



Dovetail joints in silver maple contrast with quilted African bubinga wood in a Jeffrey Greene cabinet inspired by the form of a pagoda.



Jeffrey Greene points to a plaque of walnut burl that backs the handle of the pagoda cabinet.

Back to nature

A longtime fine woodworker returns to the roots — and the bark — of his earlier art.



A pegged, notched fork joint strengthens the base of a table.

Photos by David Garrett

By GWEN SHRIFT
STAFF WRITER

The wood is old when Jeffrey Greene buys it, and will be far older still when the form he gives it ends its time on earth.

Greene points to an immense slab of black walnut awaiting installation of supporting pieces in purpleheart, a tough, stable, exotic wood.

When the table is done, up to 16 people will be able to sit around it.

The artist is certain they will get his point.

"It's not about the design here, it's about the wood," he says. "It's as strong as a workbench. ... I get more of a kick out of making one of these than the very, very fancy museum-quality work."

Recently, the designer known for his rarified contemporary pieces has begun looking backward — to the way he began.

Thirty-eight years ago, Greene worked in a mode popularized by the late George Nakashima — "simple, natural-edge pieces," he recalls.

After that, he gravitated to stylized flights of fancy in wood.

Among the most spectacular is the Spacewhip Bench, in which the artist floated an oval cherry seat amid a whirling structure of laminated ebonized bubinga. Integral to that period are other spare works like Greene's tall, ethereally thin spindleback chairs.

Then came a creative sea change.

"Furniture really implies a lifestyle, so I started thinking about what kind of a lifestyle that I would like, that I would like to imply," Greene says. "It is not a prissy lifestyle. It's implying ... that people are



Large planks of wood, some from Amish sawmills in Pennsylvania, line the walls at the studio of Jeffrey Greene in Doylestown.

enjoying the wood, and are relaxing."

Nakashima's iconic pieces often have delicate supports, but "I'm taking it to a slightly different position," says Greene. "I'm building bases that are very, very strong — very simple and very strong."

He delights in sketching perfectly balanced chairs made of only three pieces of wood.

"The proportion has to be exactly

right," he says. "Art, engineering, science — there's all that stuff involved with it."

Greene's studio in an industrial building near Doylestown Airport, where woodworkers who have apprenticed with the artist execute his designs, also contains plenty of museum-quality furniture made to order for clients who can afford \$11,000 for a dining table.

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From musical aspirations ...

In between launching her first and second bands, Christine Weiser found inspiration for her debut novel.

By NAILA FRANCIS
STAFF WRITER

"I had never played with another live human being, and the inability to pause and rewind was a little frustrating. Still, it was a new sensation. Connection. I couldn't describe it any other way. We chugged out careful chords like tiny birds clambering out of the nest."

The scene is from her debut novel, "Broad Street," but Christine Weiser recalls exactly what it felt like taking those tentative steps toward launching her first rock band.

The Palisades High School graduate had no great musical expertise to speak of when a few years out of college, she and Allentown native Lynette Byrnes met, through their respective boyfriends at the time, and hit it off.

Weiser had fumbled her way through playing bass in another project — "I thought, 'How hard can it be? It's just four strings,'" she recalls — and after clicking with Byrnes decided that the two should form their own band.

"I did always want to be in a rock band, because who doesn't want to be in a rock band?" she says with a laugh, sitting in the Elkins Park home she shares with husband Rob Giglio (drummer for Philadelphia rock quartet Beretta76) and 6-year-old son Dexter.

"We had no clue what we were doing, but we thought it would be kind of fun. I knew enough about guitar to teach (Lynette) bar chords and the basics. We would get together and play along with Wanda Jackson records, and as we got to know our instruments better and got to know more about songwriting, our songs became more complex."

Eventually Mae Pang, described by Weiser as a "chick rock garage band," was born. The group would go through the seemingly requisite rotation of drummers before settling on

Elisa Chiusano and enjoying a boisterous five years on the Philadelphia music scene before dissolving and then reincarnating as The Tights, a brooding pop-rock band with whom Weiser still plays alongside Byrnes, on lead vocals and guitar, and Byrnes' husband John, on keyboards and percussion.

But this Weiser makes clear: While obviously drawing on her experiences in an all-female band during alternative rock's heyday in the mid-1990s — and making liberal use of the clichéd but no less intrinsic backdrop of sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll — "Broad Street" is fiction. The title refers to the band started by two friends, Kit and Margo, initially out of supercilious glee to best the musician men in their life (Weiser chuckles when confessing that she has received e-mails from women who believe they have dated Kit's not-so-nice ex-boyfriend, whom she spends much of the novel trying to get over — "I've gotten that several times, so I must have struck a chord," she says).

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"You don't do it for the money. You do it because you love to write and you love books," says Christine Weiser, of life as a novelist. **RICK KINTZEL** / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Weiser

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But as the story unravels, chronicling their ascent from early gigs at seedy clubs to opening slots at the Trocadero, "Broad Street" becomes in many ways a journey toward self-realization and empowerment.

