Exploration

My challenge, after reflecting on my case studies, was creating a structure for myself to direct my ideas and aesthetic values in a manner that would yield results that I could build a project on. My professors were very helpful in directing me to evaluate the visual elements that I was attracted to most and helped me flesh out what I meant by each. The purpose of the criterion would be to guide my explorations and use them as a method of evaluating these explorations.

The visual elements that I used to guide my explorations are:

1. Line:
  - Lines that are derived from nature, non-linear
  - Exploring soft and unrefined lines, certain gestures and certain relationships that create harmony
2. Texture/surface quality:
  - The tactility and feel of a surface, as well as the visual qualities
  - Adding another sensory quality to my pieces, adding more of myself to my pieces
3. Positive and Negative space:
  - How the positive and negative space of a piece affects how we view it and what we focus on
4. Volume:
  - The space that an object/piece occupies
  - How the volume of a piece affects its presence
5. Balance/Composition:
  - Juxtaposing elements and how they can balance and interact with each other to create harmonious and interesting pieces
  - How creating balanced pieces create intrigue



fig. 29

Main staircase in Studio Valentin Loellmann

# Explorations



The goal for my explorations was to explore my criterion. There was no forethought to the specific end results that I created, and I guided myself with rough ideas. I felt that this was the best way to approach these explorations to better understand myself and develop my sculpting abilities.

The pieces were created very quickly and spontaneously. I would have a certain image in mind at the start but I would re-evaluate that image as I would progress and let the piece speak for itself. This method also helped me find new moments to create interesting and balanced pieces.

The dialogue between my ideas, my work, and the piece itself is what I am solidifying throughout these explorations and further explorations. Some explorations did turn out to be distinct furniture pieces, but many were pure explorations to dig into the elements I chose to guide me and find what I resonated with and didn't resonate with.

# Line

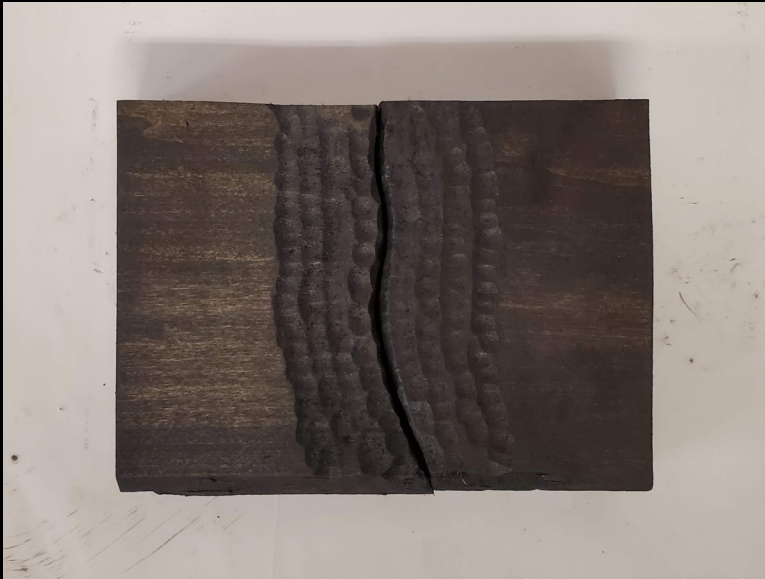


Shaped Pine



Shaped Poplar

# Texture



Stained and textured Poplar



Stained and textured Poplar



Shaped, charred, and stained Douglas Fir



Shaped, charred, and stained Pine

# Positive & Negative Space



Shaped Maple



Shaped Ash



Shaped Maple



Shaped Ash chair

# Volume



Shaped Ash



Shaped Ash

## Balance & Composition



Shaped Ash



Shaped, charred, textured, and stained Poplar





Shaped and stained Basswood



Shaped and stained Ash



Shaped, textured, and stained Poplar

In the end, I didn't come back to this mode of exploration to generate new ideas, or to iron out details for the pieces that I would eventually create. The process of working out the rough ideas that interested me, with the material I would be using, helped me focus on the elements that I would choose to further explore and develop.

Early Work



# Low Stool Prototype

My stool prototype was my first attempt at creating a piece of furniture using all of my research and following the guidelines for my explorations. I made a stool because I could make it quickly, and this would help me explore my fabrication and design process in full scale. Making a piece of furniture in full scale was also helpful in balancing my thoughts about the design and the functioning of the piece.

The resulting piece was not particularly successful but did produce interesting individual elements. I found that the piece wasn't successful was because there's no flow and cohesiveness throughout the piece. It very much looks like two separate ideas desperately holding onto each other.





