Gregory Rec/Staff Photographer
Peter Korn with one of his creations, a Continuous-arm Chair made of ash and leather. In the foreground is David Haig's Monogram Rocking Chair, made of walnut.

NEXT HE'LL CRAFT A NEW FUTURE

Peter Korn is retiring from the Center for Furniture Craftmanship, the woodworking school he founded in 1993. A farewell exhibition includes some of his own work as well as that of mentors and peers.

By **BOB KEYES**
Staff Writer

ROCKPORT — When he turned 62, Peter Korn told the board at the Center for Furniture Craftsmanship that he was retiring – when he turned 70.

Good to his word, Korn will step away from directing the woodworking school that he founded 28 years ago when he celebrates his 70th birthday on Dec. 16. "I had it planned out because my goal from the beginning was to create a sustainable institution that didn't need me. That was in 1993, the first year of the school. And I knew this was the last and perhaps most difficult step in terms of institutional development, when the founding director steps away," he said.

He entertains no second thoughts.

"I will say, the closer it gets, the more enticing it looks. I have spent considerably more time in my own workshop the past two years than I had been able to previously," he said. "This is no longer a 60-hour-a-week job. I'm not saying it's a 40-hour-a-week job, but it is no longer a 60-hour-a-week job."

Evidence of his productivity can be seen in the exhibition in the center's Messler Gallery, "Straight from the Heart," a farewell exhibition that Korn curated as an homage to mentors and peers. He included a few of his own pieces, among them a pair of woven-fabric, beech and walnut chairs that he considers works in progress, reflecting his return to the studio and his first love of making fine, functional furniture. But the exhibition is mostly about his friends and fellow woodworkers. Specifically, it is a tribute to four mentors who led him into furniture-making and guided him: Tage Frid, James Krenov, Art Carpenter and Alan Peters, as well as contemporaries whose work he admires and whom he considers friends.

Korn began working with his mentors in the 1980s, when he was starting out. The dozen peers whose work he selected for the show have taught at the center over the years, and they come from across the country and the globe: Brian Boggs (Asheville, North Carolina), Garrett Hack (Thetford Center, Vermont), David Haig (New Zealand), Thomas Hucker (Jersey City, New Jersey), Beth Ireland (St. Petersburg, Flor-

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Courtesy of the Center for Furniture Craftsmanship
Macaw, by Silas Kopf, part of the "Straight from the Heart" arewell exhibition.

Courtesy of the Center for Furniture Craftsmanship
Peter Korn's Dictionary Stand, made with walnut in 2005.

Courtesy of the Center for Furniture Craftsmanship
Cabot Cabinet #1 (detail) by David Upfill-Brown.

Gregory Rec/Staff Photographer
Work in Progress, V8, 2021, by Peter Korn, made with European beech, walnut and upholstery.

Photos by Gregory Rec/Staff Photographer

Peter Korn, executive director of the Center for Furniture Craftmanship in Rockport, is retiring at the end of the year. The center is an international woodworking school that teaches various levels of wood craftmanship and design. Korn founded the center in 1993 and moved it to its current home in 1996.

KORN

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ida), Tom Kealy (U.K.), Silas Kopf (Northampton, Massachusetts), Aled Lewis (Wales), Michael Puryear (Shokan, New York), Chris Pye (U.K.), Tim Rousseau (Rockport) and David Upfill-Brown (Australia).

The exhibition, Korn said, represents everything the center stands for, celebrating the spirit, mission and lineage of the school itself and the joy of artful, practical woodworking. "The best way to say it – every piece in the show is fully realized. Aesthetically and structurally, it is complete within itself. There are no loose ends dangling – except for my pieces," he said and laughed. "There are no unanswered questions. That show embodies and probably communicates the mission of the school better than everything I have written in all these years. It is the DNA of the school right there."

As he spoke from the porch of a campus building, the whirring and buzzing of saws, sanders and other machinery were constant in the background, with students working on projects in a nearby shop.

BUILDING FURNITURE AND CAREERS

Korn has made his mark. He began the woodworking school in the garage of the home in Rockland where he still lives, and it now occupies a four-building campus of red-sided buildings in Rockport and has become one of a few places in this country where students, both novices and advanced woodworkers, can immerse themselves in the experience of designing and building functional and expressive furniture to the highest standard of craftsmanship. Many schools teach those skills, but few places celebrate them as being core to a furniture-maker's creative existence or encourage makers to fully express their personal aesthetics in their work.

The Center for Furniture Craftsmanship instills those skills as basic premise, said toolmaker Thomas Lie-Nielsen, founder of Lie-Nielsen Toolworks of Warren and a board member of the furniture school.

"There are other professional-track schools, but Peter is quite special in focusing on furniture specifically and on training young people in career-building and designing furniture," he said, noting the school's 12-week and nine-month programs designed for people who are ready to fully explore the potential of craft and career. "Those programs tend to attract a younger and a more diverse student body, and that is healthy for the industry and healthy for the school," he said.

Lie-Nielsen said the committee entrusted to recruit Korn's replacement is moving forward. Acknowledging the difficult task of replacing a long-term founding director – "Peter is a really tough act to follow with unique abilities" – Lie-Nielsen said the search would "wind up when we find the right person. I don't quite know when that is going to be, but we are right in the middle of it. The board has taken ownership in making this happen and making it happen well. I am sure we will find someone really good."

