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# A Tinker's Studio

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A TINKER'S STUDIO

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Art at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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## Abstract

### A TINKER'S STUDIO

By Catherine L. Hudnall, MFA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Art at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2005

Major Director: Bill Hammersley  
Associate Professor, Craft/Material Studies

This thesis is meant to describe and explain a space in which one can imagine things necessary for making objects that wobble, squeak, clack, creak, crank in and out, open and close, light up, roll about and generally hurl themselves into creepy existence. It is also an endeavor to describe some objects having lately taken such a journey into being. These include (but are not limited to): a chess table for one, an examining table and tray, two workbenches, chessmen and women, creaky floorboards, stairs on wheels, a stool on wheels, and Monsters of various sizes and shapes.

## Artist Statement

I am making furniture that is a little creepy, a little wobbly, and that would never be made by anyone actually desiring a functional object. It is furniture for a world that doesn't exist outside my sketchbook, but the more of it I make, the more of that world I bring into this one, and the more I can share that vision with other people.

As a woodworker, I am inspired by older materials, which have a history that cannot be created artificially. The nail holes and tannic stains in pallets and old barn wood, or copper pipes crusted with patina add an important layer of information to my work. It is in dealing with the kinds of problems presented by these materials that I leave the confines of traditional woodworking and the imaginary becomes a quirky and playful reality.

In the newest series, I've taken illustrations of characters and their surroundings from my sketchbook and turned them into furniture. I illustrate children's books and am captivated by the things we show children to teach and entertain them. They are fantastic, made-up, and yet we can completely submerge ourselves in the stories they tell. There is something honest and unpretentious about the way we invent a hundred different versions of the world as children. And so, as an artist, as a "furniture maker", I ask myself questions that I might have asked at age ten, "What would a pirate look like if he turned into a stool," or "What kind of studio would a monster-maker use?" And, armed with visions, I try to reinvent the world.

## The Room Before

It's an eight by ten foot room, with ten-foot high ceilings. The doorway takes up a third of one of the longer walls, and a huge window sitting diagonally across from it takes up about a third of the other long wall. There's a walk down a long, fairly narrow hallway to get to the space, but the light from that window draws people into it, despite the distance. It helps that the bathrooms are on that hall. Pipes of varying sizes rise from the floor to ceiling in one corner and snake their way over and out of the room through the walls. One of them is so hot that you can feel it from the door. There are ventilation ducts running along the ceiling across from the pipes that make a low, humming noise that is almost inaudible in some parts of the small room and deafening in others. There's a radiator on the far short wall. The walls aren't even square to each other. The room feels quiet, as if it were waiting for something. The space is perfect.



## The Room After

From the hall, the window looks boarded up. There is light shining through the cracks in and between the boards. The combination of that bright light and the dimly lit room leaves everything in shadow and spots dancing in front of eyes. Closer to the room, you realize that there are steps leading up to that window, and that the boards across it make up a door, painted a light blue, complete with hinges, a latch, and a small thick green window up near the top. There is also a peephole, hidden behind a flip-up cover, inside a little door, cut into the bigger one, also hinged and latched. Probably though, you haven't noticed any of this, and won't for a little while yet. Probably, you're still wondering if the door goes out to a fire escape or ledge, or if it opens into empty air two and a half stories above the ground.

Maybe you've noticed the rafters, that arc across the upper walls of the room and end in a small curl just outside of the entrance to the room. The wood is dark, beautiful even, but it's been cobbled together in the oddest fashion. From the bottom of the curl hangs a set of rusty skeleton keys, like mistletoe. You follow that curl with your eyes. You take it from the keys, up and out as it uncurls, straightens, and runs into the room to meet another thin, arcing wooden beam that moves your eye left, and up, finally into the room properly. But wait, dear reader, you've missed something. Hanging from the place where those two arced pieces meet is a lamp illuminating the surface of what look like a chess table. It's just inside the door, and though your brain says chess, your eyes say that the pieces on this board do not exist in any game of chess you've ever played.

Besides, the surface is uneven, with each square being a different height and size than those around it, and there are stairs and a crow's nest rising out of it with no hint of an explanation. To your right, running along the wall at eye level (eye level if you are, like me, on the short side) is a shelf full of the oddest bits of things. Lenses, scrolls, strange metal domes, and myriad other objects spread out along its length in a dark and glittering dance. This room, you decide, is full of things for which you have no name. It is a cabinet of curiosity, and you are glad for the chance to sift through its contents without its owner being present.

