The award-winning artist Ernst Gamperl has spent a decade shaping a single oak tree into looming vessels that defy the limitations of wood. As *Tree of Life* goes on show for the first time, he talks to *Debika Ray* about the series

STAR TURN

'What I like about wood is the smell,' says the German artist Ernst Gamperl. 'And cutting it with sharp tools, which, when combined with a speedy turning object, means you can form even the hardest wood easily. And the way you shape wood on the lathe – you see the shavings flying around, and it's really something special.'

He is talking about his enduring love affair with his material, but I'm failing to extract a crucial piece of information: how he hollows out his monumental wooden vessels – one of which won the inaugural Loewe Craft Prize in 2017 – given their mouths are so narrow. 'For the smaller objects, I use a hollowing tool like all wood-turners do, while for the bigger ones I have a special tool I've made myself after around 15 years of development,' he explains. 'But it's a workshop secret.' He laughs, and I am forced to move on.

The depth of his vessels is one of their most intriguing qualities. Standing up to 1.5 metres tall and with walls as thin as five or six millimetres, they take up to two weeks to turn. When displayed – as they are now at the Gewerbemuseum in Winterthur, near Zurich – they loom large like contorted, headless bodies, with delicate, almost poignant, detailing at the rim where the inside meets the raw, textured

Previous spread: objects from the *Tree of Life* series, which are on show at the Gewerbemuseum.
Left: Ernst Gamperl with the gargantuan oak that would become the focus of a 10-year project.
Right: the artist hollows out the taller vessels using a tool he invented himself

'The organic elements of what he does are subtle and sublime, backed up with his understanding of engineering'

SARAH MYERSCOUGH, GALLERIST

grain of the exterior. On the surface, lime, iron oxide, clay powder, hydrogen water or vinegar merge with the wood's natural tannins to produce tones ranging from a pale, bone-like colour to deep browns and blacks.

When Sarah Myerscough, the artist's London gallerist, first encountered his work in 2012, it was this dichotomy of delicacy and magnitude that caught her attention. 'It astonished me that someone was able to make pieces of that scale and with such a thin rim all the way though,' she says, observing that Gamperl has not only created these works, but created his own craft through a set of customised tools and an experimental, responsive process. 'If you think about a branch of an oak tree spinning on a machine and being carved – it sounds scarily dangerous and impossible, but Ernst defies possibilities. What is fascinating is that the organic elements of what he does are so subtle and sublime, but it's also backed up with this incredible understanding of machinery and engineering. The two parts of his mind work in a lovely rhythm.'

The mystery surrounding his method and the staggering presence of his works are why, according to Myerscough, he is gaining increasing recognition among collectors and museums – the V&A in London, the Museum of Arts and Crafts in Hamburg and the Collection Issey Miyake in Tokyo are among those that have acquired his works. 'They are magnificent and every piece has its own character,' she says. 'When you display them as a group, they are a family of objects – he chooses pieces that are in conversation with one another.

The exhibition at the Gewerbemuseum is the culmination of the *Tree of Life* body of work that includes the prize-winning piece. The collection – 67 large vessels and 30 smaller items – was produced from a single tree, a gargantuan oak that was uprooted by a storm in Germany, over a period of 10 years. In 2008, when a friend sent him a picture of it, he had no idea that this tree would absorb him for the next decade. 'I said "wow" – I've never had a trunk as big as this.' It was too large to be transported as a whole to Italy, where he lived at the time, so Gamperl travelled with his assistant, Steeves Danguy, to cut it into pieces small enough to put on a turning lathe, after spending a year-and-a-half preparing the workshops, machines and tools to start work on the project.

By 2012 he had run out of space at the 300-year old stone building he shared with his wife, Ulrike, so they relocated to a farmhouse at the foothills of the Alps in Bavaria, where they live and work today. 'In Italy everything was too tight. I couldn't breathe any more,' he says. 'It was tough to make the bigger objects there.'

As the space he has available has expanded, Gamperl's method and output have also evolved. He now has a greater repertoire of techniques, for example. 'It's like a language,' he explains. 'My vocabulary of making is now more profound than when I started, which means my objects are becoming richer and stronger.' He has always been drawn to vessels, but over time his work has moved away from more straightforward, recognisable shapes to become increasingly ambitious, sculptural and anthropomorphic.

What has remained is his desire to be in conversation with his raw material, rather than simply fitting together pre-made components – a drive that was central to his shift from furniture maker to woodturner in 1989. The catalyst was his discovery of a book by Australia-based woodturner Richard Raffan: he bought a turning lathe and taught himself to use it, experimenting in a way that might have been difficult if he was formally trained. 'I was completely free in my mind,' says Gamperl. 'I tried everything I thought could work, and if it didn't I tried other ways. It was learning by doing.'

OAK: PHOTO NIKLAS GOSLAR | ALL VESSELS: PHOTOS BERNHARD SPOETTEL

This page: Gamperl in his workshop in Bavaria. Right: the vessels continue to change shape after they have been turned

PHOTOS: BERNHARD SPOETTEL

Later, he studied traditional turning techniques in Hildesheim using dry wood, rather than the fresh, wet wood he had formerly worked with, which tended to warp, shrink and move in unexpected ways. But he found the perfect shapes that resulted from using dry wood less satisfying. 'I felt caged in by the symmetry of these objects,' he says. 'It took me a while to find my way back.' The objects he has produced since then make the most of the qualities of fresh wood – he embraces cracks, imperfections and the way it deforms both during and after the turning process. The objects sit in his workshop for up to half a year after they are shaped, their thin walls slumping and gently collapsing in on themselves as the months go by, creating intriguing slopes and curves as the wood finds and settles into its eventual form.

'It's a dialogue with the material,' Gamperl says, nodding to the title of the book, *Dialogue with Wood*, which he is launching in September alongside the exhibition in Winterthur. 'I'll have an idea for a form and start to cut a trunk with a chainsaw and then on the turning lathe. I'll then discover details that were previously not visible, and maybe change my idea. It could be in the end I have another form from what I was planning, because the wood didn't allow the first idea.'

He names 20th-century American woodworker George Nakashima as a key influence in this respect. 'Often a maker has an idea and then he puts the idea onto the wood, rather than reading or feeling it,' he says, 'but I like the way Nakashima looked to wood, to see the naturality in it. That's also a big part of my work – I let the wood be what it wants to be.'

The forthcoming exhibition is the first time the entire *Tree of Life* collection has been shown in public – he is in discussion with institutions in London and Korea to exhibit it after its run in Switzerland. In displaying his work, Gamperl has discovered new sculptural qualities in his vessels that he had not previously noticed. 'I've recognised that something has changed strongly within myself in terms of how I look at objects,' he says. 'I discovered that some objects can fill a space on their own, rather than being displayed in a group. I now give them more space to breathe.'

And what of the tree – is there anything left to work with? 'There are some pieces left over, but they will become firewood.'

'Ernst Gamperl: Dialogue with Wood' is at the Gewerbemuseum Winterthur, Switzerland, until 3 November. gewerbemuseum.ch
ernst-gamperl.de

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