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AN INTERVIEW WITH OLLY FATHERS

Olly Fathers is a London-based artist, who works with wood veneers and marquetry techniques. Here, he shares the origins of his experimentation with wood, his craftsmanship process repurposing wood offcuts, and the inspirations that shape his compositions.

CG Your work is known for its meticulous craftsmanship using wood veneers. Can you walk us through your marquetry process, from concept to completion?

OF It depends on the body of work as different artworks can have different starting points, however they often start with a loose drawing of an idea for a composition. This is then tightened up multiple times and carefully mapped out to ensure all the measurements for the piece I want to make are planned to the millimetre. Alongside this stage, I also spend a good amount of time deciding which veneers will work well for what I want to achieve for the artwork, the colour and grain of a wood can really evolve a design and it's important the wood choices take the composition to where I want it to be. Over time I've learnt the characteristics of the wood veneers I use and often have an idea at the initial design stage of which woods I'd like to use for that particular artwork.

Once I've chosen the woods for the piece, each element is cut out meticulously by hand using a variety of tools and homemade jigs, perhaps the most rewarding stage of production for me as there really is no where to hide inaccuracies in marquetry and I take great satisfaction from these cuts and joins I've made, meeting together to kiss at a perfect point.

The shapes are then joined, glued, sanded and finished multiple times to



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give the smooth, flat finish of the artworks.

CG Following this, how have your self-taught techniques developed over time, and what challenges have you encountered in evolving them?

OF The main challenge I have overcome and will continue to do so indefinitely, is an understanding of the material and how different species react to being cut, glued and other aspects of the making process. Some woods are much easier to work with than others but often some of the more interesting ones can also be most difficult to cut and glue at such a precise level, so it's gaining the knowledge of how to alter my technique to get the best from these.

CG What drew you to use wood veneers as your primary medium, and how do you think it influences the final outcome of your pieces?

OF Working with wood and 'playing' with tools is something I've been interested in from a young age. Seeing my Dad working on the house when I was a child and having nostalgic memories of the smell of freshly sawn wood. I also have fond memories seeing little boxes and pieces of furniture at my grandparents house that had traditional marquetry on them. I actually have the majority of these boxes in my studio now which I use on a regular basis to keep things in. Marquetry is something I never really fathomed how it was made when I was younger but loved the skill, finish and intrigue it left me with.

Something just clicked with me when I started experimenting with wood as a medium, I think there's absolutely a satisfying tactility to it, when I run my hands across a piece or make those really clean cuts, it's a very enjoyable natural material to handle.

Using wood as my medium brings a real depth to the final outcome, I talk about colours of veneers but these colours are made up of wood



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grains of varying shades which brings such a beautiful visual texture to my work, each veneer is unique in that the wood grain is completely unique to that piece. I use a lot of burl wood in my work as focus points as these grains are really quite beautiful and would spend a good deal of time selecting the right section of the wood to cut to get the most from the grain.

CG You've transitioned from being a technician to a full-time artist. How has this shift impacted your artistic journey and the way you approach your work?

OF It's been fantastic. It has allowed me to give more time to my practice, which inevitably means I get a lot more out of it in both enjoyment and development.

I really see my time working as an art technician as well as set construction and fabrication for galleries as quite an important path to my artwork today. The understanding of the tools I was working with, wood and confidence in sourcing materials and dealing with suppliers has all led into my current practice. Without this experience, I doubt it would have led me here.

CG While your work is rooted in traditional craftsmanship, it also seems to engage with modern technological aesthetics, influenced by architecture, early



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computer technology, and design. How do these elements inform your creative process?

OF These are things that I always been interested by and whether I'm making paintings, sculpture, or the wood veneer works they have been a great influence and this always shows in my work.

I like the juxtaposition of using marquetry which is such an old technique, with these modern aesthetics. It seems more logical to me to work in wood having been so influenced by architecture and design, as it has much more of a connection than painting on canvas.

CG Being based in the London, does the city landscape influence your work?

OF Certainly, yes. I'm fortunate to be surrounded by great examples of architecture in London, the curves and shapes found in building design draws my eye on a daily basis when travelling around town and undoubtedly a constant reference for my works. I'm partially drawn to that of brutalist and bauhaus which I think comes across strongly in my artworks.

