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AN INTERVIEW WITH DANIEL MIRCHEV

Daniel Mirchev is a Bulgarian sculptor who blends traditional wood carving with contemporary forms. Here, he shares his creative process, working with birch plywood and bamboo, and his evolution from complex to minimalist designs.

CG Can you tell us about your journey into the world of sculpting and wood carving, including the story behind your artist name Duna?

DM Entering the world of wood carving has been one of the most satisfying decisions of my life. As a student at the College of Applied Arts in Bulgaria, I had the privilege of immersing myself in this age-old craft, learning not only technical skills but also the rich cultural heritage it embodies.

I grew up in a small Bulgarian town. I was surrounded by beautifully carved wooden objects - from the elaborate iconostasis in the local churches to the decorative wood-carved elements and furniture in the Bulgarian home. These works of art told me stories about our history and traditions, provoking my imagination as a child, wondering about the hands that sculpted them.

When I was accepted into the College of Applied Arts, I felt excited and happy. The college is known for its free artistic education based on traditional Bulgarian crafts. The curriculum was designed to provide a comprehensive education in both the artistic and technical aspects of wood carving, and within the 5 years spent there I felt like I want to pursue this craft and turn it into an art.

It was clear from day one that this journey would require dedication, patience and a willingness to learn. Woodcarving as a craft teaches patience, precision





AN INTERVIEW WITH DANIEL MIRCHEV

and control. On the other hand, the ability to create depth and dimension gave me the freedom to express my imagination into volumetric shapes.

Studying woodcarving in Bulgaria offers a unique opportunity to connect with our cultural heritage. I learned about the historical significance of folk motifs, which are not merely decorative, but carry deep cultural significance, reflecting the history and beliefs of our nation.

At that time I had the opportunity to work on replicas of a traditional iconostasis. It was an experience that essentially connected me to generations of carvers before me. This project wasn't just wood carving; it was a study of the symbolism and artistry that define Bulgarian wood carving.

Behind the name Duna, it is in fact the nickname my college friends used to call me, short for Daniel.

CG Could you walk us through your artistic process, from the initial pencil drawings to the final wood-carved sculptures?

DM The creation of a sculpture begins long before I touch a piece of wood. It starts with an idea, a spark of inspiration that can come from anywhere - nature, a dream or even a fleeting thought. As an artist, I strive to bring these intangible concepts to life, mixing traditional wood carving techniques with contemporary forms and visions.

Every work begins with a concept. My approach is to transcend the traditional boundaries of wood carving and explore the limitless potential of wood as a medium for contemporary art. I am fascinated by the idea of creating forms that are both familiar and otherworldly, blurring the line between reality and imagination.

Once I have a concept in mind, I start with pencil sketches. This stage allows me to explore different shapes, forms and compositions. I sketch multiple versions of the idea, experimenting with angles and proportions. These drawings are often abstract, serving as a loose blueprint rather than a strict guide. They help me visualise the flow and movement of the sculpture,

CUBE GALLERY

ensuring it captures the essence of my concept but keeps the balance at the same time.

I choose the material carefully, taking into account its texture and colour. Each type of wood brings its own character and challenges to work with. I have been working with plywood for ten years now. I create large wooden blocks from layers of plywood by gluing them to size. Then, before I start carving, I prepare the taught block of wood by cutting it into the shape of the future artwork. Once glued together, when the block is cut, the plywood layers form unique lines and shapes. Depending on the angle from which the wood is carved, different lines appear that either emphasise the shape of the sculpture or soften it.

The initial carving stage is where the sculpture begins to take shape. Using traditional woodworking tools (hand and electric), I begin to carve out the basic shape based on my sketches. It is a dynamic and somewhat crude process where the work begins to emerge from the raw material.

In the refinement stage, I pay close attention to the flow of lines, the smoothness of curves, and the interplay of light and shadow on the surface. This stage requires patience and precision, as even the smallest details can significantly affect the overall work.

Finally, the sculpture undergoes a slow, long and painstaking sanding process. Sanding smoothes out any rough edges and brings out



AN INTERVIEW WITH DANIEL MIRCHEV

the natural beauty of the wood grain.

CG What attracts you to use birch plywood in your sculptures, and what influences your choice to leave the wood natural or stained, as seen in 'Dune'?

DM Depending on the material, I use different coatings of natural oils, but very often, when the sculpture is made of plywood, I leave it without any coating. This is how I achieve an elegant balance – I let the natural beauty of the tree lines show, and the sculpture looks light and airy.

I use plywood because of the play of lines that appear when carving it. Sometimes they are even unpredictable, but they always manage to enter into a dialogue with the form I am sculpting. The layered structure of plywood allows me to carve complex patterns that create the illusion of folds or wavy surfaces.

Texture plays a crucial role in my sculptures, serving as both a visual and a tactile element. My sculptures always make people want to touch them and even stroke them.

