

by Rob Ditessa

Making time

“MY JOURNEY CONTINUES,” sums up Phoebe Everill, a third generation woodworker, at the conclusion of her conversation with AWISA Magazine. Her maternal grandfather was a pattern maker creating the wooden forms used to cast metal, a highly skilled trade almost lost nowadays. When he died, at an early age, her mother kept his tools. Phoebe’s father used the tools subsequently, and today Phoebe uses them.

Some of her favourites are “a 19mm Stanley socket chisel with a long cocobolo paring handle, his English box carver’s mallet and a US-made number 2 Stanley Sweetheart bench plane with walnut tote and knob with the original blade still in it.”

In her workshop on her property in Drummond, a picturesque town in Central Victoria known for its quality food and wine, Phoebe makes fine bespoke hand-crafted furniture, and operates her furniture making school.

“Commissioned works form the foundation of my making time. I love the dance with someone who likes your work enough to commission a piece that they will live with, in their own home. I do some spec work which usually goes to the Bungendore Woodworks Gallery near Canberra. With my teaching commitments there is not as much time as I would like to be able to supply other outlets.”

The courses spring from a strong desire to pass on the knowledge she has inherited. “Teaching is a passion for me, and I am fortunate that it is, as many of my contemporary makers struggle to make a good living out of their making alone. The cost of setting up a high-quality workshop and practice can be prohibitive. The school provides the ongoing cash flow to

allow me freedom as a maker to pick and choose what I want to work on. I no longer work as a carpenter and professional renovator. I haven’t for the last fifteen years. My partner runs the admin side of the business, and the accommodation that we have onsite for visiting teachers, students, and the BnB.”

Planning and a project management approach, has been the key to her success, says Phoebe. She explains that she sees the process of making a new piece of furniture breaking down into four main categories.

First, production pieces where repeatability is key, and all design decisions are made around time, and hence financial constraints. The issue is how to get a good quality piece that meets a market price point, and that can be made in small batch runs.

The second is commissioned pieces where the customer has input on design and timber selection, where it is necessary to quote and stay within the potential budget and time frame.

The next is exhibition or gallery pieces where there is more flexibility and Phoebe will often use this as a challenge to go in new directions or experiment with different techniques.

The fourth category is student pieces where, Phoebe says, her job is to manage expectations, break a piece down to the student’s capabilities, and problem-solve the making challenges.

Sustainability is a big concern nowadays and it plays a big part in Phoebe’s approach to her furniture making. “Sustainability is built into a well-crafted piece. Most issues, I believe, with sustainability in furniture are from companies making shoddy

Chaise lounge made from drummond blackwood with Italian leather upholstery, showcasing steam bent and laminated elements.

Photos: Phoebe Everill



The Winton reading chair made in black walnut with Italian leather upholstery and ebony details.

work designed to be short lived, thrown away and replaced as impulse or fashion changes.”

Phoebe explains she sources most of her timber from local millers who are committed to working with makers who will make the most of the wood. “I source timber in Tassie regularly from small mills with access to rare timbers such as huon pine and sassafras. Clients may also provide timber that has a special importance to them. Specialist timbers come from a variety of timber importing businesses, such as Mathews Timber, and Urban Salvage.”

Although her property supports many species of trees, Phoebe says the peppermint gum, messmate and manna gum are not really suitable to use to make fine furniture, due to the difficulties in seasoning them properly without the fibres ‘collapsing’ and a large amount of cracking. “The prize for me is the blackwood which grows along the creek bed on our boundary.” She adds, “We do mill and air-dry timber here, not only our own storm-fallen logs but, also logs that have come from local botanic gardens or significant street plantings.”

The timbers she enjoys working with the most include the Tasmanian timbers and particularly sassafras, often without the black heart figure in it. There are some timbers that she avoids or uses in very limited amounts due to toxic dust. She rarely uses recycled timbers because, she explains, her machines are incredibly important to her practice.

