

## TERRY HOLZGREEN

*I'm not trying to find my voice. I have it.*

It was the mid 1960s and 10-year-old Terry Holzgreen, flipping through the pages of a magazine, came across an irresistible ad: Write in for a free 30-day trial of an electric circular saw! Without knowing quite what the tool was, but with a real fascination for making, he sent in the postcard. It's not certain whether he or his parents were more surprised when a really large cardboard box arrived in the mail; the free Tupperware stayed, but the tool went back.

Holzgreen's parents weren't makers, but they did help him shape an unconventional school experience he describes as "late '60s hippy educational progressivism." Out of high school, Holzgreen went to Oregon to follow his anti-authoritarian dreams but in his early twenties he landed back in Los Angeles. He wanted to be a carpenter but had no training. "Here's what you do," his therapist said. "If you start by doing demolition, they can't get rid of you." With little more than a hammer, a drill, and—finally—his own circular saw, he posted an ad for a carpenter-for-hire in the newspaper, said yes when homeowners asked if he could build or fix a thing, asked questions of more experienced makers, and made a life in the trades, ultimately moving from job sites to cabinetry.

Though he loved the arts and explored everything from ceramics to photography, Holzgreen couldn't figure out where his expressive voice intersected with wood. On beaches and in scrap yards around town, he picked up driftwood and other odds and ends, storing them sometimes for years in shop bins before the bins themselves emerged seven years ago as a compositional tool and framing device, and Holzgreen began to imagine what the scraps could become.

The last cabinetry job he did was completed at the start of COVID. Since then, he's been deep inside of a practice that draws him to the shop most days. When the compositional process is cooking, it's unlike anything else, as when you're looking for a piece that's four and eleven sixteenths wide and you pick up a piece that's exactly right. Then it's hard to go home, and Holzgreen comes back to the shop the next day, if only for an hour, to keep that rhythm going.

In late 2020, shortly after Joe Biden won a convincing presidential victory, Holzgreen used his signature fabrication style to create a kind of cabinet on long, spindly legs. Fun and funky, says the artist, "I think it kind of looked like a spider or octopus or something." In a moment when many of us were taking deep and sustained sighs of relief, he titled it, *'Cuz Democracy Still Got Legs*. As another election cycle looms, Holzgreen feels the ongoing relevance of his first ungainly tribute to democracy's resilience. In the shop at 1800 North American in Philadelphia—arguably the seat of American democracy—Holzgreen has built another box perched atop wobbly legs. Built from bits of wood that are various in their textures, patinas, species, and wear, this "furniturish" sculpture breaks new ground for the artist. Over several years he's been developing this construction methodology, building what Leslie King Hammond refers to as "objects of sublime beauty and extraordinary craftsmanship,"<sup>1</sup> functional works from the material commonly discarded.

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<sup>1</sup> Leslie King Hammond, Baltimore Craft Week Favorites

At the WARP Residency, Holzgreen is claiming permission to try something new. Instead of using surfacing tools to remove those patinas, he's preserving the wood as found, a choice that's particularly poignant for the LA-based artist in residence in Philadelphia. The debris and scrap found on building sites around *this* city might easily reflect the ongoing work of democracy over the last nearly 250 years. Perhaps there will be *Cuz Democracy Still Got Legs, July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2024*, and another the year after. "So that's why it's all the pieces that are weathered and tiny and trying to hold together and definitely wobbly." The legs may be uneven; they may need customized plinths to steady the base, or splines and scrap twine or even wire, but we hope Holzgreen keeps making these until democracy stands on more stable ground.

Accretive wood sculpture emerged in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century with Louise Nevelson, who painted the wooden scraps to create a monochromatic landscape. Holzgreen allows the wood to remain visible. For the first several years of this practice, he used tools to render the surface texture continuous, bringing attention to the grain and variability of tone in his found materials. This one, he says, "is the most rugged of any of them that I've done before. Usually I'm drawn to making them beautiful and elegant and all of that. I'd say 95% of this is just the weathered exterior. Even though if you made that interior surface visible it'd blow your mind, I'm not showing it." Making things from wood, which—even when long ago dried out—will move and change in different climates, can be vexing. When you're using scrap and gluing up hundreds of pieces whose grain moves in different directions, and whose species and age means they take on moisture quite differently, the variables are ten-fold. Holzgreen is still understanding the implications of this in his practice, both conceptually and in an art market that seeks predictability and the archival. For now, though, the development of his creative voice and the excitement of making pieces that explore culture, politics, and humans' deep impact on the environment in our material choices, is enough to take on.

When asked if he'll fill the box, he pauses. There are lots of possibilities, from paint to the pages of the Mueller Report; perhaps pages from all the Donald Trump indictments. The artist is drawn to Travis Townsend's sculptural, painterly machines, composited from found elements and created to do not-quite-identifiable jobs. Ice could melt, paint would drip down the legs, drying as it goes; but maybe what the piece already holds in the surfaces and the construction—a metaphor for the complexity of a multiracial democracy—is enough.

*I'm just really building it (this piece) for this moment. Those questions are in front of me. I'm learning here that my creative voice is really strong. This opportunity gives me a chance to push, to go further. And it's unique and it's one of a kind. I'm not trying to find my voice. I have it.*