

Wycliffe Stutchbury - FALL LINE

by Emma Crichton Miller (Editor-in Chief, The Design Edit)

Wycliffe Stutchbury is an artist whose primary material, wood, is also his primary source of inspiration. In his hands wood becomes paint. He works with tiny, delicately hewn tiles of timber to build his screens which shimmer with subtle colour. The timber he selects for each piece comes from a single source, so not only is each work an improvisation on the unique qualities of the wood, as it has been battered and bleached or showered with rain, in a given spot, enduring a particular climate, it is also, inevitably, a meditation on place.

Brought up since he turned thirteen in Hampshire and Sussex, Stutchbury traces his relationship with wood to these southern hills: "The Downs are very much my default landscape, especially near Eastbourne. There is not much woodland and the trees struggle to grow - the hawthorns and the ashes there - they are really digging in against the odds, completely sculpted by the prevailing winds. I love the way trees adapt like that - it is part of their history, the way they reflect the environment they have grown up in." Just as Stutchbury feels that his processes reveal these hidden histories, so his own emergence as a maker has exposed a passion for his material that runs deeply back to this country childhood.

At first, Stutchbury channeled his energies into making furniture. But he felt increasingly disturbed, he says, by the way technique "can suffocate material". So he went back to college, to art school in Brighton, where, while all around him people were using CAD and 3-D digital printing, Stutchbury worked with a bandsaw. His first flat panels, revealed at Origin in 2009, were an immediate success, winning him a Crafts Council award and several commissions. At first wall-mounted, the panels lend themselves to the making of screens, a meeting point for function and art, where the apparent modesty of the means is a foil for the sheer poetic beauty of the material and workmanship, and what had been considered flat art becomes sculptural in its interaction with the space around it.

Stutchbury's works resemble landscapes. It is not just the way their contoured relief patterns recall maps or aerial views, but the whole manner of their coming into being. Stutchbury allows the wood strips themselves to guide his way, each carefully selected tile by carefully selected tile, building a work through a painstaking process as slow as erosion or accretion. Stutchbury says, "What I like most about this whole process is that I don't really know where it is going to take me. The geometries get me into corners where I have to come up with a solution. This is not something I plan or foresee. I am trying to work as intuitively as possible and trying not to think too much. What I look for is where the geometry creates incidents. That is like nature, where the grain of the tree adapts to knots in the wood."

Almost as a natural evolution of his method, his surfaces have become more three dimensional, resembling waves running up a beach, or layers of sedimentary rock, reflecting different facets of the landscapes he admires. Light and shadow enliven them like sunlight over fields. And as he has gained access to a greater variety of timbers - dark bog oak from Kent, for instance, and white holly from near Abergavenny, so he has been able to play with different colour ranges. With each piece there is the almost magical, imaginative transformation of a single body of waste wood into a single art work, making a new story without losing the integrity of the original.

Stutchbury's most recent experiment has been to create a billowing, draping textile, titled Gayles Farm 5, (2020). The tiles, drawn from discarded oak fencing, are fastened to a cloth which, tied by simple fish hooks, is like a canvas liberated from its frame. The tiles move and flicker like fish scales, but there is also a distinct analogy with music, as the consistent horizontal line holds myriad variations, in length, texture and colour, on the theme of weathered oak. Whatever the larger conceptual framework of his pieces, however, Wycliffe's ambition as always is to foreground the beauty of the wood: "It is still about intervening as little as possible, and getting people to look at the colours and textures that are there."

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