STYLE & DESIGN

Meet the Most Visionary Woodworker in Texas

Llano's Danny Kamerath builds playful and dreamlike cabinets, chairs, tables, and more.

By Laura Mallonee | January 29, 2024 | 0

Texas Monthly; Danny Kamerath

I'm standing in Danny Kamerath's kitchen in Llano holding a dustpan and broom. There isn't a crumb or speck of dirt on the floor. But even if there were, I wouldn't feel right sweeping them up. Unlike the plastic sweep sets shoved away in pantries and utility closets, **this one**, elaborately carved from rare cocobolo wood and burnished to a buttery finish, belongs in a museum. Or maybe a palace. The price tag? $2,700.

"I suspect it will never really be used as a broom," Kamerath tells me.

Kamerath, 68, just might be Texas's most innovative woodworker. He makes gobsmackingly beautiful objects and furniture, a lot of which reflects his quiet humor. Picture a **melting chair** you can't actually sit in, or a **stool** shaped like a thunderstorm, with a cloud for the seat, lightning for the leg, and a barn and silo at the base. The stuff regularly wins accolades at the Texas Furniture Makers Show, which runs at the Kerr Arts & Cultural Center every fall, and it also appears in exhibitions across the country. But recognition isn't what drives Kamerath. "It's a compulsion," he says. "I'm just compelled to make stuff."

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His earlier work was only slightly more practical. In 1990, Kamerath and his wife, Carol Burke, went shopping for dining room chairs to furnish their brick Tudor in Dallas's M Streets neighborhood. Kamerath, an advertising designer with a discerning eye, didn't like anything he saw. So he decided to make his own. He had tinkered with wood since the second grade, when he strung a cord through driftwood to make a lamp for his mom, and had since hoisted a band saw, grinder, and sander up to his attic, where he'd turned out a few tables and cabinets. How hard could a chair be?

Woodworker Danny Kamerath in his shop. Gary Daniels

Someone else might have gone for an easy first design—say, a simple cafe chair. But Kamerath had a vision. On a large piece of paper, he traced the form of a colleague lying on her side and used it as a template for a magnificently **swoopy chair**, with Nordic birch plywood slats connected by 168 cherry dowels. It took him a full year to get right—and then he still needed to make seven more dining chairs. (In the interim, he and Burke sat in the breakfast nook.)

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But that didn't discourage him. He'd been sketching new designs in the margins of his notebook during interminable work meetings and was eager to try one out. So he made chair number two. Then chair number three. And on and on, until people began buying them. Finally, in 2005, Kamerath, sick of designing annual reports that got trashed after the fiscal year, shut down his graphic design company to go into the seating business full-time. "I thought, 'Everybody in the world sits down. I'm going to be rich!'" he says.

As it turned out, most people don't need a $4,000 chair. No matter. Kamerath would likely be bored if that were all he did. His oeuvre now includes cabinets as complex as puzzles, undulating vessels and sculptures, and ridiculously fancy canes and shoehorns. There's a playful, dreamlike quality to many of the pieces. "It's a way that I get to spend my life that's completely pleasurable," Kamerath says. "It's the least lucrative but most rewarding work I've ever done, and I'd like to do it until my last day."

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Ten years ago, Kamerath and Burke fled to the Hill Country to escape "the traffic, the road rage, the sprawl" of Dallas, he says. It took driving 6,800 miles and scrutinizing more than one hundred properties to find these 22 hilltop acres near Llano, which they share with a menagerie of deer, coyotes, foxes, armadillos, aoudads, and two beloved cats.

At 502 square feet, the house—a corrugated metal structure with a slanted roof and clerestory windows—is really more of a cabin. The morning I visit, we sit in the small kitchen. Light streams in through the window, illuminating Kamerath's white hair, which is wispy and long. His face, like his work, is sculptural, with high cheekbones, a pointy chin, and ice-blue eyes, their pupils constricting like pinholes. Everywhere you look, you see something he's made. The dining table, a trompe l'oeil construction, stands on horizontally offset legs, as though a samurai took a giant sword and cleaved them in two. Atop it rest a few of the woodworker's "**splash**" bowls, sculpted from scraps of wood Kamerath couldn't bear to throw away, with edges that mimic water droplets flying up from the surface of a pond. "I like the idea of liquid wood," he says.

Kamerath's "splash" bowls.
Danny Kamerath

In the bedroom, there's a tall glass-door cabinet made of leopardwood, a dappled, South American species that splinters easily, stabbing Kamerath with cactuslike spines during the cabinet's production. It contains his teensiest creations, including a splash bowl that fits on the tip of my finger, like a thimble, and a miniature chair that stands less than an inch tall. The chair is whittled from Gabon ebony, a dense black wood that polishes up beautifully, Kamerath says. The man knows tree species the way painters know pigments. Yet some of the loveliest vessels I see are hewn from humbler, even deformed, specimens.

