



Beyond Clichés

Making statements in wood, a Michigan artist finds his life's direction in Santa Fe

For Native American artists, the question of identity is a complex one. Those who try to pursue a contemporary aesthetic often find themselves burdened by the expectations and clichés that relegate them to the marketable but restrictive category of “Indian artist.” For Dennis Esquivel, the Michigan-born son of an Ottawa Indian mother and a Mexican father, the challenge of honoring his heritage while carving out his own niche as an artist began as a more basic search for a path in life. The inevitable rebellion against mainstream labels, and his subsequent re-embrace of his Indian identity, came later.

Until he moved to Santa Fe in 1993, Esquivel had yet to find a career that could nurture his artistic leanings. “Education wasn’t really a big priority in my family,” he allows. “I got a GED and

always had a job, but I wasn’t really challenged.” Raised by his mother and stepfather, an African-Polish-American, he resisted his stepfather’s offer to teach him auto mechanics in favor of spending long hours alone in his room, drawing and painting. On the advice of a friend who encouraged him to study art, Esquivel enrolled in the local community college, then transferred to the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA), where his talent began to blossom, even as he encountered his own ambivalence toward incorporating his Native American background into his work.

“Painting was always my first love,” he says. “When I started out, I did expressionist, figurative paintings, and I tended to focus on subversive topics. You see Indians romanticized so much in the culture at large, so I set out to turn those images around: Instead of Indians on horseback, I’d paint



Top: Wings carved from cherrywood adorn the butterfly table. Bottom: The salmon table is made of lacewood, with rainbow obsidian for the fish eyes. Opposite: Dennis Esquivel in his element, with a slab of quilted African cherry.

them being dragged by their horses, or drowning after their canoe tipped over.”

Although he achieved sporadic success with his painting, it wasn’t enough to make a living, so Esquivel started a small business building stretcher bars and framing other artists’ work. He also worked at SITE Santa Fe as a preparator, maintenance man, and all-around assistant. Then, in 2000, he made the decision to abandon this financial security in favor of taking a shot at artistic fulfillment.

“I had gone to Santa Fe Community College to build stretcher bars for my paintings, but once there I got interested in their woodworking program,” he explains. “Their curriculum is excellent—they really teach you everything in detail, not just the general stuff. I learned so much there, and it opened up a whole new world for me. So even though I liked the security of my job with SITE, I decided to make the leap to go out on my own and create my own work rather than merely helping other artists present theirs.”

Using what he had learned, Esquivel honed skills like cutting, sanding, and joinery, and then began to seek ways to innovate. “I’m always trying to think of new designs, new shapes—my tables are not your standard four-legged tables,” he says, pointing to table bases in the forms of butterflies and salmon. “Even when it’s cut down into boards, the wood is still alive, so I have to pay attention to how the wood moves. Solid wood will expand and break, so I learned to use veneers.” >





As Esquivel gained confidence in his work in this new medium, the anger over distorted perceptions of Indian identity that he expressed in his early paintings gave way to an appreciation of his culture that fed his creativity. “I started bringing in symbols from my tribe: canoes, war shields, dream catchers, drums,” he says.

His canoe table, for example, combines clean, contemporary lines in wood and stainless steel with stylized tribal motifs: legs shaped like gunstock war clubs, paddles forming the side aprons, and the curved tabletop representing the canoe itself. Another of his current projects is a drum table commissioned for Santa Fe’s new civic and convention center (to be called Santa Fe Center), for which he uses brass wire as braces, with stylized eagle heads adorning the legs and a tabletop shaped as a medicine wheel that features a morningstar design that is repeated underneath the braces. “I designed it that way to let the eyes move back and forth and embrace the four directions,” Esquivel says.

“I always start with a sketch, then do a full-size drawing to scale,” he says of his method. “Then I do a mockup in plywood so I can see the piece in 3-D, and at that point I make changes in the design until it’s exactly how I want it, and I use that as a template.”

