

Lisnavagh 2/14, 2015,
Ebonized and textured
oak, blue pearlescent
ink, height: 8½' (2.6m)

A JOURNEY — Twenty-Seven Years of the Work of Irish Woodturner EMMET KANE

Roger Bennett

Photos by Francis Morrin.

A rippling cone of black with a channel of shimmering blue, it looks both ancient and modern—a long traditional cloak, perhaps, or a nod to space-age sleekness. This is *Lisnavagh 2/14*. It is an imposing sculpture, over 8½' (2.6m) in height: turned, textured, and ebonized oak, its smooth recess colored with blue pearlescent ink. It is one of the most recent creations by Emmet Kane, and it stands in the lobby of the National Museum of Ireland, like a sentry guarding the stairs of this former military barracks. Or a milestone, perhaps.

Upstairs in the building, the exhibition “A Journey — twenty-seven years of the work of Irish woodturner Emmet Kane” opened to the public in January 2015. It is a groundbreaking event, the first solo exhibition in the museum by a contemporary craftsperson. The title explains itself: the exhibition charts his life in woodturning over the years from his earliest tentative pieces to the assured presence of *Lisnavagh*. It is a huge honor for Kane, it consolidates his standing as a wood artist both nationally and internationally, and it tells an inspiring story.

A representative exhibition

“A Journey” shows the full range and scope of his work: open bowls, hollow forms, wall pieces, free-standing sculptures, whimsies in wood—from egg-shell delicate to massively monumental. Art critic ▶



Hollow Vessel, 2013, Ebonized and textured oak, blue pearlescent ink, 3½" × 5½" (9cm × 14cm)



Hollow Form, 1994, Elm, 8" × 10⅝" (20.5cm × 27cm)

Gemma Tipton describes how Kane “developed a philosophy of ignoring rules, pushing boundaries, and following his nose when it came to the direction in which to take his work.” (Tipton’s entire review can be found at tiny.cc/GemmaTipton.) Chronologically, the exhibition is not strictly linear, as he regularly revisits techniques and designs used earlier in his career. But it does start at the beginning: the first display case contains bowls and lidded boxes in elm and cherry from the late 1980s and early 1990s, competent traditional pieces that already show his interest in form and texture. These were made on a lathe given him by his father in 1988, a little Myford ML8 that he pushed to the limits and beyond.

Kane comes from a long line of craftspeople. His father and grandfather were building contractors, and he remembers doors, windows, and other joinery pieces being manufactured in his grandfather’s

big workshop. Kane has inherited the building contractor’s essential capacity for problem-solving: he could not afford a bigger lathe, so with the

help of his father he built one with a reinforced concrete body capable of turning up to 4' (1.2m) in diameter.

Influences and direction

By the early 1990s, Kane was well on his way: passionate, constantly absorbing techniques and ideas from books and magazines, from woodturners and other craftspeople. The annual seminars of the Irish Woodturners Guild, which Liam O’Neill had founded in 1984, were particularly exciting, with demonstrators from overseas opening his eyes to new possibilities, such as David Ellsworth’s hollow forms, Merryll Saylan’s and Giles Gilson’s use of color, Jim Partridge’s scorching and texturing, and Paul Clare’s

split pots. These were all major influences, and over the years Kane has found continuing inspiration in the likes of Hayley Smith’s fine texturing, Robyn Horn’s and Stony Lamar’s sculptures, Marc Ricourt’s organic forms and surface treatments, and Jacques Vesery’s carving and coloring. Kane’s selection for the Crafts Council of Ireland’s Business Development Course in 1996-7 (Glenn Lucas was a fellow participant) helped him to hone his design and marketing skills.

Repetitive production turning would not suit Kane’s restless temperament. By his own admission, he can be easily bored, although he is also capable of immense concentration. The exhibits from the 1990s—all one-offs—exemplify the preoccupations that continue to underpin his work today: the use of sustainable, native Irish hardwoods such as elm, oak, cherry, holly; a love of burrs, and of flawed, irregular pieces of wood; a preference for turning green. *Hollow Form* is a fine example of his mastery of the hollow vessel, in which he makes a feature of the natural defects in the wood; it is interesting to compare it with a later piece such as *Hollow Vessel*, which he has embellished with color and



(Left) *Dún Aengus*, 1996, Sandblasted burr oak, 18" × 19" (46cm × 48cm)



(Right) *Gealltanais*, 2002, Airbrushed and ebonized oak, gold leaf, slate, 30½" × 31½" (77.5cm × 80cm)

texture. *Dún Aengus* is an early sculptural piece, its surface turned, carved, and sandblasted to evoke the curving stone walls of the prehistoric fort on the Aran Islands.