I'm also very interested by peoples interaction with cities and I've often tried to create compositions that suggest movement and depth and these will have undoubtedly been

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influenced by living in and observing the flow of traffic and development in this city.

CG In the past, you have mentioned Frank Stella and Ellsworth Kelly as an artistic inspiration, what elements of their work resonate with you, and as a result appear in your own pieces?

Whilst at uni I first saw Ellsworth Kelly's works and alongside some other of the big minimal artists of the time it was quite a profound moment. I began to really appreciate the effect such simple, bold forms and shapes could provoke such a reaction. When you stand in front of these works you get a sense of movement, or change in the dynamic of a space purely by the power of a simple line or curve. Previously I'd been over critical and felt the need to have more going on to help justify an artwork. But the sheer simplicity and minimalistic approach to these works is what makes them so strong and impactful. With works like these there is nowhere to hide or distract your attention. To get such a simple form to have that effect takes a lot of confidence and awareness of balance in a space.

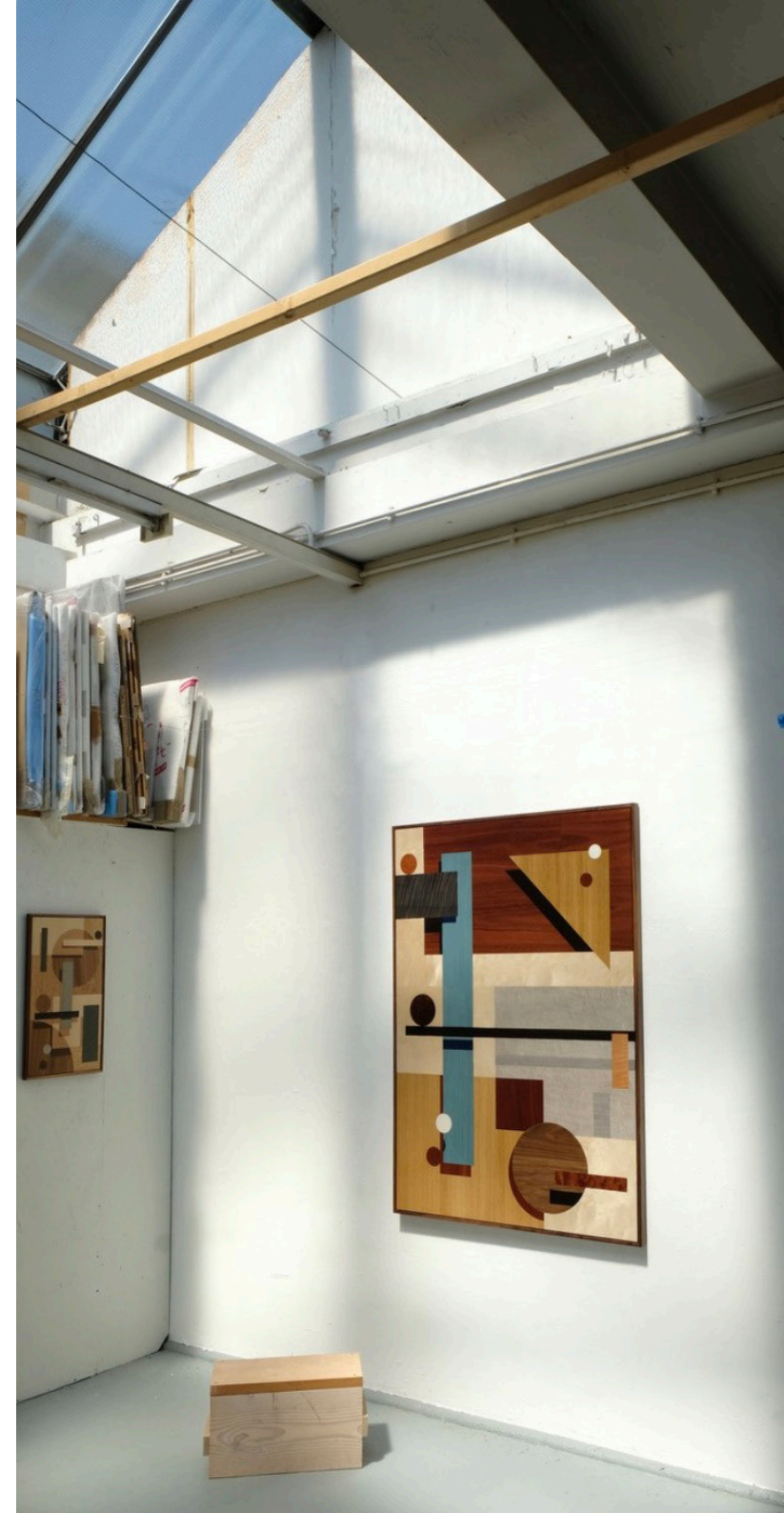
Frank Stella's work has a similar effect but they had a slightly more constructed, and engineered composition that has nods towards architecture whilst remaining playful with his use of bright colours. With his later works and particularly his sculptures you really get a sense of him having fun, experimenting with compositions, materials and possibilities. All of which is something I look to do and take influence from.