Thomas Moser, who carved his own reputation for working in wood but whose legend might well be cast in granite, described Korn as uniquely individualistic and self-determined. His vision, expressed in the curriculum of his school that emphasizes quality and personal choice, has influenced a generation of makers and branded Maine as a destination for contemporary craft furniture, Moser said, noting that he has hired many of Korn's graduates to build furniture.

"Peter is one of those individuals who slogged through it pretty much on his own, and he has achieved something very important to Maine," Moser said. "Because of Peter, Maine – along with perhaps Oregon and Washington state – Maine is known as a furniture crafting center. People look to Maine for that, and Peter is responsible for some of that."

EDUCATION OF A CRAFTSMAN

Korn was raised in Philadelphia, and his parents – or his father, at least – wanted him to become a doctor or lawyer. He followed that path at first, studying history at an Ivy League school. But a summer spent working as a carpenter on Nantucket persuaded him he could make a living as a furniture maker – or at least motivated him to try. He moved first to New York City, where he built and sold his furniture; then to Anderson Ranch Arts Center in Snowmass, Colorado, where he taught and helped direct the craft school; and then to Maine, where he opened the Center for Furniture Craftsmanship in 1993, inviting a half-dozen students into his workshop in Rockland.

Work in Progress, V7, 2021, by Peter Korn, made with European Beech, walnut and Danish cord.

He rented space at the junction of routes 17 and 19 in West Rockport in 1994-95, then bought land and started building the current campus in 1996. The red-sided buildings with black trim are quietly visible from Route 90, reflecting Korn's subtle and pervasive aesthetic.

Moser accepted an invitation from Korn to teach a woodworking class at Anderson Ranch in Colorado and has stayed in contact over the years. "He wanted to teach woodworking not in an artsy kind of way, but in a utilitarian craft kind of way. When he came to Maine, I suggested to him that he locate in some place like Lewiston-Auburn or an industrial area, but he wanted to be by the ocean. So he started in his barn with a handful of students."

That he has built a world-class school speaks to Korn's focus and commitment to that vision, Moser said. "He has been remarkable in his ability to start with nothing and create what he now has, which is probably one of the two or three most important institutions of its kind in the country."

Korn's wisest move, said Lie-Nielsen, was turning the school into a nonprofit entity after settling in Rockport, because it ensured the center's existence beyond his leadership. "By creating a nonprofit, he also created an institution that will carry on long after he is no longer involved, which is what we are getting into right now," he said.

Other than teaching classes, Korn wants no involvement with the management of the school after his retirement, and has said he would not serve on the board.

IF YOU GO

WHAT: 'Straight from the Heart: A Farewell Exhibition curated by Executive Director Peter Korn'
WHERE: Messler Gallery, Center for Furniture Craftsmanship, 25 Mill St., Rockport
WHEN: On view through Jan. 5; 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday to Friday
VIRTUAL TOUR: woodschool.org/wood-school-gallery/straight-from-the-heart/

SATISFACTION

Beyond teaching students to make furniture, Korn instills the value of living a satisfied life. He wrote about that quest in his book, "Why We Make Things and Why It Matters: The Education of a Craftsman," published by Godine in 2013 and now in its fourth printing. He won a Maine Literary Award for best memoir in 2014. In the book, he wrote about the reward of conceiving and creating something new.

In an interview, he said the publication of the book represented a pinnacle of his career. In retirement, he aspires to such heights again.

"Writing that book is the most challenging and gratifying thing I have done professionally, maybe in any way, in my life, even more so than creating the school, in certain ways," he said. Writing another book is a goal – and he has a specific idea in mind – but he wonders if he might "have said everything I have to say that anyone would want to hear. I don't know if there is going to be another writing project of equal magnitude to me personally."

Korn has taught a basic woodworking class since the school's inception, and will continue doing so. It's the same class he offered when he assembled the first six students in his barn 28 years ago. "The school was built on that course. I wrote the textbook for it. I should be teaching it. I have been teaching it since more than forever. I love teaching it. I did it on chemotherapy, and I'll probably be able to do it when I am dead from the other side of the grave," he said.

A cancer survivor – at a young age and later in life – he has learned to take nothing for granted and to cherish his time.

In retirement, Korn also will teach a chair-making class, which he called "a great love. I have not taught a more advanced course since we moved to this campus in 1996," he said. "I have always felt, I should leave that for people who are in the studio more than I am. But I am and will be back in the workshop more, so I can resume teaching chairmaking."

Michal Puryear, whose work Korn selected for "Straight from the Heart," has known Korn since the early 1970s, when both lived in New York, before Korn went to Colorado and long before he dreamed of establishing a school in Maine. Nothing that his friend has accomplished has surprised him, yet he is amazed by Korn all the time. As talented as he is as a maker and administrator, Korn's sharpest skills are his ability to understand people, human nature and how to communicate, Puryear said.

That's why the school succeeded, he said. Korn designed a simple and effective curriculum that emphasized basic skills and creative expression, and recruited top-notch teachers and students with a sense of adventure. The community has grown around those ideals.

"He knows how to engage people, and he seems to read them very well," Puryear said, "and he has managed to turn what was basically a shop in his barn behind his house into a campus with four buildings and a program that is the best woodworking program in the country."

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