A **pale bowl** streaked with gray, its fluted edges so thin they resemble papyrus, is carved from a piece of dead hackberry, "Texas's biggest weed," that was attacked by fungi. They eat through the wood, leaving dark trails that sing when burnished. Kamerath also makes sculptures from burls, essentially warts, that he harvests from dead trees. Possibly due to stress (scientists don't quite understand it), the wood's cells grow in irregular, mesmerizing swirls. Unlike with the furniture, Kamerath approaches these works with no preconceived plan. "If you listen to the wood, it will tell you exactly what it wants to become," Kamerath says.

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It's a quarter mile down a gravel road to the 1,250-square-foot shop, a corrugated steel building more than twice as big as the house. Kamerath enjoys the daily exercise of walking down, seeing which animals' tracks have crossed the road, and maybe adding another rock to the enormous red granite cairns he stacks near the path.

Entering his shop, the smell of woods hits me like a wall, but the shavings I expect to see covering the floor are notably absent. A runner and mountain climber, Kamerath preserves his lungs by using various dust collectors, wearing masks and filtered helmets, and, when the weather is nice, rolling up the giant doors on each end of the building so the breeze can wash through. The downside is that hummingbirds fly in and knock themselves silly on the skylights. One morning Kamerath found one on the floor, its flesh picked clean by ants. He placed it beneath a bell jar by one window. "The structure is so extraordinary," he says.

Birds are a recurring theme in his work, representing "love or friendship or respect or gratitude." He carved his first from ebony a decade ago as a Valentine's Day gift to his wife, and he has given away about 250 of them to family, friends, and the occasional stranger. A male and female face each other atop the **double urn** he created to hold the ashes of a close friend, Dallas-based illustrator **Jack Unruh**, who died of cancer in 2016. Crafted from five contrasting woods, it's shaped like a U—one side containing Jack's ashes, the other awaiting those of his wife, Judy Whalen—and sits within a see-through gridded pedestal.

The urn is part of Kamerath's Grid series, which flips traditional cabinetmaking on its head. While woodworkers typically use cheap, "secondary" woods like pine or poplar for drawer sides or bottoms, Kamerath selects finer ones and shows them off by floating the drawers within a Piet Mondrian–like grid. One such work, a three-foot-wide **jewelry chest**, features bubinga, canary wood, satinwood, sapele, padauk, white oak, and . . . well, let's just say fourteen different woods. He worked seven days a week for nine months—a total of 1,300 excruciating hours—to make it.

"People look at my stuff and they say, 'Oh you're so patient,' but I'm not patient at all," Kamerath says. "I'm stubborn, and I stubbornly try to make it turn into what I want. When I'm able to do that, I stand back and look at it, and I'm just really satisfied. It feels like I finished a marathon or climbed a mountain."

The feeling is fleeting, and he always finds himself back in the shop, working on the next thing. Some days, he'll walk as much as two and a half miles back and forth between the table saw and the chop saw and the air vacuum, moving through a progression of grinders, carvers, rotary tools, and sanding bars. He bends, squints, and occasionally curses. The house is far enough away that Burke can't hear him yell when something goes wrong.

"Some days I wish I wasn't this way," he says. "I'll be laying in bed wide awake at two a.m., thinking of how to solve a problem I've created in the woodshop. It would be nice to just be able to walk away from it."

He has airfreighted pieces to Australia, Dubai, Canada, England, and Sweden, but most of them end up in the northeastern U.S., which has a long tradition of handmade furniture and where collectors often buy his works with the intention of passing them down to their children. In Texas, he opines, people seem to prefer trendier pieces. "They're not thinking about when they buy a piece that it will even be around in ten years, because in five years they're going to redecorate their house and throw all that stuff out," he says. Local, artisanal furniture doesn't seem as popular, a mindset he traces back to the West Texas ranchers who made a lot of money, traveled the world, and brought the rest of the world back to Texas. "I think they think the work is going to be better if it comes from somewhere else."

But Kamerath doesn't aim to please, and he doesn't take commissions. There are already too many ideas he'll never get to. "I understand where I am in my life," he says. "Sand is going through the hourglass, and that's the order of things."

The older he gets, the less practical his work becomes. His advertising career trained him to think functionally, but he's increasingly moving toward the realm of pure sculpture, like his favorite artist, Alexander Calder. "I paint with shapes," Calder once said. So does Kamerath, yet he's too modest to call himself an artist, even if he labors beneath vintage metal sign letters spelling A-R-T on a high shelf in his shop. "I'm just a guy working with wood, trying to make something beautiful."

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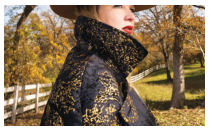

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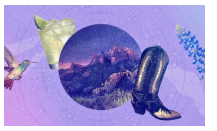

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