# George

George was a very important first step in the direction that I would choose to take my project. I decided to make George, spurred on by my own inspiration, because I liked Figures 40 & 41 and wanted to make something like it in full scale. I was fortunate enough to have a hefty piece of douglas fir.

I made a few quick digital drawings with different variations and decided to follow through on what you see here. What compelled me at the time to make it was the rapidity with which it could be made and its simplicity.

I really enjoyed making it and I enjoyed how quickly I could turn a drawing and raw material into a finished piece. What was the most impactful for me was the presence of the piece once it was finished. It's existence in space, at full scale, wasn't something that I could understand well or experience with a finished model or exploration. The size and proportion of the elements were much more enjoyable to finalise and work out on George himself and through tweaks in my drawings.





Creating George was a challenging turning point in my project because I wasn't certain of the narrative that I had created through George. The simple and abstract elements worked very well visually but I didn't fully understand the story that they told, and I didn't fully understand the rules by which George was created to give this specific outcome.

I liked George very much, but I wasn't sure that it was a good idea to move away from making furniture and diving into making functional art. I wanted to make a more recognizable set of furniture pieces, like my stool, but I didn't want to let go of exploring these new tools and techniques that I enjoyed so much.



# George Jr.

George Jr. was a good challenge in pushing me to create a balanced and cohesive piece with a more limited set of choices. I had three triangular pieces of wood that were too small to mill, and make a more orthodox piece of furniture, and had circular cut outs at the ends of the pieces, from where the sculpting on George had taken place. I decided to glue the pieces back to their original shape and to sand down the outside faces to get rid of the cut outs at the ends.

The angled facets complemented the already triangular pieces, and the burning of the inside faces, further highlighted the slender triangular forms that made up Jr. The contrasting moments found in Jr. was something that I would more fully understand at the beginning of my second semester. The strength of George's and Jr's designs come from the contrast between light and dark, between planar and angular elements, and between textured and non-textured surfaces.





# Bernice

Bernice was the last piece that I would make in my first semester. My intent for Bernice was to take some of the elements that made up George, change some of them, and add new ones. I wanted to see if creating another piece with some of the elements that made up George would help me understand why he worked so well, I also wanted to try creating a piece element by element without referring to a drawing.

I decided to carve the recesses on the edges, instead of the faces, and line them up at an angle from each other rather than be level horizontally. The cut out at the bottom is curved and only passes through two faces of Bernice. Lastly, the angled cuts on the two opposing corners of Bernice were the two new elements that I introduced in making Bernice.

I didn't, as I had hoped, figure out George's strengths by making Bernice but what I did learned was the importance of having a clear vision when creating a harmoniously balanced piece. Bernice feels disorganized and chaotic, and this is because each step wasn't considered the same way and in the same manner as George or Jr. Bernice was an attempt at throwing things at a wall and seeing what stuck, and what stuck was something interesting but lacking in cohesion and therefore not as compelling a piece as George or Jr.





Progenitor

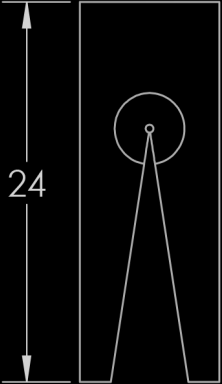
Your children are not your children.

They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.

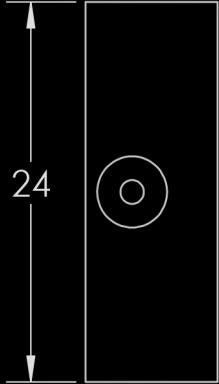
They come through you but not from you,

And though they are with you yet they belong not to you.

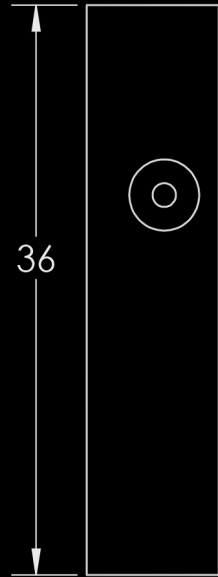
-Excerpt from "The Prophet" by Khalil Gibran



