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Art in this neck of the woods

Garland man enters Rockport center's Maine Wood 2010 exhibit

By Jessica Bloch
BDN Staff



Gregory Crispell is a land surveyor by trade. In his spare time, the Garland resident enjoys making maple syrup. He has even done a little middle-school basketball coaching.

But Gregory Crispell, wood artist?

That's one job title Crispell never expected to put on his resume, at least not until recently.

But the time Crispell has spent in Maine's forests has driven him to explore his creative side, he said, and led him to submit a piece of work to Maine Wood 2010, the biennial exhibition organized by the [Center for Furniture Craftmanship](#) and now on display in the

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE CENTER FOR FURNITURE CRAFTMANSHIP

"If You Want Something Done Right, Do It Yourself"
Winner of the award for most creative entry by Philippe Guillerm of Rockland, Maine.



center's Messler Gallery.

Crispell's entry, a box made of sugar maple and fabril which he calls "Twelve Lights," won him the Best New Maker award.

That's right — at the age of 57, Crispell is the rookie of the year. In fact, he was just happy that his piece was one of 20 works chosen out of 120 entries to the exhibition.

"The truly exciting thing was getting selected," he said. "Everything at the Messler Gallery I consider to be really fine stuff, and to have my stuff in there is really pretty special. Most of the other people that were selected are professional people, furniture makers or woodworkers. I'm the new person."

This is the center's second biennial, an event that started in 2008 as simply an exhibition for wood artisans living and working in Maine. Peter Korn, the center's executive director, said after a strong applicant pool and positive reaction from the first show, the center decided on another exhibition two years later. And so a biennial was born, and local businesses provided prizes.

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The 2010 biennial jurors were Anissa Kapsales, editor at Fine Woodworking magazine; Gretchen Keyworth, director emeritus of the Fuller Craft Museum in Brockton, Mass.; and Silas Kopf, a noted furniture maker in Northampton, Mass.

Korn and Messler Gallery manager Beth Sauer said they gave the jurors a wide berth in selecting the pieces for the exhibition, other than considerations for top-notch craftsmanship and artisanship.

“We told them they could choose what they considered the best work,” Korn said. “So it could have been that no sculptural work was chosen or it could have been all sculptural work. It was what they thought was the best. We knew we were going to get a range of stuff because they had a range of sensibilities between them.”

The selected works ranged from functional pieces such as Crispell's box to the elegant furniture of Cumberland's Gregg Lipton to the more abstract sculptural works of Rockland's Philippe Guillerm.

Other work, such as Bath artist David Boyle's “Home from the Sea,” which won both the jurors' Best in Show and Outstanding Craftsmanship awards, are a blend of both functionality and abstract. The work of hornbeam, walnut, poplar lilac and maple seems to be a piece within a piece — a set of two weathered-looking, greenish-blue drawers with drawer pulls resembling sea glass, which sits on fiery yellow branches underneath a wood table.

The meaning of Boyle's work is up for debate for the viewer, but Crispell said “Twelve Lights,” a 4½-inch tall by 11 inch long box with lattice work on the top, is a reference to a window with 12 panes, or lights.

“I thought, as you looked at it from different angles, the way the light played through the lattice on the top might look interesting and cool,” he said. “It might be something not really alive, but it will look different visually depending on the light presentation and where it was.”

That kind of creative thinking is relatively new for Crispell, who has been surveying since 1980 and has owned Gregory W. Crispell Co. Inc. since 1985.

On the side, he managed and harvested wood from his own 45-acre lot to produce maple syrup and do home carpentry projects, but didn't think about more artistic work until about three years ago when he was asked to help build a wine cabinet as a present. That project sparked something in Crispell, he said, and led him to take classes at the Rockport center.

“I thought, I like doing it and I want to learn how to do it well,” he said. “I [also thought], I want to do something else in my retirement. I don't want to sit around and play golf. One frustrating thing about my job is there's nothing terribly creative about it, and I want to do something creative.”

“Twelve Lights” was Crispell's second effort at a box last year after thinking he might try to make something to submit to Maine Wood 2010. The first he took earlier in the year to Korn, who was Crispell's teacher for a two-week introductory course in 2008, for criticism.

“He kind of dumped [on the box],” Crispell said with a laugh. “But one thing he told me was, if you're going to enter a box, get it professionally photographed. Peter's a pretty kind guy, and he probably wouldn't waste my time if he thought it wasn't worth it. I took that as, I'll go for it. I'll play with the big boys.”

As he toured the gallery earlier this week, Korn seemed to take most pride in the work of Center for Furniture Craftsmanship students such as Crispell, as well as Conger Murray of Orrington, whose cherry and maple “Oval Writing Table” also gained entry to the biennial.

“It's so great to encourage people, and I guess you could say a lot of what this show is about is encouragement,” Korn said. “We have all these people working at this passion in isolation, because that's the nature of woodwork, and they get a chance to be seen here. It sort of bolsters their identity as a member of the woodworking community in Maine.”

Crispell, for one, has felt so encouraged that he's considering starting a Web site with his more artistic work — once he has more examples of it, that is — and finding somewhere to sell. He already has consulted with Rockland

resident and longtime friend Connie Hayes, a well-known painter, about how an artist goes about marketing him or herself.

But he's not in a rush — after all, Crispell didn't expect to be in this position at all.

"I still feel like I'm a beginner," he said. "I did a lot with what I know, but there's a lot I still need to learn."

Maine Wood 2010 will be on display until Feb. 12. For more information, go to <http://www.woodschoo.org/> or call 594-5611

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