



Artist Interview: Federico Méndez-Castro



By *Seth Macbeth*

Much of the allure drawing you to his unique work stems from the way Venezuelan artist Federico Méndez-Castro plays with the organic components of rare and exquisite wood. A leading visionary in wood sculpture, the bends and curves he creates follow natural rings that flow with the grain, bending to the orientation and the balance of the overall piece. These are complimented by his sharp eye for imperfect beauty, like the transition of sap and hardwood within the grain. The wood dictates the shape of the final pieces as much as he does, and nature balances with his expertise as if it chooses its own outcome; “To me, it’s like the grain of the wood writes a certain music, and my hands can’t help but dance to it.”

Stepping into the studio of Méndez-Castro, you are instantly embraced by its inviting and creative energy. The elegant installations play with the shadows and daylight that dance in through the tall windows, and stand as perfect examples of power and beauty in both nature and man’s artistic release combined. His artwork is an ever present and precarious alignment of opposing forces, utilizing the best of each other to form a singular, harmonious piece. Their interaction with the surroundings speaks effortless volumes, bringing a peace and elegance to the room that holds you in wonderment and warmth.



These outstanding hand-carved installations reflect a true love and dedication to pattern and form. Intricate arrangements of lines and contours formed naturally within the stunning Cedars and Ebonies are strikingly exposed with meticulous care. Precision is important to his work; “It’s how I feel my feet are on the ground,” he laughs. But sometimes when he feels the need for freedom, his “Seed” sculptures come as an escape from restriction. The openness and abandon he feels in their creation is reflected in their magnificent delicacy and reaching arms, twisting up towards the sky.

“I love concave and convex shapes,” he explains. “The shapes of your body are what interest me most.” His favourite source of inspiration is the human spine. The many-layered levels of shape that it achieves can be seen in much of his work. Paying homage to his grandfather, a diviner, many of his pieces also play with straight edges and balance, using elegant hand carved pendulums. “Instead of finding water,” he says, “I am looking for pure form. That is one of my obsessions.”

Cultivating his fanatical passions for wood and craftsmanship even as a young man, Méndez-Castro took advantage of his exposure to the many European furniture makers that had settled in his native Venezuela. Spending weekends at their workshops he was introduced to the world of woodworking, and how to express its exquisite natural splendor in an untraditional way.



Méndez-Castro followed his appetite for woodworking to Canada’s west coast, to study Krenovian methods at their prestigious school of fine cabinet making. Their way of mixing sculpture and function caught hold of his love for the old techniques of woodworking. “From a craftsman’s point of view I am very old school,” he states, showing me tools he has crafted by hand himself, to match those used for hundreds of centuries in traditional woodwork. “If you know the principle of how to build your own tools, you can make a tool for any shape you want to achieve.”

Some of the secrets behind his delicate contours and curves lie in the expert crafting of these handmade tools. Therein lies the true passion of his craft, collected within the instruments he commands every day.

“You can be a poet without writing - poetry can be shown in any form; cooking, music, or working in wood. It is the passion and the soul of the work, not a matter of skills. Once you have those skills, you realize what is important is what you do with them.”