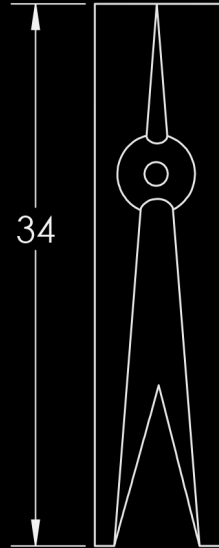
George



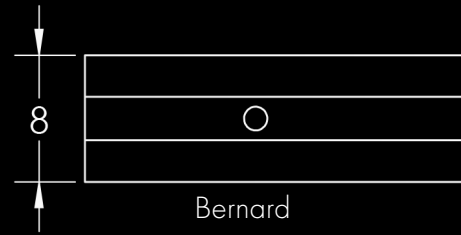
Frank



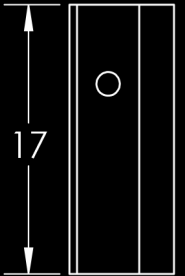
Taylor



Astrid

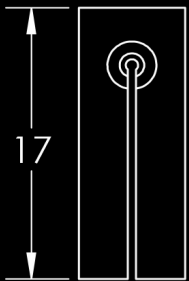


Bernard



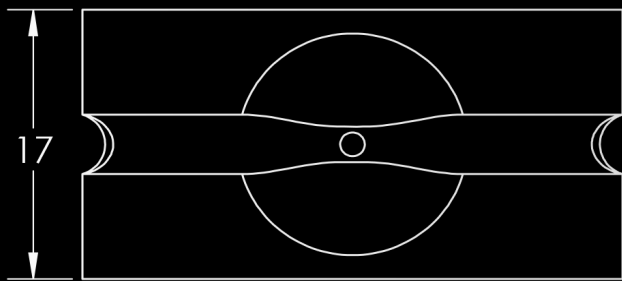
Harrison





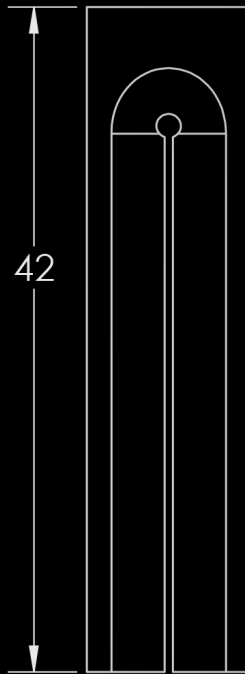
17

Laura



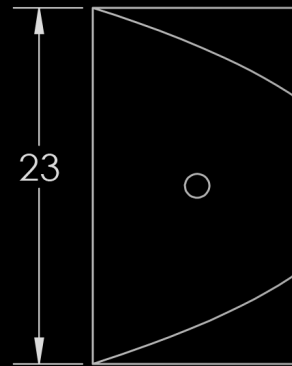
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Jack



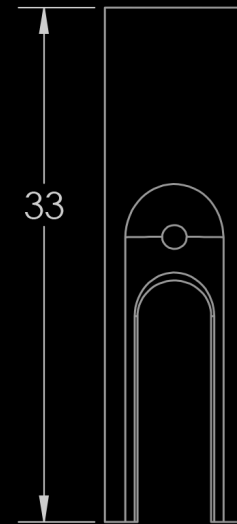
42

Edward



23

Douglas



33

Sarah

A progenitor is, “a biologically related ancestor...a person or thing that...originates something, or serves as a model.”<sup>1</sup>

My objective for this project is to take a natural material, mill it using machines, and then “re-nature” it through mark-making, reintroducing the same visual elements that were found in its natural form, while using simple visual elements to symbolize the process of transformation.

Using natural materials is important to the symbolism of the pieces because each material has unique limitations. With reclaimed wood, the limitations are greater than with furniture grade kiln-dried lumber that has been processed, selected, and dried carefully over time. Reclaimed wood may have been previously used and contain metal nails, cracks, rot, and other imperfections that need to be adapted to or worked around. These elements in reclaimed timber not only give each piece a unique character, but also impose specific constraints onto each piece I create. These material constraints require a high level of awareness and focus as I engage with each piece and balance my process against these material constraints.

As I worked with the unique challenges and features of each material, I came to see the pieces as one might see their child; Just like the relationship a parent has with their child/ children, every day brings new challenges and requires changes in approach to resolve old and new problems alike. Every day also brings new opportunities for growth and room for new ideas and new approaches, and as each child is an individual, so are these pieces. This is why each piece was given a human name. The personification of each piece is meant to not only



<sup>1</sup>Dictionary.com. (n.d.). Progenitor definition & meaning. Dictionary.com. Retrieved March 28, 2023, from <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/progenitors>

solidify my relationship with each piece but also to help the viewer connect with each piece and the message they evoke. Each piece has its own unique characteristics, but they all bear the same marks from my sculpting while still maintaining their own features. There is a part of me in all of them.