Sure, titillating details such as one-night stands, strip joint performances, e-mail stalkers and coke-induced debauchery make for an entertaining read. But there are also the struggles with friendship, family and shifting dreams and realities.

"Ultimately, it's a coming-of-age story," says Weiser, who also serves as co-publisher of the nonprofit literary magazine Philadelphia Stories, publisher of the Convention Center Visitors Guide and managing editor of Tech & Learning Magazine. "It's about finding your way in the world via your friends, your family ... it's about finding self-esteem. The band is actually a vehicle (for Kit) to make some bad decisions — picking bad guys and doing other risky behavior that she doesn't deserve to do — and learn from the lessons that came out of those."

"When you're first out of college, it's such a confusing time and there are no guidelines. In our generation, there are so many choices, it can be a little overwhelming at times. And so

you need to take that journey to figure things out.

"Eventually, (Kit) comes to know and appreciate who she is."

For Weiser, who grew up in Springtown and graduated from Muhlenberg College with a



Christine Weiser has turned writer.

degree in communications, the path to professional and personal fulfillment may not have been as meandering or murky, but she admits she did rack up a few transient years after college. When she finally settled in Philadelphia, she started her writing career as an editor for the education and technology trade magazine Media & Methods, where she worked for 15 years. With a father who is a poet and psychologist and mother who is a communications director for a church — the two even co-authored several self-help books during the '70s — she says she always wanted to be a writer.

But it wasn't until Chiusano left Mae Pang that she began

considering a novel.

"It was really devastating because our connection was so special and being in a band is really like a family, but I thought, 'Maybe I can take this and work it into a positive experience,'" says Weiser.

Besides the actual writing, one of her biggest challenges with the novel was in distancing herself from Kit, whose story is told in first person. But joining a writers' group and attending the Iowa Summer Writing Festival with Philadelphia Stories co-publisher Carla Spataro helped her find her voice — and eventually get past the first three chapters, which she says she rewrote hundreds of times. After coming back from the festival, she finished "Broad Street" — which she'd been struggling with for three years — in eight months.

"It was life-altering, just so great to be fully immersed for a whole week in writing. That's when I decided to really take this seriously," says Weiser. "A lot of times, you don't get your first book published, but I think of this as my MFA that didn't cost me a thing: I was learning how to write, learning what voice is, which is a very abstract idea, and just learning the process."

The book would be shelved for three more years, however, due to an oversaturated chick-lit market. During that time period, Weiser wrote three more novels: a sequel to "Broad

Street," which catches up with Kit and Margo 10 years later; a mystery called "The Mom Squad," about an emerging rock star turned stay-at-home mom who stumbles upon an election scandal in Philadelphia and enlists her playgroup moms to help her crack the case; and another with a more offbeat storyline that she says will never be published.

And this she has done all while wearing her more technical writing hats — she's even co-authored a resource for library media centers called "Ask Mr. Technology, Get Answers" — and playing in clubs in and around Philadelphia with The Tights. Weiser has also gone into book publishing herself. Last year, Philadelphia Stories launched its small press division, PS Books, and "Broad Street" was its first title. "The Singular Exploits of Wonder Mom and Party Girl," by Marc Schuster, will be released in the spring.

"Flexibility is the only way I can do it," says Weiser, who maintains a Philadelphia office but primarily works from home. "Being a mom, being a writer, being a journalist for an education and technology magazine, being part of a family — I have the opportunity to be diverse in different responsibilities, and all of these pieces make me better at each one."

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Greene

Like the deceptively rough-hewn works, "I want them to last for many, many generations," he says.

Two pieces in the making are commissions from clients with clear ideas of what they want. One customer asked for a low-boy cabinet based on the form of a pagoda. The other sought a dining table that "from the side, had a yin-yang look to it," says Greene.

Neither has a natural edge in sight, but they exert an aesthetic appeal on the artist nonetheless.

"Part of the excitement of the work is doing one-of-a-kind pieces," says Greene. "I work in an extremely broad design range. I can usually develop a design they can be happy about."

The pagoda cabinet is made of quilted bubinga, a hardwood from West Africa.

"It's not a hugely rare wood," says Greene, "but what is rare is the figure (inherent pattern) in some of it."

He and the client exchanged ideas, leading to the construction of a piece with curving details on all sides instead of the flat back most furniture has.

The doors are hinged in three sections to fold cleanly around the sides. A plaque of walnut burl is a foil for a handle built of straight-grain wood in a pagoda form.



A table made of wild cherry. DAVID GARRETT/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Greene has worked out a design for the yin-yang table, in which the supports, without being circular themselves, suggest the famous taijitu diagram of interlocking forms within a circle. Open, sharply curved structures of bent laminated work in curly maple and figured black walnut will support the table.

Rare curly cherry planks individually approved by the client are scheduled to be made into the tabletop and leaves.

