

Gordon Pembbridge

Capturing Human/Nature

D Wood

Back Country Stream in progress on the carving table. Pembbridge used all sorts of props, including beanbags.



Comparing the interpretations of nature by artist Gordon Pembridge with the reality that inspired them can be an astonishing experience.

As a devoted angler, Pembridge accompanies friends on quests to remote New Zealand regions. While the excuse for adventure might be the elusive brown and rainbow trout, the capture of images, colors, and sensations is a certainty. The Whanganui River, an important navigation route that ferried supplies and tourists via steamboat in the early twentieth century, is the inspirational source for Pembridge's *Back Country Stream*. The river, now largely a tourist attraction, still beckons outdoorsmen and women who value the isolated eddies with their hidden prey of all varieties. For Pembridge, the prey, in addition to the one-that-got-away, is motifs that make his turnings authentically natural.

Back Country Stream began with thinly turned macrocarpa, a timber whose strength consigns its use to a building's framing components. Pembridge turns storm-felled green wood to a thickness of one millimeter (less than 1/16") that air dries quickly. Like in the construction industry, the macrocarpa is the structure that permits Pembridge's creation of a montage of details from native bush and waters. Prominently displayed is New Zealand's national symbol, the silver fern: Its realization is by elimination of timber, resulting in negative space around each pinna or leaflet. The pinnas are then carved, adding unexpected texture to the fronds. Surrounding the tops of the fern blades are small ovular holes that an observer might assume are simply a decorative feature to maintain the consistency of the pierced design. However, Pembridge's photograph of a shallow portion of a Whanganui tributary shows the effect of sunlight on gently undulating water, creating the exact pattern that is painstakingly replicated. Lower on the bowl's surface are the water's ripples, rendered in

a form and airbrushed lacquer color that hint at phosphorescence.

Identifying the elements of *Back Country Stream* contributes to appreciation of the whole, but the whole is what makes this piece a three-dimensional natural wonder. A view into and through the bowl, with the juxtaposition of ferns with water and stones, is like glimpsing the Whanganui from the dense landscape through which it courses. Darker tones, reminiscent of the forest floor, define the carved base of the bowl, while sunlight floods the upper rim and filters into the lower reaches. Attention has been paid to the myriad ways of viewing *Back Country Stream*, a testament to the vision of an artist. As Pembridge says, "It's not about woodturning. It's more about the artwork. The wood's just a canvas."

Influence of Kenya

An affinity for the natural environment originates from Pembridge's childhood

in Kenya where his father managed a tea plantation in the eastern highlands. He played with local *totos* (children) and remembers the lush vista of Lake Victoria from the Nandi Escarpment. "Walking in bush with wild animals in Africa left an incredible impression on me," he recalls and, when commissioned to do so, will undertake a sculpture or painting that captures what he now considers a bygone era. Whereas the Kenya he experienced was a landscape with few inhabitants, Pembridge now describes it as, "a sea of humans with pockets of Africa." It is not surprising that his intrinsic appreciation of nature, obtained through personal direct experience, is now manifest in work that pays homage to distant, unpopulated areas of New Zealand. Pembridge is not a politically involved environmental activist, but expresses his concerns covertly by investing care and passion in the flora and fauna he portrays. ▶



Korus ferns unfurling fascinate Pembridge.



New Zealand ferns are common along backcountry streams, so I include them in my designs. They are an icon for New Zealand.



The iridescent colors of the New Zealand pigeon (*Hemiphaga novaeseelandiae*) provide inspiration for Pembridge's work.



The water ripples and boulders of the Whakapapa River, North Island of New Zealand inspired *Back Country Stream*.



The Deep Blue, 2008, Macrocarpa, acrylic paint, 4½" × 7½" (115mm × 190mm)



Back Country Stream, 2012, Macrocarpa, acrylic paint, 6" × 8" (150mm × 200mm)

Education

Pembridge's family emigrated in 1977 and after attending boarding school in Whanganui—the city straddling the Māori-designated “big river”—Pembridge took art and design courses before embarking on a career in photography. His skills included printing, retouching, and restoration, and he subsequently established a company engaged in graphic design and art. As part of his transition to full-time wood artistry, Pembridge works two days a

week for a hunting and fishing retailer. This contact with the public is an intentional counterpoint to the hours of necessary isolation for concentration and execution of his designs. He also inserts teaching into his schedule, valuing the opportunity to tutor about form and color mixing, and foster enthusiasm for creative activity. He is not worried about producing clones because he encourages the benefits of individuality: “There is nothing better than achieving your own work and

getting satisfaction from it. Who needs drugs or coffee?”

