


TO HEAR THE
voice
of
Wood

**Wind and water speak
through the driftwood
creations of Maine artisan
Michael Fleming.**

**BY ANNIE GRAVES
PHOTOS BY GRETA RYBUS**

A man with grey hair, wearing a dark t-shirt and jeans, is seen from the side, holding a large, weathered piece of driftwood. The wood is long and textured, with some bark missing. He is standing on a beach with a body of water and a forested hill in the background under a cloudy sky.

Michael Fleming sizes up an ocean-weathered log at a beach not far from his home on the Phippsburg Peninsula. Since finding the perfect driftwood for his work is no easy task, he keeps his favorite foraging locations a secret.



It is nearly impossible not to submit to the presence of driftwood. Smoothed out by the rhythms of time and water, twisted and rubbed clean by the wind, stripped to bare essence, these are the Rorschachs of nature. Forms that speak to a deeper part of our psyche. More primal. More imaginative. Definitely more elemental. They are, after all, literally sculpted by the elements.

Which is why it makes such sense that Michael Fleming calls his work at Designs Adrift “a collaboration with nature.” What else would you call this massive, bleached-bone, perfect tangle of roots sitting on a platform in his barn studio; this hunk of silvery beauty that he hauled from the northern reaches of Maine, then aged for months, smoothed and leveled, and cajoled into bearing a slab of glass, like some windblown Atlas?

This is a table equally at home on a stretch of beach or in a city loft. He is, Fleming explains, “sculpting with the wind and sea, sun and sky.” And while many driftwood artists concentrate on smaller pieces—mirrors and such—Fleming works on a grand scale, crafting high-end furniture with an artistry that has gained him a following around the world.

It’s a beautiful, sunny day. A steady breeze is blowing on the Phippsburg Peninsula, one of a cluster of dangly peninsulas that grace the midcoast of Maine, and Fleming is delighted that it’s keeping the mosquitos—apparently insatiable gluttons—at bay. It allows a chance to really take in the strangeness and peace of the immediate surroundings. A gray-shingled Cape Cod-style house from the early 1800s melts harmoniously into an open clearing surrounded by conservation land that continues on to Popham Beach. An ell off the back joins the house to the barn, where Fleming dreams and shapes and hones his contemporary driftwood furniture and art in a workshop cloaked in old barn boards. Wood harboring wood.

Which is all quite lovely, but I still haven’t gotten my mind around the heaps of driftwood in the yard, mountains



of it, rising up through the grass and wildflowers. It’s staggering to see so many intricate, perfect pieces of driftwood all gathered in one place. A kind of outdoors workshop annex, where the wood continues to age and weather, except it’s really more like an elephant boneyard, wild and mythic.

“Now this one,” Fleming points to a long, sloping chunk of wood, “will be a bench, with a resin inlay and brushed steel legs, can’t you just see it?” And I can, as his excitement conveys a picture of something that already exists in his mind. Then he hefts a different piece of driftwood, about half the length of a telephone pole, as casually as a 10-pound hand weight. When I ask about his chiropractic bill, he chuckles. “Well, two trips ago, I blew out my back,” he confesses. “I’m getting older now—55, I can’t believe it. I’m very strong, but I’m like, OK, now I have to start



Fleming in his workshop, crowded with chunks of driftwood and works in progress. He admits to wishing for more space to accommodate his larger designs, saying, "It gets tight in there when I'm doing a few pieces at a time."

stretching." He grins. "So I stretched, and you know what? My back straightened right out!"

Fleming is rangy, as you'd expect from someone who routinely wrestles large, heavy pieces of wood. (How heavy? We'll get to that in a minute.) He looks a little like Hal Holbrook, gray hair curling out from under a ventilated baseball cap, with a dash of Crocodile Dundee. And that actually seems about right: amiable, with an underlying restlessness, and a skill set that includes years of experience as a fine woodworker and furniture maker, while the rest is a Tom Mix combo of explorer, treasure seeker, wood wrangler.

Fleming and his wife, Jennifer, met 25 years ago, in Tortola, where she was vacationing and he was surfing, after delivering a boat from Rye, New Hampshire. They've been in this setting for 19 years, together with their son, Finn,

12, and rescue dog, Dee Dee, but before that they spent years traveling—sailing and surfing around the world—while they both worked, he as a carpenter for hire. Later, after settling in Maine, they continued to surf the world: Australia, all through the South Pacific to South Africa. His wanderlust and observations of other cultures began to influence the carpentry skills he carried with him. "All these other countries had this type of furniture that used natural materials," he says. "And I'm like, wait a minute. I live in the most beautiful state in the world, with the most beautiful material. And nobody's really refining it."

Make a bed, said Jenn.

That's how it began. Fleming crafted a beautiful queen-size bed, with columns of driftwood at the four corners.



They still have it in their home. And as he tells it, the response to his new work was practically instantaneous. First, it was friends. Then his first show, in East Boothbay, where he exhibited chairs, lamps, mirrors, a few tables. Everything sold. They set up a website around 2010, and from there it just grew. Jenn takes care of the business; he does the rest. “We don’t come from money,” Fleming says. “We did it all with hard work and Yankee ingenuity. I got out of building houses, doing fine furniture. I knew this was what I wanted to do.”



The other takeaway from his years as a traveling carpenter? Travel light. With a minimum of tools. This, too, translated well into Fleming’s new passion. “When I did fine furniture, I had every tool under the sun,” he remembers. “But when I traveled with my carpentry in developing countries, I had two tools, and sometimes I even had to make the tool. That really resonated with me.” He shows me the two most essential tools he uses now: a hand grinder that helps him shape the wood, and a small Japanese handsaw, about the size of a boomerang, that opens to reveal a row of hungry teeth. “I can cut a massive tree with that,” he says, admiringly. I have no doubt.

