ARTISTS IN

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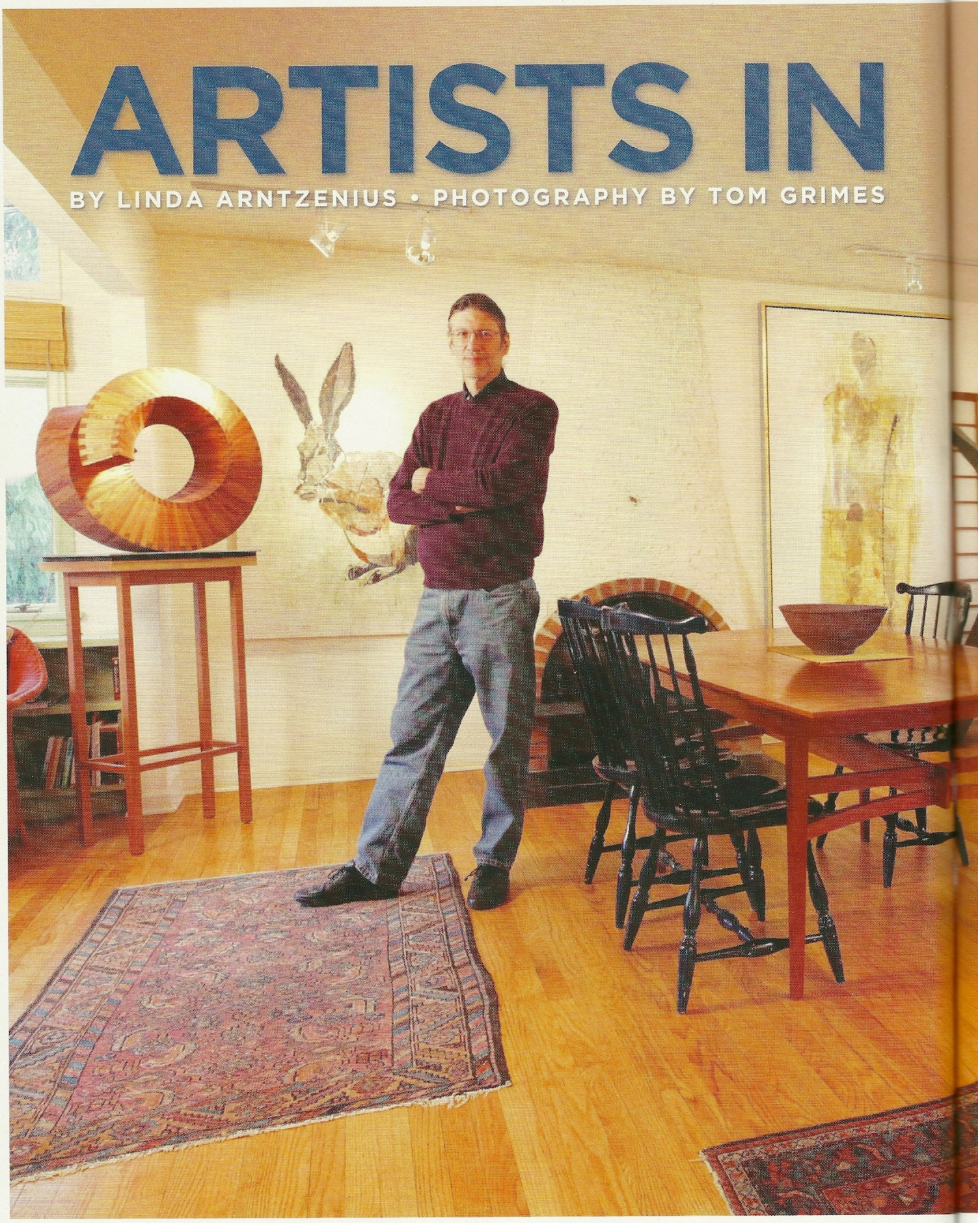


RESIDENCE:

A STUDY IN CONTRAST

PRINCETON MAGAZINE VISITS TWO PRINCETON ARTISTS IN THEIR STUDIOS

Interviewed in their Princeton home, Hetty Baiz and Jim Perry finish each other's sentences and break off in the middle of conversation to delight in the details of each other's work. Perry points out the technique behind the patina on one of Baiz's recent works – the effect of a blowtorch on delicate handmade paper. Baiz marvels at the mathematical precision of Perry's abstract wood sculptures and at the ingenuity of the Shoji screen pocket-door and cherry wood kitchen cabinetry her husband designed and crafted for their home. The lives of these two artists are as intertwined as a Celtic love knot, but when it comes to their workspaces, it's each to his and her own!