Kane's environment is a huge influence on his work, sometimes consciously, sometimes unexpectedly. His workshop—his grandfather's old cowshed—is in Kane's native place, Castledermot, in County Kildare. This town has an extraordinary richness of historical remains, including High Crosses and a Round Tower from the seventh century, a Viking hogback stone, a twelfth-century Knights Templar square tower, and the ruins of a Franciscan friary. Kane shares his parents' deep interest in and knowledge of archaeology—his father is an acclaimed local historian—and it is fascinating to discover in many of his pieces echoes of buildings and artifacts from the town and much further afield.

Gealltanais is a striking example of this influence. The first dramatically eye-catching piece to be encountered in the exhibition, it is roughly circular with a broken rim, its surface textured with concentric lines and colored with multiple layers of airbrushed ink so that it resembles subtly variegated granite. At its center, a round hole, framed by gold leaf. "Gealltanais" in Gaelic means "promise" or "pledge," and this piece was inspired by an ancient swearing stone in the local churchyard, a stone with a hole through which people shook hands to seal deals or promises. Kane made it as a wedding present for his sister.

Texture, color, and scale

Texture and color fascinate Kane and are defining elements of his work. He loves the natural tactile qualities of wood itself, also of materials such as rocks, concrete, tarmacadam, rusty metal. He has researched and mastered an impressive array of techniques. His pieces are wire-brushed, chainsawed, carved, gouged, sandblasted, pierced, broken, textured with fine or coarse burrs; they

are ebonized, scorched, airbrushed yellow and blue and red, fumed with ammonia, gilded, lacquered. He loves experimenting, trying out new tools and products, "having a go."

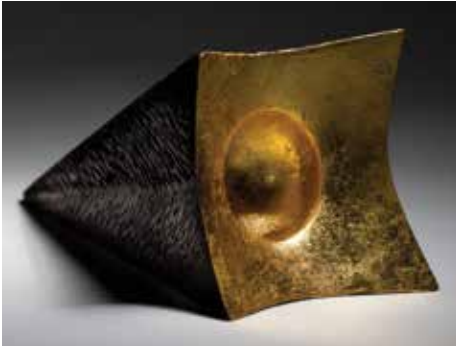
Galactic is a wildly exuberant wall piece, its electric blue center surrounded by black spokes that Kane has cut radially with a chainsaw and then broken unevenly. Most of his ebonizing is achieved through the reaction between the tannins in the wood and a solution of vinegar and iron; alternatively, he sometimes scorches the wood with a blowtorch, then finishes with a wire or nylon brush.



(Top) *Crock of Gold*, 2011, Ebonized burr oak, gold leaf, 7" × 8¼" (17.5cm × 21cm)

(Bottom) *Galactic*, 2002, Ebonized oak, blue pearlescent ink, 71" × 76" (180cm × 194cm)





Wedge, 2011, Ebonized and textured burr oak, gold leaf, 2¾" × 2¾" × 5⅜" (7cm × 7cm × 13.5cm)



Murky History, 2011, Textured oak, gold leaf, nails, 8" × 8" × 16½" (20.5cm × 20.5cm × 42cm)

A pack of toothpicks from the Wood Turning Center was the unlikely inspiration for an ongoing series of spiked pieces: these are tantalizing hand-sized forms, which bristle with colored spikes inserted into their sides like the spines of a sea-urchin or the quills of a porcupine. Kane thinks he might be using these spikes to help confront past demons from his childhood. Born with a rare congenital condition, he spent several of his early years in and out of the hospital, and then, when he was five, he contracted viral meningitis—so it is hardly surprising that he should have an abiding horror of doctors' needles.

Two of these spiked pieces, *Cone of Gold* and *Cone of Color*, were to play a major role in his career. When he exhibited them at SOFA Chicago, they caught the attention of Dr. Jennifer Goff of the National Museum of Ireland "for their originality and eccentricity," and they

became part of the Museum's collection. Jennifer Goff is the Curator of Furniture at the Museum, passionately and tirelessly committed to her role; she became fascinated by Kane's creations and followed his career closely, eventually offering him the opportunity to have this solo exhibition, which she herself has curated.