CG Often, the nature of your work is described as calming and therapeutic, is this a deliberate effect? How would you like your work to be perceived as the viewer?

OF It wasn't something that I set out to do when first making wood veneer pieces. However the more I've made them and received peoples reactions to the works it has made me realise that a lot of people have that sense of familiarity and often nostalgia with wood, much like I do.

I think a lot of people enjoy that the works are made using natural materials and hand made which is quite a nice contrast from the fast paced, digital world a lot of us are surrounded by and that helps to bring that calming quality to the artworks.

The works are all highly considered compositions which go through a slow making process, which



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in itself is very therapeutic for me at times so I really enjoy that this experience is shared by the viewer.

CG You often work repurposing offcuts, giving new life to what others might consider waste. How important is sustainability in your practice, and does this ethos shape your approach to your art?

OF Sustainability is very important, veneers in their nature are used to minimise the amount of a tree that is used to gain the woody aesthetic aspired. Yet I still try to select carefully which veneers I use in my practice, for instance ensuring they are not cut from endangered tree species.

It's a beautiful thing being able to use a natural material as your medium, and each batch of veneers is unique in its own way so I really value and respect every piece of wood.

Using offcuts wasn't something I'd thought about when first making these artworks but I have a habit for collecting and I found myself curating these discarded shapes for their unexpected beauty. Soon a box of offcuts grew and I began playing with these forms as starting points for new works and also artworks in themselves. The process of making my marquetry works always results in these offcuts shapes and it's something that I'll continue experimenting with indefinitely.

CG Your work has been exhibited internationally, and you have completed commissions for prestigious clients like Soho House. Does your creative approach differ when collaborating?

OF Not very dramatically, whenever I've worked on a commission it's come from an angle of interest by the other party that stems from an appreciation of my work generally. They may have a particular size or few aspects that could make a work really resonate with a space, which I'll often be happy to work with, but there's a great trust in myself as an

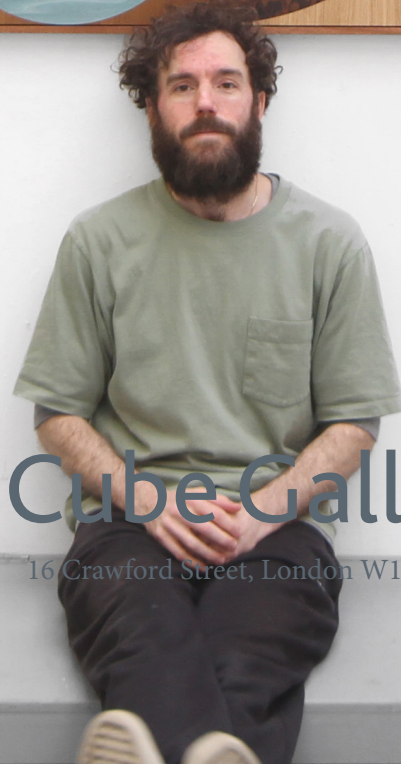
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artist so my work and my process stays very much the same.

CG Looking ahead, what are some new directions that you see your work taking?

OF I have a lot of directions I see my work taking and that feeling is so important to me, I enjoy the energy it brings me and I want to continue to allow time to experiment and develop these ideas.

There's lots of different veneers and combinations we'd like to explore in the studio and playing with new techniques as well as some more sculptural works that fit hand in hand with the wall based pieces.



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