ENTWINED LIVES, SEPARATE STUDIOS

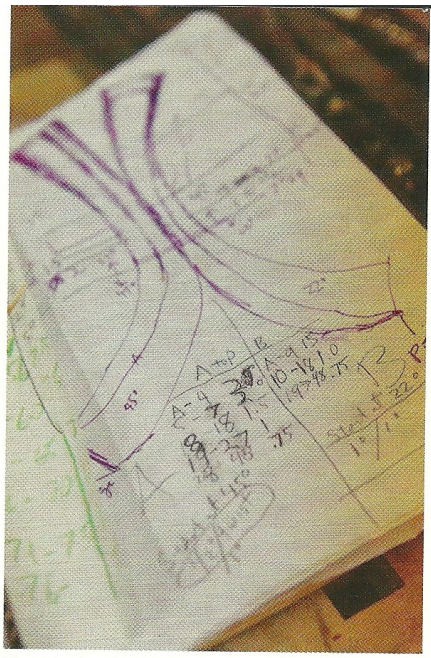
Neither is allowed into the other's studio except by special invitation. "We don't intrude on each other's process," says Perry. "When we do visit each other's studio, it's usually toward the completion of a piece of work," says Baiz.

Most artists face a point at which they ask, 'is this work finished?' "I usually take a break, look, step back, go away, come back, keep looking until I figure out what I need to do," says Baiz, "and this is the point at which I might invite Jim in." The same goes for Jim, who is nodding enthusiastically.

While *her* studio can be reached from their home's family room, into which its contents occasionally spill when she prepares for a show, *his* studio is accessed by means of a separate entrance from the outside. In her light-filled space, large canvases of works-in-progress are pinned along one wall with materials arranged to hand: paints on a work table to one side, the hand-made paper she currently favors on another. *She* works in a variety of media while listening always to classical music radio – her favorites are Bach and Vivaldi with the occasional piece by Bartok to add that little bit of edge that is a subtle element in her work. *He* works in wood and, as a self-confessed 'news-junkie' listens constantly to NPR in his studio next door.

Since last June, Baiz has been working on a "Wildlife Series" – with works-in-progress featuring zebra, hyena, fish and others – using papers from China, Tibet, and Japan, even papyrus supplied by New York Central Paper. "It's intense work but it can also be quite therapeutic," says Baiz, who practices Zen meditation. "I'll spend time tearing paper until 'I take off.' I like Asian art and work that has a patina of age – that doesn't appear too fresh or too pretty." That's where the blowtorch comes in; she uses it to impart another dimension to the surface.

Baiz's labor-intensive pieces evolve as she works, often beginning with a rough sketch on canvas that has been prepared with a modicum of paint. She moves from tearing and shaping to layering and manipulating. Uneven edges, exposed fibers and layers convey a tactile quality, which animates her work and invites one to touch. Sometimes she makes her own paper. Sometimes she distresses or adds paint to a paper if she feels the need for a particular color or texture. She will tear and collage, splatter and burn, in order to achieve the result she's after. Sometimes she will make her own paper.



Perry's notebooks record ideas from conception through development.

Asked if there are points of confluence between her method and that of her husband's, Baiz ponders for a moment: "I think there are some ways in which Jim has influenced me: he works with individual pieces of wood and builds them up and I work with fragments of torn paper."

Perry's studio is a far cry from his wife's bright, dust-free, and warmly inviting environment. It takes a moment or two to take in a space that is redolent with resin and the scent of wood. The effect is industrial. Here is dust, carpentry tools, wood-oil and stains, a table saw for ripping boards from his Bucks County source, exhaust fan and pipes, stacked wood in various sizes at various stages of his process: one-inch strips of mahogany, walnut, cherry, or his current favorite

Perry's exquisite wood structures start out in his studio as carefully crafted layers that will transform straight lines into curves.

Spanish cedar "It's neither cedar nor Spanish," he laughs, but it has a quality he favors.

Here too is order and also Perry's notebooks, filled with the sketches and numbers that will give shape to his original ideas. "Each sculpture is the result of a process of layering in which each layer builds on the characteristics of previous layers – it's a cumulative process a little like life, in which one's experience and knowledge of the world builds incrementally."

An individual sculpture may have between 120 and 1,500 layers and while the pieces forming the layers are straight, the sculptures are curved. People, often scientists and mathematicians to whom Perry's work has an especial attraction, are moved to ask, *how do you do that?*

While there is an element of assemblage in the process, there is also room for change as the work develops, sometimes in unexpected ways, introducing new curves or twists that alter Perry's original conception. Changes require further cutting and Perry constantly functions between straight line and curve, translating rigid pieces of wood into fluid forms.