A woodturner by definition is pre-occupied by the circular, but Kane is increasingly drawn to exploring other shapes. He has made a number of large free-form sculptures, most of which are quite roughly hewn. His series of *Wedges*, however, are very different: like reclining pyramids, whose bases have become their faces, they are intensely tactile pieces, their sides sometimes finely incised with chevron patterning. The only turning is in the face, to shape the well for gilding.

Kane's interest in history and his ability to think laterally have resulted in some very imaginative responses to

specific commissions. He made *Murky History* out of timber from the original Rappahannock River Crib Dam in Fredericksburg, Virginia; the wood was sent to him by Historical Woods of America, for its *National Treasures* exhibition. The story resonated with Kane—the dam was built in the 1850s by immigrants who had fled the Irish Famine, and he treated the timber with respect and restraint. With *Murky History*, he left the original saw marks and nail holes, simply ebonizing the block of wood and placing a gilded well of optimism in the center; the piece stands on hand-forged nails from the dam.

Recent work

Two of Kane's latest pieces can be read as tributes to the much-admired Irish artists who inspired them.

P.S. 2014 evokes the very distinctive gold-leaf paintings of the artist Patrick Scott (1921-2014). Scott liked to use raw linen canvas, which Kane suggests by bleaching the wood; the routed lines radiating fan-like from the middle allude to Scott's delicate tempera rays; and the sun-like gilded center completes the act of homage. Kane's material is wood, not canvas, and the piece is very much his own: an area of dozed wood has been picked out, and Kane has balanced the resultant void with a glowing segment of gold. In *E.7.E.11*, Kane's inspiration is

Cone of Color (left), 2008, Textured burr elm, blue pearlescent ink, blue dyed spikes, 5⅝" × 5" (13.7cm × 12.5cm)

Cone of Gold (right), 2008, Ebonized and textured burr oak, gold leaf, yellow dyed spikes, 5" × 5⅝" (13cm × 13.5cm)





E.7.E.11, 2015, Ebonized and textured oak, red lacquer, 9" x 5" (22.5cm x 12.5cm)

P.S. 2014, 2015, Bleached burr oak, gold leaf, 22" x 23½" (56cm x 60cm)



the lacquer work of Eileen Gray (1878-1976), who in the course of her long life had an extraordinarily prolific career as a furniture designer and architect. Kane has become very interested in Gray's use of lacquer: *E.7.E.11* is a very thinly-turned oak vessel, whose textured, ebonized exterior contrasts with the smooth luster of the deep red lacquer interior. Lacquering is an extremely slow and onerous process; the traditional substances used by Gray are now unavailable for health reasons, so to his regret Kane has had to make do with modern substitutes. Although faster, these still require the application of up to forty layers, sanding between each coat. He consulted Jennifer Goff on this process, as she is responsible for the Eileen Gray collections at the Museum and has written the definitive book on Gray's work and career.

Kane is a natural communicator, yet another trait inherited from his politically active father. Throughout his career, he has "got involved"; his c.v. is most impressive, with lengthy stints serving as president and chairman of the Irish Woodturners Guild,

and as a board member of the Crafts Council of Ireland. He has taught and demonstrated in many countries, from Finland to Australia, including regular sessions in the United States.

"A Journey" is a superb exhibition; Jennifer Goff has curated it meticulously, and the pieces are beautifully displayed and lit. It is accompanied by a comprehensive catalogue in which Goff's detailed chronicling of his career is complemented by Kevin Wallace's biographical article and a thoughtful introductory essay by David Ellsworth. The exhibition ends with an informative video in which Kane is shown working and talking (search YouTube for "Emmet Kane Exhibition").

What next for Kane? He says, "I don't have a satnav [satellite navigation]!" but he is very excited about future directions. He recently acquired a huge lathe from Willie Stedmond, a father figure of Irish woodturning: this is capable of turning up to 17' (5m) between centers and 4' in diameter. *Lisnavagh 2/14* was one of the first products of this beast. So the potential is huge—literally.

For more on Kane's exhibition at the National Museum of Ireland, visit tiny.cc/EmmetKane (case sensitive). See also www.emmetkane.com.

Roger Bennett is an Irish woodturner. He specializes in making bowls, vessels, and jewelry, which he colors and inlays with silver. He is also co-editor of the online craft journal *Make Believe* (www.makebelieve.ie). In a previous life, he was a teacher of English and French. For more, visit rogerbennettwoodturner.com



Emmet Kane at work.