

## Portraits

# Furniture? Sculpture? Both



Andy Sharp

Artist and sculptor Wells Mason is seen at his Ironwood Industries studio in downtown Coupland. He is shown with his sculpture "Loose/Canary" which will be on display in Austin in October. Mr. Mason salvaged the steel round part of the sculpture from a Williamson County road crew.

By AMIRA JENSEN

For Coupland artist Wells Mason, it all started with a chair on a dock in Florida. It caught his eye, he took its measurements and when he returned to Austin, he recreated it with his own

twist. Mr. Mason has since done several iterations of the chair, modifying its details in an evolutionary process.

"Once you're done, you step back and think about what you could've done differently," Mr. Mason said. "That always happens."

Although Mr. Mason studied English at the

University of Texas, that dock chair sparked his career in sculpture and furniture-making. He opened Ironwood Industries in Austin in 1996 and moved it out to Coupland in the end of 1999.

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## PORTRAIT

### Artist lets the materials speak

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"I had a professor who wanted me to be a scholar and it seemed so dusty," Mr. Mason said. "So it's kind of ironic that I'm surrounded by sawdust." Ironwood Industries is a wood and metal studio where Mr. Mason creates customized furniture, sculpture pieces and installations for residential and commercial clients. His pieces celebrate wood's imperfections as well as the beauty in functionality. "It's about function and intellectual exploration," Mr. Mason said. "It's as much sculpture as it is furniture."

Mr. Mason's signature collection, named Umami, include benches, tables and chairs that are meant to "blur the line between furniture and sculpture" with the use of recycled materials such as telephone poles and soda cans. This experimental collection

won a Smithsonian award in 2007 and has been showcased in art exhibitions around the nation. First inspired by the Japanese-American artist Isamu Noguchi, Mr. Mason said the Umami collection is an outlet to explore different societal issues and the series has no end in sight.

He creates his pieces in his spacious Coupland studio. The converted bar is now a wood shop and metal shop separated by a heavy sliding metal door. Stairs on either side of what was a stage now lead up to Mr. Mason's office. It overlooks the woodshop, where different projects in various stages of completion wait for Mr. Mason to return to them and finish another step. A pattern for an ornamental gate is drawn out, waiting to be OK'd by the clients. Mesquite wood from the East Coupland arrived and is waiting to be married to its steel base and become a table. "The process is everything," Mr. Mason said. "The single biggest ingredient to learning to build yourself is to understand that there are so many steps. Once you design it, then it's steps until you finish it."

Mr. Mason is self-taught, though he attributes his ability to work with his hands to his father. He learned about the tools and the process of building from exposure to his father's garage workshop growing up.

When he worked in Austin, Mr. Mason said people would poke their heads into the shop and talk to him about possible projects, but often nothing would ever come into fruition. He would then have to make up for lost time by working late. Since moving to Coupland, he has had the time and space to keep his projects moving along. "When people make an appointment to meet me, they're ready to pursue a project," he said.

People come to Mr. Mason for custom furniture like bed frames, tables and entertainment centers. His favorite wood to work with is black walnut and other domestic hardwoods like pecan and white ash. He also keeps sustainability in mind with his work, often using reclaimed lumber salvaged from old buildings and exotic wood veneers, which use less

wood for projects than solid wood. Since not everybody has the same "hard-edged contemporary" style that is reflected in Mr. Mason's experimental pieces, he meets with his clients to get a good idea of what their vision is and works to make it a reality.

"Still I always push the envelope a little bit," Mr. Mason said. "If you're going to do something custom, it gives the opportunity to do something creative and unique."

Mr. Mason's work will be featured in an art opening show at Gensler in downtown Austin's W Hotel on September 29. He will also be available to talk about his work at his other studio in East Austin during the East Austin Studio Tour on the weekends of November 12-20. In the meantime, Mr. Mason resides in his outpost studio, making progress on his work and design concepts.

"I love it, this is the sort of thing you never stop doing," he said. "You never retire from art or design. I feel like I'm just getting started."

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Andy Sharp

Mr. Mason is at work creating what will be an ornamental iron gate being done for a client in Austin. He has drawn out on large cardboard what will be the final design of the gate.