Because cherry darkens as it ages, the leaves also will serve as a removable top for a side cabinet, so all the wood changes color at the same rate. (The cabinet will have a secondary top as well.)

And grow old gracefully it will.

"It's such a disposable mentality that we're living with," says Greene. "This is the opposite of it."

COMMENTARY

There really are people who still enjoy good music



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Flower and St. Hubert's. In my junior year, Gilbert and Sullivan's 'Mikado' was presented, and in my senior year, it was Sigmund Romberg's 'My Maryland.' What a treat it was to see those great movie operettas with all the great music, handsome men and beautiful ladies."

In Marie Quimby Magee's e-mail, she wrote: "In 1952, I was one of those girls from St. Hubert's who was picked to be in 'The Student Prince' at North Catholic. There was a really handsome guy who played the drums in the North Catholic band/orchestra. I was 16, he was 17. Last November, we celebrated our 51st wedding anniversary. I was in three of the operettas at North — 'Rose Marie,' 'The Student Prince' and 'The Mikado.' I look back on those days and know they were the very best of times."

An e-mail from Kathleen Gable of Warwick began: "I grew up in Kensington and remember going to the Iris, Midway and Harrowgate movies, to name a few. I enjoyed the operetta-type movies with Jeanette MacDonald and Nelson Eddy, Kathryn Grayson and Howard Keel. I am a Little Flower alumna and frequently went to North Catholic for their musicales, although I never had



Nelson Eddy and Jeanette MacDonald are a favorite of several readers.

the opportunity to perform in one of them. I did perform in those presented at Little Flower."

An e-mail from Tom King Sr. was equally poignant: "I loved the operettas and the music," he wrote. "I went to North in 1947-1948 and participated in the 'Red Mill.' I was a resident of St. Francis School in Eddington and remember thumbing it down the (Bristol) Pike to get to the practices they held at night. It also prepared me for the future. I was choir director at St. Mark's, Bristol, for 14 years, then choir director at Queen of the Universe (Middletown) for 16 years. I presently direct the Delaware Valley Choral Society."

In his phone call, Charles Echelmeir of Willow Grove related that as a member of North Catholic's class of 1944, he played the French horn in the orchestra and marching band,

and was involved in the operettas from 1940 through 1944. He especially remembered Mr. Lucarini, North's musical director, and Fr. Naulty, who produced many of the school's operettas. His son's father-in-law, Anthony Machetti, was the lead male singer in North's production of the Victor Herbert operetta "Eileen."

Solebury's Ruth Farthing called to say that she grew up on Long Island listening and playing the music from the operettas. She would play the melody on the piano and her parents would sing the lyrics. Her favorite operetta was "Babes in Toyland" which she saw several times. She'd love to know if any operettas are going to be performed locally.

Jane Kratz of New Britain Township called to say she was thrilled to learn that someone would still write about the

Jeanette MacDonald-Nelson Eddy film "Naughty Marietta." Kratz, a Kensington High grad who is 91 years old now, saw the film at Philly's Uptown Theater on North Broad Street in the mid-1930s when she was dating her husband.

Iris Sokol of Buckingham called to let me know that it was the operettas that stimulated her interest in operas. Sokol grew up in Brooklyn and saw all the operettas there. She particularly loved the performances of film actress and singer Jeannette MacDonald.

George Russ of Washington's Crossing called to say that it was the column brought back memories of his mother playing songs from those operettas on the family piano. Russ grew up in the Wilkes-Barre area.

An e-mail from Sheila Boros of Montgomeryville offered an international perspective on operettas: "(Your) lovely article brought back so many memories of my teens and pre-teens when I lived in England, way back in the '30s and '40s. I loved all the operettas and used to sing them all the time. It was during World War II. I was only 9 years old then, but I was brought up in a house of music. My sister and brother played piano, and we also had a gramophone that we

had to wind up to listen to the operettas. My sister Grace's boyfriend was one of the "Desert Rats" that fought against Rommel in North Africa, and she used to sing the love song 'Lover Come Back to Me.' Fortunately, he did.

Two e-mails offered some evidence for local enthusiasts that operettas are still alive and kicking.

In the first, Joan and Bill La Barge of Hatboro wrote: "In 2007, we went to Great Valley High School (in Malvern) to see our granddaughter play in the orchestra for (Gilbert and Sullivan's) 'The Pirates of Penzance.' It was an outstanding production. The kids did a fantastic job — not missing a beat of this fast-moving operetta."

In the other, Jeanne Plate wrote: "I thought that you'd like to know that a new (Bucks County) Gilbert and Sullivan Society had its first auditions/rehearsals in Buckingham. The production is 'Trial by Jury,' one of my favorites. The e-mail of the organizer is: bobbinkley@gmail.com. The Web site for the organization is: www.bucksgilbertandsullivan.org."

Jerry Jonas' column appears in the Life Section every Sunday.

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