And now, to the treasure hunt.

“It’s so private where I get the wood,” Fleming says. His voice grows quiet. “I was just up at the lakes, way up north of here, for a week. I call it ‘the field,’ where I have wood that’s drying. I camp on a teeny island; it’s completely pristine.” Traveling within a 200-mile radius of home, always in Maine, he haunts the lakes and ocean shores, often camping for a week at a time. It is where he gets much of his inspiration, where he recharges from his studio work. “It helps me connect back to nature, and gives me so many ideas of what’s coming next.”



He tells me about the reality-TV show that wanted to follow him on one of his treasure hunts. Fleming refused. He’s protective of his resources, the way a truffle hunter might be. “People would just come in and grab it all up,” he says. “And the thing is, everybody thinks when I get wood, I just pick whatever. But it doesn’t work that way. It’s a slow process. I don’t just go in and grab, grab, grab. It’s a little piece here, a little piece there. I ride for days. I row for miles. I drag it out.” Always with permission. Always doing everything by hand.



It’s very clear why a reality-TV show would want to tag along. There’s drama in driftwood. Fleming points to a small metal boat sitting off to one side in his yard, so unobtrusive it’s nearly invisible. The battered little aluminum skiff is his workhorse, a 1957 Crestliner, that he even takes out to sea, to the offshore islands. “It’s very small,” he admits. “I could use something bigger, with pulleys, but I have to tread lightly. I’ve gotten stuck. This boat, I can handle by myself.” That’s important when you go out into



LEFT: Fleming with his dog, Dee Dee, a faithful workshop companion with an uncanny knack for getting underfoot, he jokes, right when he's moving heavy pieces. OPPOSITE: A selection of Fleming's artisan creations, each built around the unique colors and contours of driftwood collected on the Maine coast.

a piece—finding the wood, bringing it back, cleaning it, weathering it,” he says. He’ll sand for days, mostly working with hardwood, like oak and maple. His favorite for tables is cedar, because of how it weathers from the minerals in the water and the sun. He points out a piece of spruce, also destined to be a table. And here is “a gorgeous piece of ocean sumac.”

It’s such a Maine material, he says more than once. “And the colors—there’s no other color like it, it’s so pleasing to the eye.” As if to demonstrate, his eyes skim over the wood. “The natural forms complement any room. That’s what I love—the curves and the color.” It’s so different, he says, from when he was doing fine furniture, and would go to a mill yard to pick out conventional wood. “I like enhancing what’s been done by nature, and continuing that into its final piece.”

Which might end up being anything, from an elongated lamp topped with a drum shade, to an installation, to artwork that incorporates rippling strands of found lobster warp. But one thing is certain: It will be clean and sleek; it will emphasize the wild beauty of this wood, and then some. “When it’s finished it will look nothing like this,” he says, pointing to a weathered stump. “I might add a piece in here that you won’t even notice, and then a piece of metal, because I like incorporating metal-glass-wood. It all marries together.”

So successfully does he blend these elements that his appeal runs the gamut of clients. Fleming has fashioned a 15-foot “tree” to hide a metal post in the Rolls-Royce showroom in Virginia. Installed a huge bald eagle on the exterior of L.L. Bean’s flagship store in Freeport, Maine. Created three loggerhead sea turtles for the town of Marco Island in Florida. His glass-topped tables are coveted from Portland to Paris to Saudi Arabia.

Up in the hayloft, over the barn, he’s got a stash of smaller, exquisite driftwood, all carefully chosen, a reserve of raw material. Perfect little trees, columns, shapes that resemble antlers, horns, flames, and tusks. Faces peer out of knotholes. Eyes stare off to the sea. Softened and smoothed, this one looks like a heron. This one could be a gull. There’s a dancer, and a whale, and an acrobat. The loft feels alive with motion. And this, in the corner—a wind-knotted twist of beauty. It’s just waiting. 🍷

To see more of Michael Fleming’s driftwood creations, go to designsadrift.com.

the wilds. “I go *beyond*,” he says. “If I get stuck, nobody knows I’m there.”

“How did you haul this one out?” I point to a large mass that looks like a tangle of moose antlers. Fleming grimaces. “Oh God, on my back. Even the guys that deliver my firewood are like, ‘How do you do it?’ I have a backpack that I modified that I can strap on a piece and haul it out.” He adds, as an afterthought, “It’s grueling.”

Fleming goes out in all seasons, but the best time to pick up driftwood is the end of summer, because everything is dry and water levels are low. Out among the islands, or exploring Maine lakes, he will carefully plant a vertical stick to flag the driftwood he’s considering, then come back to revisit. Some of these pieces weigh 400 to 500 pounds when wet, and he has to wait. “I had pieces I tried to get in the boat a few weeks ago, and I couldn’t get them out. They’ll have to dry for a while longer and then I’ll go back.”

He camps under the stars, gathers more driftwood, watches moose stroll by. Gradually he fills his truck, a small Toyota. Then his boat. Hitches them together like train cars, and begins the drive home. It’s easy to imagine the surprised look on people’s faces when they pass him on a Maine highway, trailing this romantic cargo behind him, a tumble of majestic ocean flotsam.

And then he’s home, confronting the possibilities.

Because finding driftwood is just a beginning. “There’s no way I can include all the time that goes into making