His favorite woods currently are bird’s-eye maple and cherry, with white holly and ebony for accents, although he acquires some exotic imported woods as well. “The cherry has a wavy grain or even the rare quilted grain that I particularly like,” he

says. “And the holly is such a pure white that people are often surprised to learn it’s naturally that color, not painted.”

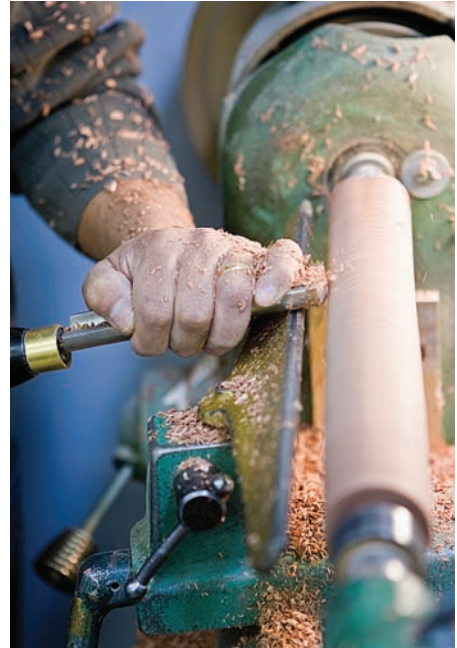
Esquivel occasionally collaborates with his wife, acclaimed beadwork artist Teri Greeves, to create pieces that blend his Ottawa tribal symbols with her own Kiowa beading tradition. One of his cabinets incorporates a white holly trim on ebony with smoked deerhide and Greeves’s beadwork. Such collaboration notwithstanding, he says that he resists using crossover symbolism from other Native American traditions. “You might not know what’s behind a particular symbol or design,” he points out, “so you have to be careful. Now that Teri’s married to an Ottawa, she can use our floral symbols in her beadwork, but there needs to be a real connection to the culture, not just a borrowing of symbols.

“Of course, you can’t really help but be influenced by local Pueblo culture,” he concedes. “My Pueblo friends take me to dances and ceremonies, which make a big impression. But I try to stay true to my roots. Recently I went to the Smithsonian [National Museum of the American Indian] in Washington to research old work from my tribe—feast bowls, carved war clubs, cradleboards. It was truly inspiring, and after that I came home and began making floral cabinets decorated with brass tacks, using the old materials and symbols for inspiration.”

Unlike some wood artists, Esquivel does all the sanding and cutting himself, not just the designing: “I do send pieces out for



Top: The canoe table is fashioned from quilted African cherry, bird’s-eye maple, Eastern curly cherry, and stainless steel. **Bottom:** A cabinet of maple, cherry, and Spanish cedar features smoked deerhide decorated with Great Lakes floral motifs and dragonflies crafted by Teri Greeves from beads, seed pearls, natural pearls, turquoise, ocean jasper, jade, spiny oyster shell, lipidolite, and sterling silver. **Opposite:** Esquivel perfects the mortise-and-tenon joinery for his butterfly table.



Esquivel uses a lathe to spindle-turn the body of a butterfly table.

finishing, but only because I am not equipped to do that here in my studio. But I learned that too at the community college, so I feel pretty complete as a woodworker.”

Esquivel has also returned to painting and now works at both métiers. “My painting has changed a lot since the early days,” he says. “Instead of figurative work, I now like to do landscapes, using a lot of layering and glazing for a dimensional effect.”

In both his work and his life in general, faith is important to Esquivel, something that Santa Fe—whose name translates to “holy faith”—continues to nourish: “My grandmother, who was Ottawa, and my grandfather, who was Chippewa, were both pastors, and they had a huge influence on my spiritual life. And although I wasn’t raised on the reservation, in retrospect I realize that my upbringing was very traditional in many ways.”

Esquivel acknowledges that he sometimes misses Michigan and his family there, but he appreciates what Santa Fe has given to him and considers it as much his home as Michigan. “I like the blending of cultures here because I was raised in a multicultural environment, although the mix was different,” he says. “Also, it was here that I met my wife, had kids, got an education, and launched my career. I feel like I’ve really found my way in Santa Fe.” ❁