“I love real joinery, both machine and hand cut, when the client gives me time to get things really crisp and clean.” She finds it especially satisfying to let the timber shine through the design and the making.

Continuing, Phoebe reflects, “To make a heritage piece that will last, hopefully for hundreds of years, the timber will be of the highest quality, well-seasoned, and selected carefully for the joinery needed. The provenance of the timber is all important in the story of the piece, and makes me decide carefully how I will use it.”

A favourite piece, and one she is especially proud of is a tool cabinet. She describes it as a collaborative work done with Terry Gordon, from HNT Gordon, and Colen Clenton, “two of Australia’s finest tool makers renowned around the world. They asked me to make a bespoke tool cabinet to house a complete set of both their tools. It was an absolute privilege for me as a maker of tool cabinets. Technically, it made me refine and improve my veneering skills, and then develop ways to house and display these incredible tools to the best

advantage. Both sets were made from a spectacular log of Macassar ebony. It spent time in a few major galleries in New South Wales before the tools were sold to collectors. I am currently repurposing it as a high-end liquor cabinet for sale.”

Amongst her own hand tools, the one she uses the most is her 60- ½ Lie-Nielsen low angle block plane. “It lives on my bench, and only occasionally getting back into the tool chest. It is a very compact plane which stays sharp, and does end grain and edges superbly.”

Describing her workshop and its layout, Phoebe says she likes using paper and pencil for sketching, and planning. “My machine room is very comprehensive and the very best that can be run without three phase power, as we are in a rural location. The dust extraction units, resaw bandsaw, jointer and panel saw and shaper combo are Felder units. My helical cutter thicknesser and drum sander are Laguna models. The finisher and morticer is Jet brand, and I run two router tables. My favourite has the JessEm Excel Lift System on it. I have my Dad’s old bandsaw set up for curved cutting, an industrial lathe, and the pride and joy of the fleet is the new Parken drill press. Virtually all the hand power tools are Festool, with some Makita filling the gaps.”

The Lie-Nielsen low angle block plane was a gift from her father when she began her studies at the Sturt School for Wood, in Mittagong, NSW. “My father was my first woodwork teacher, my mentor, and the greatest supporter of my work and journey as a maker. Generous to a fault, kind, and yet also firm when he knew I was wanting an easy out. He had run a very successful small business and he provided me with good advice, and a constant ear to sound things out on.”

At Sturt, which she describes as Australia’s oldest craft centre and the launching pad for very many makers, she developed as a designer-maker in the three-year course. “There I was exposed to a great many makers and tutors that pushed me to develop my own style and technical skills.” Her website says she completed a Certificate IV in Furniture Design & Technology, and then was awarded an Artist in Residence, providing a studio space and machine access to further develop her portfolio, as well as the opportunity to spend time ▶



Trio of heritage tools handed down from Dad and my grandfather.

► with the School's international and local makers, and teachers.

Reflecting on making, learning, and teaching, Phoebe says her students often come with an idea which they have seen online, or in a magazine, and want to make a copy of the piece. She sees that her job is to take the aspects of the piece that appeals to them most and draw on their own creativity to make something original and theirs. Failure is a constant in this craft and in a world that does not like to even mention it, it leads to questions and discussions, and new ways of moving forward and develop a new direction within the original design. An example would be where the doors of a cabinet have been made too narrow, and there is a too large gap between them when they are closed. A well-crafted 'T' moulding potentially including a hand carved handle that opens the doors in a



contrasting timber is one solution that teaches new skills, and individualises an enhanced design.

"Making things with my hands is something that I believe is actually hard-wired into my being. It makes me happy. It is a form of active meditation when time is stilled and I am at my most centred. I believe it is so for many people. That's why we are seeing such a demand for classes in all craft areas." Phoebe continues the journey. ■



The Collaboration Cabinet made out of sassafras and detailed in wenge and brass, housing complete sets of HNT Gordon and Colen Clenton tools in Macassar ebony and brass.