## The Whys and the What For

I have a fascination with old, worn things. There is such a relationship between a thing's purpose and the way it's been colored, abused, rubbed through, scratched, or broken. I have been collecting old plumbing parts, hardware, scrap wood, pallet wood, and bits and pieces that once functioned for I don't know what. It all seems valuable to me, though I cannot describe just why. The nail holes stained blue in old pallet boards, or a brass handle that has gone shiny with use in some parts and green with patina in others, these things are like books; they tell stories if you know how to read them. The pieces in this show are the first ones I've made that revel in that story, rather than obscure it. I am finally able, through the work, to tell a story of my own by cobbling together the stories of these different collected things. It is a story about a character I think of as the mad Tinker, though he is not mentioned directly in the work. These pieces gathered together in this room, along with the floor, door, drawings, etching and other odds and ends help to describe the sort of person that might occupy this space, and spend his days turning junk into monsters, toys, lanterns and chessmen.

The room is meant to draw the people in, it is meant to make them slow down, and it is meant to make them look at a space in a way they don't normally. Ideally, it is explored alone, with time to stop and really look at everything. I envision viewers bending down to look at the underside of things, and tilting their heads back to follow the crooked lines of rafters. I imagine people checking to make sure that the hallway is clear and then opening the door, or trying the crank, or pulling out drawers. I hope they feel like I used

to as a small child when I was left for a moment in a shop and told to, “stand still and not touch anything.” At first, just my eyes traveled from shiny object to shiny object, but then, finally, something would catch my attention and, after darting a look around, I’d touch it. Maybe I’d pick it up, maybe not, but I’d broken a rule and I always felt kind of good about it. As if I shared a secret with the thing that I’d touched. It is my desire that those people who make it over the first creak of the threshold leave feeling enthralled and a bit sneaky.

## The Pieces and the Process

The Examining Table with Tray started as a very thick cutoff board, roughly square, with one flat surface and one gnarly surface. I wanted to make the board into a tabletop, and set it up on some long, thin stilts to gauge how high it should be. When I stepped back, I fell in love with its awkwardness as it rested up on those stilts. Here was this heavy, thick top, precariously balanced on spindly legs and it looked as though the air currents in the room were making it sway. It had a spider-like quality, too, as though it might shake itself and suddenly lurch toward the door. It occurred to me that *this* was the sort of thing I'd been trying to make for a year, and in taking the wonky, off-kilter qualities out of my objects, I was taking the heart out of them as well.

By allowing that first piece to live outside of this world's definition of the word, "useful," I found myself lacking the information I needed to finish it. In other words, what on earth was it *for*? The scenes and creatures that I have filled my sketchbooks with since I was in high school came to mind. Perhaps, this table wasn't useful in this world, perhaps, instead of fitting it to the context of this landscape; I needed to create a context, a world, in which it *was* useful.

With this discovery, solutions and new pieces began to suggest themselves immediately. The Examining Table was fitted with four different sized wheels, a tray for holding parts in progress, and a magnifying stand, all treated with the same mentality. The pieces that followed, a Chess Table for One, the Workbench I with jar holder, small drawer, and

clamp, the Workbench II with crank-out bits, and a ruler, a Rolling Stool, and Rolling Stairs came in quick succession, all of them made during my last semester in school.

On a smaller scale, I began creating some of the objects I decided my mad Tinker might build in his studio. Monsters, chess pieces, and a strange metal “lantern” were assembled from the leftovers, mistakes and experiments that had been collecting in *my* studio for two years.

In order to let this other world come through in the work, I was forced to remove myself from the usual methods/techniques practiced in traditional wood and metalworking. The work began to build itself. For example, in the Chess Table for One, when two braces attaching the top to the legs weren't enough, I simply added a third. Or, if a brace didn't hit the top in the right place, I cut it off and bolted it back on so that it ran in the right direction. Other, subtler things began to occur to me as well. The Chess Table for One was originally drawn with seating for two. It seemed unlikely, given my mad Tinker's personality, that he would allow another person into his space, so mid-piece; I rearranged the legs and added wheels so that the whole thing rotated on one spot.

The last things built were made with dimensions specific to the room itself. The floor, door, landing, rafters, shelves and lights all had to be built in pieces and then fit together on site. The room in which I created this world had to be full of things that looked like they belonged there, like they were made there and couldn't have been assembled in that configuration anywhere else.

What I was looking for, when I finally stepped back from the room, was a feeling not that you were looking at pieces in a gallery space, but that you had somehow accidentally wandered into some madman's studio. I wanted a space too fantastic to seem possible in this world, but not so fantastic that it seemed utterly impossible either. I wanted to take people by surprise with it, and really convince them of the possibility of this space. It is the sort of project that has no tangible boundaries, no final steps, no point at which the word "done" rings clearly in your mind. The more time spent in the actual space, the more I would have filled it. The drawings and etchings would have, given more time, spread from the paper taped to the wall to the wall itself. There would have been as many layers of information in the room as I tried to put onto the surfaces of the pieces themselves. This is the sort of work that grows to fit the size of the room it's in. It is also, I hope, the sort of work that grows inside the viewer, reminding him or her of lost treasures, the spaces that they once turned into forts as children-the room under the kitchen table, the crawl space behind the sofa-and allows them to revisit and revise those places and things as adults. I would like to think that people entering the space feel as if they've been given a chance to explore, to imagine and to play.