My sculpting represents a process of transformation and exploration within a strong rectilinear shape. The contrast between the hard lines of the rectilinear profiles and the soft lines of the recesses is one set of contrasting elements that serves to enhance the message of transformation within each piece. The 're-naturing' that occurs represents the physical transformation of the material. The material comes from a tree with soft and organic lines, then is processed into a milled piece of lumber, with hard lines, and I reintroduce soft lines through sculpting. The hard lines and soft lines also represent the relationship between concept and reality. An idea is a 'perfect' thing, much like a perfectly square and milled piece of wood. But reality, and the reality of the material is that of a piece of wood.

The visual flow of the pieces is one of narrowing and expansion. The observers' eye starts with the natural faces and then is drawn to the burnt recesses which lead to the hole in the center. The recesses carved into the faces act as a transitional space from the outside through a small passageway into the pieces. The darkness represents obscurity and change as it contrasts against the natural wood around it. The hole allows light to travel through each piece and is a visual guide through the surrounding obscurity representing optimism through the process. The transition between the known and unknown is part and parcel of the process of change and transformation. Through these elements, each piece represents the process of change itself.



# Rules

- A. The pieces must be rectilinear, and have to remain relatively untouched to maintain their profiles or at least the suggestion of their profiles
  - The square profile of the wood is needed for 2 reasons:
    1. To contrast the natural state of the material (a tree)
    2. To contrast the soft lines of the recesses and cut outs
- B. A hole must be drilled through each piece
  - This represents the journey of transformation through the piece
- C. The recesses are centred around or incorporate the hole
  - The recesses are meant to draw the viewer into the hole and act as a transitional space from outside the piece into the piece
- D. Recesses can connect to each other but cannot interfere with the functional space of each piece
  - The purpose of the recesses is to visually guide the viewer into the piece but also symbolically allow everything outside the piece to “enter” the piece
  - The recesses cannot interfere with the functional space of the piece because if they do then they are no longer functional and are merely pieces of art
- E. The recesses can only be circular or a linear element that isn't contained within the given face of a piece.
  - A circle must be used because it's non-directional. Linear recesses that aren't contained within the face are also acceptable because conceptually they draw from outside of the piece into the piece.
- F. The recesses must be burned, wire brushed, and finished with a black finish
  - The contrast between the darkened and natural wood and the textures of both is also representative of the process of transformation from the known to the unknown
- G. Pieces must work with the natural imperfections of the material and work in relative harmony with them
  - There must be a balance between my interventions and the qualities of the materials to respect the material for what it is and not use it out of convenience
- H. A piece cannot be made from multiple pieces of wood, if a piece is laminated it must be from the same beam
  - By adding on new material, I am not respecting the material for what it is and am now using the material for its convenience rather than for its natural qualities.































Conclusion

What I have learned about myself through my project has been recognizing the balancing act between inspiration and reflection, action and inaction, control and chaos. Learning where in my process I will find excitement, find inspiration, find joy, but also where in my process requires reflection, diligence, and perseverance. I was fortunate enough, through my explorations, to create and pursue something that excited me and filled me with the desire to reflect and explain what I had made.



fig. 30

Burning Frank



fig. 31

Sawing the cut out in Laura

The process of exploration, through the guidance of and adherence to my criteria, was an exhaustive but also equally exciting process. To move myself and make choices with little thought to the outcome was freeing and allowed me to fully dive into creating without having to actively constrain myself to distinct furniture forms. Being able to work out ideas or moments from my imagination, or from rough drawings in real life, helped me hone in on what attracted me to certain moments and develop the language which I am expressing myself with. This free process allowed me to feel the magic of creation and feel the joy of diving into the unknown to see what I would come back to the surface with.

In terms of the development of my physical process, and the tools and techniques I used to create these pieces, I find myself enjoying more and more these ways of interacting and grappling with the material. Using handheld machines and tools to achieve the results that I want gives me a more intimate connection with the material. These tools heighten and intensify my relationship with each piece because each piece has its own qualities that require individual attention and care. The speed with which I can create my pieces also intensifies my relationship to my pieces. The simplicity of the designs and fabrication processes allow me to focus more on what it is I am creating and helps me ease into each step of my process, which facilitates my enjoyment of my fabrication process much more.



fig. 32 Carving the recesses in Laura



fig. 33 Shaping a test piece



fig. 34

Planing material

Image  
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fig. 23-25: Kurtz, Christopher. (2018-2019) Christopher Kurtz Works. Sourced from: [christopherkurtz.net/furniture](http://christopherkurtz.net/furniture)

fig. 26-28: Hild, Eva. (2014-2019) Eva Hild Works. Sourced from: [evahild.com/ceramics](http://evahild.com/ceramics)

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fig. 34: Solda, Madison. (2023) Daniel Planing Jack





Thank you