The forms I carve into the wood are meant to interact with light, casting shadows that enhance the illusion of depth and movement. This approach not only adds a three-dimensional quality, but also engages the viewer's sense of touch, inviting them to imagine the softness and fluidity of the forms.

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I stain the wood when I want to make the plywood lines disappear and to focus on the form.

CG Your pieces often create an illusion of movement, how do you envision these dynamic forms?

DM As a person I don't like staying in one place. I prefer moving, developing, searching for new experiences. As an artist, my work is inspired by the concept of movement, fluidity, the dynamic forms with delicate balance between solid and ephemeral states.

The essence of my work is to capture moments of transient beauty, the kind that is often associated with natural elements such as wind, water or the gentle swaying of fabrics. These elements are inherently dynamic, ever-changing and fluid. My intention is to encapsulate this movement in a static medium like wood, creating a visual paradox where the material seems to defy its inherent rigidity.

My sculptures are not simply representations of physical objects, but rather embodiments of movement and transformation. I love the interplay of shadows and light in my sculptures, which contributes to making them appear almost weightless, as if they could be lifted by a light breeze. Through the dynamic forms, I aim to evoke a feeling of lightness and airiness, yet provoke the understanding that nothing is eternal.

CG How has your work evolved from your early career to your more recent pieces, such as 'Cashmere Air', and 'Zoom in Frame I'?

DM In the beginning, my fascination was the challenge of mastering the wood, pushing the material to its limits and exploring the complex possibilities it offers. My earlier works are quite more complex, talkative and playful.

As I matured as an artist, my focus began to shift. The once exciting challenge to dominate the material has given way to a deeper understanding of simplicity. This evolution was not only about reducing complexity, but about finding deep expression within limitation. My current works embody this transition, where forms have become calmer, more serene and distilled to their essential elements.

The simplicity that now drives my work is not a step back from complexity, but a progression towards clarity and purity. In these calmer, more minimalist forms, I aim to capture the essence of the subject, whether it is a natural phenomenon like the wind or a human emotion or even an abstract form.



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By stripping away the excess, I allow the core of the piece to speak more directly and powerfully.

The process of simplifying my shapes involves careful consideration of every curve and plane. I aim to create a calmer, more silent dialogue between the work and the viewer.

Even while I experiment with other materials, recently simplicity is what excites me. Whether working with metal, paper or synthetic materials, the aim is to achieve a purity of form that transcends the material itself. I think this reflects my recent philosophy of life - valuing the essential, the authentic and the unadulterated.

CG What initially drew you to use bamboo dowels, as seen in 'Blur'? Furthermore, how does working with bamboo compare to working with birch plywood in your other pieces?

DM The choice of bamboo sticks was both a practical and a conceptual decision, influenced by the aesthetic effects I could achieve.

The "BLUR" series represents my exploration of new materials and techniques, expanding the scope of my artistic expression. While for now birch plywood remains a primary material in my practice, the bamboo has allowed me to delve into other themes of perception and illusion, creating works that challenge and engage the viewer in a unique way. By the way, this exploration of different materials continues to shape my understanding of sculpture and its possibilities, expanding the boundaries of what can be achieved in this field.

While experimenting with the "BLUR" sculptures I was fascinated by the discovery of how perception and reality can be manipulated through material and form. The bamboo sticks (dowels), with their even but sharp appearance, allowed the creation of a "blurred" visual effect that plays with the viewer's perception. If you pass by a piece from this series, you will have the feeling that your vision is blurred. This effect was crucial to the whole theme of this series, with which I tried to question how we see and interpret

AN INTERVIEW WITH DANIEL MIRCHEV

forms. The use of thousands of bamboo sticks in one piece allowed me to create a strange, almost pixelated surface that changes depending on the viewer's distance and perspective.

CG As a member of the National Association of Bulgarian Professional Artists and the art group Nine, has your Bulgarian heritage influenced your artistic journey?

DM Wood carving occupies a special place in Bulgarian culture as an art form and a means of telling stories. It reflects the country's history, beliefs and way of life.

Wood carving in Bulgaria dates back to the Middle Ages with a strong influence of the Orthodox Christian tradition. This art craft experienced a special flowering during the Renaissance, which took place in our country in the 18th-19th centuries. During this era, wood carving became an important form of expression, often associated with the rich decoration of Bulgarian churches and monasteries.

Today, wood carving continues to be a valued craft in Bulgaria, becoming a base for artists and sculptors to explore contemporary themes and styles. My colleagues from Group Nine, as well as my other friends and like-minded people from the Union of Artists in Bulgaria, are also working in this direction.

CG Is there a core message or feeling you hope to convey through your sculptures?

DM My work as a sculptor is a continuous exploration of form, texture and emotion. By mixing traditional techniques with contemporary artistic expressions, I strive to create sculptures that are not only visually compelling, but also perpetually provoke the viewers perception. For me, each piece is a journey into my imagination. It is both a testament to the endless possibilities of wood as a medium and a reflection of my artistic vision.



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