Several proficiencies have contributed to Pembridge's growing recognition. The first arose in his youth when he learned woodworking, making cabinets and bookcases, and completed assignments in technical drawing. His eventual desire to incorporate curved components into the furniture prompted research into lathes and enrollment for a beginners' course in turning. But it was the exposure to woodworking at an impressionable



(Far left) *Kiwi Koru Fern*, 2012, Pohutukawa, 3⅞" (93mm) tall

(Left) *The Last of the Line*, 2012, Macrocarpa, acrylic paint, 4½" × 5½" (115mm × 140mm) height.



Pohutukawa Koru Fern, 2012, Pohutukawa, 3" × 5¼" (75mm × 133mm)

age that familiarized Pembridge with his chosen material and its properties. Secondly, gaining aptitude with drawing guided the direction of Pembridge's oeuvre. He drafts his designs on paper and transfers the patterns to the turned volume. A lathe is a captivating machine that seemingly requires little art or design training—a wood blank can be turned into a credible object with minimal training. Whereas refinement certainly comes with extensive practice, failure to employ skills like drawing, painting, and even model-making handicaps the woodturner who aspires to a unique result.

The importance of drawing is evident in the *Koru Fern* series. The koru is the unfurling coiled fern frond, known in North America as fiddlehead. It is a Māori symbol of creation and can be seen frequently in carvings and art: The koru travels internationally as the logo of Air New Zealand. Even though the koru and silver fern can be described as

Kiwiana, Pembridge combines them in a unique way, spiraling the two forms diagonally around a bowl's walls. From some views, the pinnae are foreground silhouettes against iridescent koru; from others they read as three-dimensional entities. The prominent diagonal lines—especially the fine fern stem—create a vortex into which the eye is drawn. This precision would not be possible without careful calculation and transfer of a design to the wood's surface. The remarkable fact about Pembridge's vessels is that they are handcrafted in a world enamored of laser cutters that are capable of doing the same job, yet carry none of the mystique.

The third of Pembridge's skills is photography. He uses the camera just like a pencil or brush: It is one of the necessary instruments in the



design process. The camera is packed along with the fishing rod and sleeping bag for the capture of images that might be replicated or stylized. One of Pembridge's new departures is more realistic imagery and color, in contrast to the graphics that have characterized his work so far, and photos are essential references for this new authenticity.

Pembridge also photographs his work, thereby maintaining control of how it is portrayed: The vessels are difficult to capture, so mastery of photography is advantageous when 2-D must substitute ►



Koru Fern, 2010, Macrocarpa, acrylic paint, 4¾" x 7⅛" (120mm x 180mm)

I use pyrography for repeated patterns, here adding some detailed curls to go with the larger koru shape of the fern unfurling within the vessel.



Kiwi in a Burrow, *Koru Fern*, 2012, Pohutukawa 15¾" (400mm) tall



for 3-D. Not only are images a marketing tool, they are a record of artistic development. At intervals, he can review his portfolio, assessing what was successful, previous styles and techniques, and personal growth. Finally, photographs are the components of keynote presentations. Pembridge was invited to speak at TurnFest in 2010 and 2012, a woodturning symposium held in Australia. His talk incorporated still images and videos that supplemented his live technical demonstration, and the existence of that presentation means it's available as an ongoing marketing resource.

Those familiar with the work of Binh Pho will see similarities in technique, yet each artist explores themes that are particular to heritage and experience. Pembridge considers Binh an inspiration as are New Zealanders Terry Scott, with whom Pembridge shares a website and gallery, and Ian Fish, an instructor and tools supplier. The dearth of New Zealand galleries showing high-quality

turning has restricted the viewing of Pembridge's vessels and sculpture to regional competitions and local clubs' exhibitions; unless he is certain of how his work will be displayed and managed, it remains in the studio. Of late, Pembridge is being represented by Riley Galleries in Cleveland, Ohio, and the William Zimmer Gallery in Mendocino, Calif.: the latter offered him a solo exhibition at SOFA Chicago in November 2012. This re-entry into the American market was orchestrated with the same



Pembridge demonstrated at TurnFest 2012.

Photo: Andi Wolfe

care and attention to detail as is manifest in *Back Country Stream*.

When asked about his goals, Pembridge says that, coupled with the obvious desire for financial resources to support his family, he wants to continue to enjoy what he does. "I absolutely love doing it and I don't want to lose that." At the same time, he is aiming high, "I want to be one of the best in the world." Those who have met Pembridge know that he is not speaking out of arrogance but as a down-to-earth person who wants to do the best at what he does. Doing his best also includes highlighting "how beautiful the natural world is and how blind we are to seeing it." ■

D Wood received an MFA in furniture design from the Rhode Island School of Design. She writes about craft media for a variety of international publications and is currently a PhD candidate in design studies at the University of Otago, New Zealand. Wood wrote about New Zealand woodturners Rolly Munro and Graeme Priddle in AW vol 25 no 1 and vol 26 no 1.