

Book Review: *Bartram's Boxes Remix*, Center for Art in Wood, 2014, 176 pages

In 2011, Bartram's Garden and the Center for Art in Wood in Philadelphia invited artists to submit plans for works made from or inspired by storm-felled trees at the historic Garden. The challenge was to tangibly visualize the rich legacy and personal significance of John Bartram (1699-1777), eminent botanist and mineralogist, farmer, intrepid explorer, abolitionist, and advisor to the founding fathers. But it was the construction of wood shipping boxes that served as the new venture's touchstone, not so much for their artistry as for their contents: a cornucopia of New World seedlings destined for the collections of Europe's scientific and political elite. More than any of their contemporaries, Bartram and his sons were responsible for introducing or supplying scores of East Coast species, including magnolia, walnut, pine, tulip poplar, and rhododendron, to England and beyond.

Mixing it up

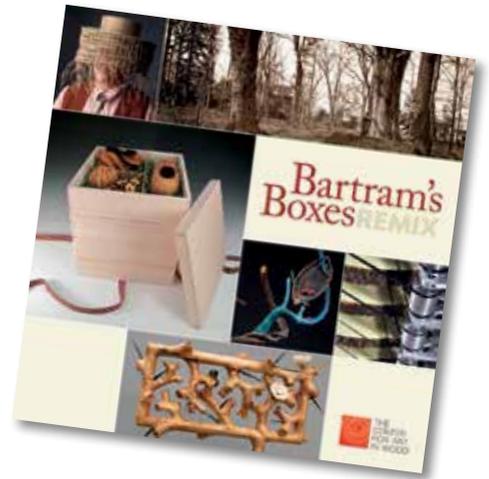
From the beginning, this tribute to Bartram embraced complexity and participant immersion. Selection of proposals required successive screenings among individuals and groups of artists, with the field eventually narrowed to 32 projects and 44 makers. As works went forward,

wood served as the dominant material, but metal, ceramics, plastics, paint, and paper also appeared in assemblages. Even electronics and motorized parts found their way into several pieces. Process morphed into product as collaborating artists exchanged ideas and documentation preserved for publication. Blogs, storytelling, digital manipulation, and poetry added yet another dimension. Activities culminated in a two-year traveling exhibition launched at the Center this past spring. The official record of this symphonic production is the sumptuous oversized art book, *Bartram's Boxes Remix*.

Woodturners in the spotlight

In many respects, *Bartram's* reflects the Center's evolving vision beyond simple lathe-focused works. Even so, about half the displayed projects appear to feature some form of turning, including offerings from veterans Ron Fleming and Steve Loar (in concert with Christina Cassone). Except for Ron's *Franklin Tree* vessel, the exhibited projects incorporate multiple elements.

Several of these remixes play directly off Bartram's sectioned boxes. For example, Satoshi Fujinuma's *New Japanese Species for Bartram* replaces



the nailed, 18th-century container with a sleek, understated set of stacked compartments with interior partitions. Each bedded cell holds a fantasy seed, pod, or botanical curiosity methodically turned, carved, and cataloged according to the maker's imagination. Like a beribboned box of confections, it aims to surprise and delight on every level.

Dixie Biggs and Ray Jones also present a sampler of lifelike seeds and fruit, but in the round. With its imposing title, winged doors, and scroll-like hinges, *Arca Botanicum* manifests a transcendent purpose. As the show curators note, "Arca, usually translated from the Latin as 'ark,' means chest or box. It's come to suggest a vessel for preserving something of profound importance... The shape is curious... It fancifully resembles a seed casing, protecting the seeds inside and carrying them to distant shores."



Satoshi Fujinuma, *New Japanese Species for Bartram*, 2012-13, Various materials, 8¼" × 6¼" × 6¼" (21cm × 16cm × 16cm)



Dixie Biggs and Ray Jones, *Arca Botanicum*, closed, 2013, Box: Walnut, cherry, boxwood; Seed/Pods: Boxwood from Bartram's Garden, 15" × 14" × 7¼" (38cm × 36cm × 18cm)



Arca Botanicum, open



Dewey Garrett dispenses with plant specimens and relies entirely on surface decoration and occasional architectural forms to arouse interest in his boxes—some 50 of them from Bartram's boxwoods. The geometric complexities recall the scientific and political ferment, as well as the growing popularity of ornamental turning, in the late 18th century. But the deeply rooted pleasures of gardening remain uppermost for Dewey, who notes, "In my imagination, such boxes would be reserved for precious or curious seeds from a botanical collection."

Transcendence and intricacy give way to explication and utility in Fred Rose's *Sassafras*. An upright log supports a framed poster, extract containers, and turned spindles representing the various uses of the species. Drop finials display the dark fruit. The containers may allude to delicious moments during the early stages of project woodworking: "The smell of root beer filled the shop."

Several artists, including Jack Larimore, explore the extended cross-Atlantic exchange between Bartram and London botanist and merchant Peter Collinson—friend, scientific colleague, and business conduit to other collectors. Jack's *Enrooted Loop* suggests a finned boat, calendar, and global hemisphere of solid paulownia rolled into one. Coiled twigs link well-used shovel heads spanning the annual rings. Points of the compass dot the perimeter, with a penciled rhumb connecting the positions



(Left) **Jack Larimore**, *Enrooted Loop*, 2013, Saplings from Bartram's Garden, paulownia, shovel heads, 15" × 23" × 27" (38cm × 58cm × 69cm)

(Right) **Dewey Garrett**, *OT Box Samples*, 2012, Boxwood from Bartram's Garden, 1 1/16" – 4 5/16" × 1/2" – 2 1/8" (2cm – 10cm × 1cm – 5cm)

of Philadelphia and London on the end-grain. Notations on working drawings link the boat form to community and the shovels to discovery. Although Jack refers to the overlap of shovel blades as a handshake, the curators liken it more to an embrace. The twigs, meanwhile, "trace the cyclic growth of a plant and its ultimate return to the earth."

Bypassing the ordinary

Those accustomed to the standard catalog format—introductory essays followed by color plates of finished work—may need to adjust to the rapid-fire juxtapositions of *Bartram's Boxes Remix*. Interspersed among the usual photos, artist statements, and curator commentary is an assortment of notes, sketches, progress and process shots, scrapbook pictures, views of raw materials, correspondence, and poetry. The eclectic look of the publication mirrors the composite works themselves and the exhibition title. With few exceptions, the photography sparkles and layout enlivens the spacious pages, bound by stunning endpapers. The pull quotes enhance the format but occasionally miss opportunities to convey memorable observations. The historical overviews by Center Director Albert LeCoff and Garden Curator Joel T. Fry, however, deftly gather the book's botanical and human-interest threads and reveal why John Bartram and his Garden still matter.

Beyond its potential appeal to mixed-media enthusiasts, history

buffs, and gardeners, *Bartram's* may well serve as a model for local turning clubs eager to develop collaborative projects, especially those recycling landmark trees. Many AAW chapters have long documented their activities with sophisticated photography, videotaping, and blogging for the benefit of members. Opportunities still abound for them to incorporate these techniques more substantively into community exhibitions that skillfully showcase not only the end results, but also the planning, execution, and cooperation that made it all possible. ■

—David M. Fry



Fred Rose, *Sassafras*, 2013, Sassafras wood and log from Bartram's Garden, avocado wood from Los Angeles, Hire's Root Beer improved extract bottle, iron, glass, illustration by Mary Jo Rado, 40" × 14" × 8" (102cm × 36cm × 20cm)