

Meet your maker: Darren Appiagyei The award-winning woodturner experimenting with nature

In the last few years, the artist and maker Darren Appiagyei has been making a significant impact on the international craft scene – attracting an admiring following for the beautiful and unusual vessels he creates through his experiments in woodturning.

From inclusion in '300 Objects' during London Craft Week in 2020 to his first solo show, 'The Texture of Wood', at the Garden Museum in 2021, and now an increasingly busy calendar of international exhibitions, Darren's profile is growing at pace.



Darren Appiagyei, holding one of his burr vessels. Image courtesy of Gareth Hacker.

The accidental artist

Darren attributes his career to two moments of serendipity. The first occurred when he was in his second year of 3D Design at Camberwell College of Arts. In the workshop one day, his attention was caught by the lathe. No one was using it – in

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fact, no one seemed to know how to use it – and Darren was curious. He began teaching himself, exploring the way the tool and the material interacted to bring out the natural aesthetic qualities of wood.

Darren discovered that, for him, woodturning was a therapeutic process, that the act of carving, gouging and shaping the wood took him away from the everyday world and into a more contemplative, creative space where he could connect with his material. For someone who had been a carer for his mother, who lived with schizophrenia, since the age of 10, the release offered by the lathe proved invaluable.



Darren Appiagyei works on the lathe in his studio at Cockpit Arts. Image courtesy of Gareth Hacker.

The second pivotal moment happened after Darren had graduated from Camberwell in 2016. Walking home in Greenwich one evening, he caught sight of the gleaming lights of Cockpit Arts and, moving closer to investigate, he noticed a flyer inviting applications for a woodturning award run by Cockpit's Worshipful Company of Turners. The prize included studio space, use of a lathe, and business guidance. Darren entered and won.

Joining Cockpit gave Darren the space he needed to pursue and perfect his practice, as well as putting him in the heart of a supportive and inspiring community

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of fellow artists – including a previous winner of the award, the woodturner Eleanor Lakelin. She was instrumental in encouraging and mentoring Darren as he began his professional career as an artist and craftsman.

From banksia to burrs to burning – a journey through nature

Darren owes his biggest breakthrough to a rare Australian fruit. Banksia nuts are hard, pine-cone-like fruits riddled with seed pod cavities. Darren became fascinated with working with banksia nuts, using the lathe to explore their aesthetic and material properties, working with nature to see where it led him, rather than seeking to impose a preconceived design.

"Woodturning for me is about embracing a material, understanding its qualities and enhancing the intrinsic beauty of the wood, whether a knot, the organic shape, or the grain of the wood."

– Darren Appiagyei

The result of this experimental process was a collection of highly unusual, richly textured vessels, which soon won attention from art aficionados and craft collectors. When the dean of Chelsea College of Art bought one of Darren's banksia pieces, he realised he was on a path to becoming a professional artist.



Darren Appiagyei's breakthrough works were crafted from Australian banksia nuts – pine-cone-like fruits with distinctive seed pods. Image courtesy of Cockpit Arts.

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Supported by the Crafts Council's Hothouse 2019 programme, and by industry peers including Yinka Ilori, who mentored him, Darren grew his presence at exhibitions throughout 2019 and 2020, and when lockdown happened, he used the time to concentrate on his practice, enjoying the freedom to think and make.

Darren's mother died during lockdown in 2021, bringing to an end the almost two-decade period that he had spent as her carer, and marking the beginning of a new chapter in his life and career. After her funeral, he travelled to Scotland for a month-long artist's residency, returning to his first solo show – 'The Texture of Wood' at the Garden Museum in Westminster.

After the success of his signature banksia pieces, Darren went on to develop 'his second album' (as he puts it), exploring a new material: burrs. Resulting from some form of stress or infection in the tree, burrs are deformed outgrowths on the trunk or branches, and are highly prized among woodworkers for their intriguing patterns of grain. This makes them an especially meaningful material for Darren, as he notes clear parallels between the growth of the burr on the tree, and the fibroids (non-cancerous uterine growths) that had contributed to the death of his mother.

Although he has always strived to maintain a distinction between his personal life and his artistic practice, Darren realised that his ongoing exploration of fragility, imperfection and disintegration in nature is inescapably connected to his personal experiences understanding human mortality, and that his complex relationship with his mother does indeed inform his work.



Darren Appiagyei's burr artworks showcase the materiality of the natural outgrowths found on tree trunks. Image courtesy of Jamie Trounce.

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From burrs, Darren has continued his experiments with natural textures in the form of pyrographics – the use of fire and flame to draw out the grain and create distinctive surface effects. Strikingly beautiful – even dramatic – in their detail, his pyrographic vessels are now being shown worldwide, at exhibitions in the US and Europe, via his website, and of course via Instagram, @inthegrainn.

“My work is an experience. You need to physically see it. From different angles, you see changes in tone and texture. It’s like taking a photo in nature – you only get a 2D snapshot of the experience. Nothing compares to seeing it, breathing it in. My work is the same. It’s inherently tactile. I encourage my audience to touch and understand the material, to observe the transition of tone, to be curious, to smell and to feel.”

– Darren Appiagyei



Pyrographic vessels have distinctive surface patterns due to the application of fire. Image courtesy of Matt Warner.

Upcoming exhibitions: New York, New York

The year ahead looks likely to be Darren Appiagyei's busiest yet. Headline moments include the recent inclusion of two of his pyrographic vessels at Salon Art + Design at Park Avenue Armory in New York last week, and his work will be shown alongside a selection of vintage and contemporary design, fine and decorative art from leading international galleries.

An appearance at MAD (Museum of Arts and Design) will follow in March 2023. Other exhibition announcements are expected soon, but in the meantime Darren is also involved in a number of high-profile craft events as a speaker and panellist (having overcome a stutter to become a confident and compelling presenter).

Darren is also working on a memoir, telling the story of his childhood as a carer, his relationship with his mother, and the countless challenges he has overcome in his journey to become one of the most accomplished and intriguing craft artists of London's emerging creative generation.

For more information about Darren Appiagyei, images of his work, and interviews, please contact sabine@zetteler.co.uk.