His technique incorporates a geometer's skill so it's no surprise to learn that he was inspired early on by the geometric abstraction movement of the fifties and sixties. His artworks are both geometric and organic—full of surprise, counterintuitive, and contradictory. He juxtaposes form (abstract) with content (natural organic material).

Since his pieces can take weeks in the thinking/planning/sketching stage and then up to a month in the construction and finishing stage, there is a physical limit to the number of pieces Perry creates in any one year. Last year it was seven but he hopes to complete several more this year and to perhaps experiment with new materials. "Some woods are harder to work with than others and I imagine I will continue to work in wood for some time but I've thought of contrasting wood with steel at some point."

"One of the best things about being an artist is not having anyone tell you what you must do," he says. Hetty concurs: "The inspiration comes and you follow it."

DRAWN TO PRINCETON

Perry and Baiz were destined to become part of Princeton's rich and diverse artistic and intellectual community. They didn't know this when they were students at Bard College. Nor when they were young "starving artists" living in their Chelsea loft studio. Not even when they drew a 50-mile radius around the city and set out in a rented car on weekends to search for the ideal small town in which to live, work, and raise a family. Ultimately, however, James Stewart Perry's connection to the town where his father, grandfather, and famous Uncle Jim (yes, he is named for his mother's brother, the Hollywood actor Jimmy Stewart) had their *alma mater*, drew them like homing pigeons to Princeton.

Pigeons had a hand in their coming to the town—at least for Hetty. Life in New York City was fine for a while but when Hetty had to shoo away the city pigeons from the sand box in the neighborhood park where their young son Christian was about to play, she figured it was time for change. "I wanted a more rural environment for our son," she says.

They were approaching their thirties when they realized that something had to give. After Bard, they had entered the New York City art scene to focus on Art with a capital "A." Although Perry had fond childhood memories of visits to Princeton, the couple thought that the town's real estate might be beyond their reach. Ultimately they found a "handyman special" on Moore Street and moved to Princeton in 1985.

Perry spent the next six years renovating their Moore Street house before they relocated to their current home in 1993 with plans to convert its two garages into two separate studios, each with its own entrance.

By this time, Perry was working for *The New York Times* as a graphics editor and Baiz had completed an MBA program (she works several days a week at Princeton University; Perry retired early to reconnect with his art in 2008). Taking on paying jobs outside of their commitment to art is always a tough compromise for artists to make, especially for two whose work was being exhibited and gaining recognition – in 1975, Perry was included in the Whitney Museum Biennial Exhibition – but when their combined income for one entire year amounted to only $4,000, they made up their minds for change.

Knowledge of woodcraft combined with innate artistic sense and fascination with geometry inform Perry's work, which challenges the traditional fine art/craft dichotomy.

This detail of Baiz's mixed media on canvas *Fish* part of her latest Wildlife Series exploring aspects of the natural world often taken for granted, shows elements of the original hand-crafted material used by the artist, in this case golden Tibetan characters woven into paper she brought back from a 2009 trip to Lhasa.

Their home on Riverside Drive is gorgeous to the senses: luminous with Perry's sculptures – "Circle Game" made of Spanish Cedar, "Fire Junction" of stained Mahogany, "Twisted Column" of Pinewood – and intriguing to the mind with walls that display large paintings from Baiz's "Figurative Series."

PERRY: OBSESSED WITH FORM

Perry, who was born in Manhattan and grew up in Bucks County, Pa., sculpted from a young age, encouraged by his artist mother. Figures in marble and cast bronze he did as a teenager sit atop the piano. A film about Henry Moore that he saw in high school led him toward his future. And if his recent return to fulltime sculpting has been a long time coming, he put his spare time during his journalism career to good effect, honing his skills and knowledge of the material he loves.

"I've been working with wood for over 30 years. In making sculpture, it allows for endless forms and varied textures and colors. It can be manipulated in many different ways: shaped, carved, and constructed. Besides, wood feels and smells good."

Perry's structures usually begin with some sort of theme as with the two forms that meld together to form "Fire Junction," named for an area in the New Jersey Pine Barrens where Perry saw Pygmy Pines charred and denuded by forest fire. A local naturalist explained how fire helps the forest regenerate and Perry worked on this complex piece of 162 layers (78 and 84 respectively for the two segments) for five to six weeks.

Perry is inspired by the pre-eminent contemporary African-American sculptor Martin Puryear, whose works in wood, stone, and wire, meld traditional crafts with a spare aesthetic. Not only does Perry admire Puryear's artwork, he is encouraged by Puryear's handling of the longstanding dichotomy between art and craft. The fine artist, Puryear, refers to himself unabashedly as a "woodworker."

"I believe that art can be craft and craft can be art," says Perry, "but it's not a trivial issue, there is a significant difference between the two. I did carpentry for years but, for me, art requires an extra degree of focus. Art can be difficult, sometimes excruciatingly so. It demands an enormous amount of personal discipline."

Perry's discipline has attracted an appreciative audience, and not only in New Jersey. Texas art dealer, Ron Gremillion, was so taken with the enthusiasm artist Steven Alexander had for Perry's work that he offered space for several of Perry's large pieces in his Gremillion Gallery in Houston. "We tend to look for work that keeps 'operating,' revealing more of itself over time in the same way that a good piece of music reveals depth and complexity," says Gremillion. "Jim's work is that way; there's an eloquence about it; it might appear simple at first glance but it is deceptively so and I find that compelling."

BAIZ: MOVED BY NATURE

Baiz (her name originates in the Cymbrian language that is spoken only by a few hundred individuals in the European Alpine region) also grew up in Bucks County. Like Perry's, her mother was also an artist. "As a child, I was always painting but I wanted to be a dancer and I played violin, still do," she says. "My mother was an abstract expressionist but I moved into figurative work before experimenting with my current series."

For inspiration, Baiz looks to the primitive: "I love work that has a rough unfinished feel—aesthetically rich art with an element of stress such as the work of Kiefer." The German painter and sculptor Anselm Kiefer studied with Joseph Beuys and often incorporates straw, ash, and clay into work that exhibits a matt/musty, dark style. He evokes the depth of past history and legend by using signatures and names.

To express her own response to a world in which humanity has been pitted against nature and in which nature has been despoiled and degraded, Baiz has turned from the human form to freely interpreted wildlife forms inspired by those creatures most often overlooked, such as insects, reptiles, fish and birds. "We spend a lot of time at a family cottage in a region of Pennsylvania that is rich in natural gas and threatened by Marcellus shale drilling. After finishing my figurative series, I was looking for a way to express my deep love of the natural world and at the same time to make people aware of the environment in a non-preachy way. I chose to present some of the smallest creatures, insects, for example, which aren't regarded as cute or cuddly, on large canvases so that people will 'see' them."

Ruth Morpeth, who opened her Morpeth Contemporary Gallery at 43 W. Broad Street, Hopewell, in 1999 (it had been in Pennington since 1996) first encountered Baiz's work in 2007 and quickly moved to give her a solo exhibition of her figurative pieces in June the following year. Currently Baiz's "Wildlife Series" is on view at the Gallery through May 8. "Hetty builds her images through collage and what I find especially compelling about this work is the way in which her image (be it a fish or a raccoon) emerges from and relates to its parts," observes Morpeth. "Both Hetty and Jim's work strike a lively balance between their parts and the whole."

During a studio visit to view Baiz's work several years ago, Morpeth noticed two wooden sculptures on the couple's front lawn. "Jim gave me the impression he dabbled in woodworking, but there was no indication of what was to come at that time," she says. Of Perry's contemporary pieces, Morpeth says: "The flow of Jim's work, its organic and rhythmic quality, is what grabs me. It's remarkable that he kept the spark alive through all the years when he was not able to devote much of his time to his art, and the same could be said about Hetty—both of them have creative, artistic family histories. Art is in their blood, you might say!"

Morpeth now represents both artists. Baiz's tactile and delightful pieces for upwards of $1,500; Perry's playful and intelligent pieces for upwards of $4,000. P

Baiz in her studio in front of a further exploration of the fishy species - a work in progress that will evolve as the artist develops her vision with paint and torn paper (shown above) on canvas. A lover of Asian art, Baiz is particularly fond of paper from Japan, Tibet, and China.

PRINCETON ARTISTS ALLIANCE

Both artists are members of the Princeton Artists Alliance, which includes such notables as Charles McVicker, Marsha Levin-Rojer and Clem Fiori. The group's members participate in shows such as the recent: "Focus on Princeton," at the George Segal Gallery at Montclair State University and the upcoming exhibit in partnership with the New Jersey Conservation Foundation: "Pine Barrens Rediscovered," which will be on view May 16 through June 20, at the Noyes Museum and at the Long Beach Island Foundation of the Arts and Sciences in Loveladies, NJ.

Currently Baiz's *"Wildlife Series"* is on view at the Morpeth Contemporary Gallery at 43 W. Broad Street, Hopewell through May 8.

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