California Love

At Dan John Anderson's place all your dreams are made with a chainsaw, chisel and turning lathe.

Words Erik Rasmussen

Photography Christian Witkin

Dan John Anderson in the dappled light by his workshop. **Opposite page:** In the backyard, overlooking the vast desert, a group of unfinished prototypes recycled as patio furniture.

Dan John Anderson can talk… about everything from feedback loops and music to design and material, about rain shadow and wood to psychedelic experience and the desert as both place and idea. Ask Anderson a question and he answers with such breadth and precision you may think he's using note cards. Have a follow-up? No need to ask, he's already answering it and a few you didn't think about. He connects the dots. He keeps you on track. Aside from a few ums and uhs, his side of the transcription reads like a David Mamet play. So, it comes as somewhat of a surprise when I ask, "How do you start a particular project, and how long does the process take?" and he politely but definitively declines to answer. "It's not my favorite thing to talk about," he says.

Anderson grew up in a kit log-cabin his father built near Cheney, Washington, a foothill town east of the Rockies. "It's the threshold between open-space and the trees," he says. It's the kind of outdoorsy middleclass outpost that's come to define Western work ethic — a labor heavy, multi man-hour mien immediately recognized in Anderson's pieces, and in the following anecdote. "I remember stacking firewood with my dad. I was probably seven or eight, a little kid," he says. "We're unloading from the back of the pickup truck. I'm throwing logs and he's catching and stacking them closer to the house. I stop to ask a question. I don't remember what it was, something like, 'Why's the sky blue?' He looks up ready for the next log and I don't have it. He says, 'Danny, if you can't talk and work at the same time, then don't talk.'"

Thus, one constituent of Anderson's process is that there's a time to talk and a time to work. This makes perfect sense considering the noise levels involved in Anderson's production require wearing earmuffs. And who's got the wherewithal to chat while they're ripping through a 400-pound claro walnut log with an engine-driven, barb-toothed chain? But scratch a little under the surface and it becomes clear that time itself is the really slippery element Anderson has trouble reflecting onto his work. "For me, it's more about the practice. I have a practice, and *stuff* comes out of it."

Read Anderson's "about" page on his website and you learn his practice is rooted in, among other things, intense labor. "I didn't actually write that," he clarifies, "but I do like it. If I got anywhere," he insists, "it's because I worked hard." Take sports. Anderson grew up playing soccer. He was pretty good, not great. "I was beyond high school ability or whatever." But he could run forever, outlast the competition. "And after you've pushed past some adversity, some pain, you get into this … place," he says with either mystic emphases or plain self-reflection. "It's not like meditation," he says carefully. "Work gives me something to do, and it allows me to get into a flow state."

> "Could that be the moment you began seeing yourself as an artist?" I ask. "In hindsight, it was a kind of flow state. Or maybe it had something to do with the weed I was smoking."

So then, how *did* he get started on his journey? It may have begun in 1997, specifically March 31st, when a record-breaking storm system spun out four tornadoes over eastern Washington. Spokane, just 20 miles north from where Anderson grew up, was hit by an F4. There was suddenly a disastrous glut of flattened trees drying in the arid country air. "I got hired by neighbors to log all this dead lumber. It was going to be a fire hazard that summer. I was kind of a stoner, out there smoking weed and running the chainsaw all day."

Mixing mind-altering substance with natural catastrophe and power tools was a recipe — either for disaster or discovery. Finding himself squarely between these two fates turned out to be a fitting inauguration to Anderson's career.

"As I was cutting through the logs, I started finding more interesting pieces of wood," he continues. "It was like those Magic Eye [3D stereogram] pictures. I started putting pieces aside to dry for the summer. It was this kind of a singular moment where I felt fully engaged. I felt good about it. I was helping people out, but also it was good for the forest, because that was going to be a real fire danger."

Above: Work in progress. **Opposite page, above:** *Untitled (No. 262),* Redwood, 2022. **Below:** *Unititled (No. 277),* Charred Cedar, 2022.

"Could that be the moment you began seeing yourself as an artist," I ask. "Or was it a kind of *satori* along the way?"

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From fire hazard came sculptural furniture. He sold a few pieces to his friends, and then more to their friends. Logging and selling, Anderson punched his ticket to Portland, OR, where he got to work producing furniture out of a garage, "mainly as a hobby." Nonetheless, what Anderson made got noticed. Those little blips on the Portland art scene caught the thoughtful attention of an Art Institute of Portland student. With her encouragement, Anderson eventually enrolled at the Oregon School of Art and Craft. "It was a real charming place. It was like *The Hobbit*. The studios were connected by trails through an orchard. Sadly, it's no longer there." Certain relationships he built while studying at the school did last, however, and from them sprung the art and design collective, Von Tundra. Anderson's work had begun to earn him a living. Though he's quick to point out: "I was living like a dirt bag."

The really big blip on the radar came through a feature in *Dezeen*. Suddenly lots of people noticed the incoming talent from Von Tundra. The collective's work eventually grabbed the attention of the pioneering artist Andrea Zittel. "She's so integral to this conversation between art and design, about living your art, or your art being your life. And that's the end of the spectrum I'm interested in." Zittel invited Anderson and his partners to show their work at her place in Joshua Tree. "I'd never been there before. Five of us drove straight down from Portland in a U-Haul truck. Two of us had to be back in the cargo space."

What was his impression of the desert then? "It was sort of a psychological space. A bit of a blank slate, that's part of it. But it's just this expansive breath."

Now fully ensconced in Southern California's Yucca Valley, Anderson's art and life are an undifferentiated eruption of art and family, home and studio. And his focus is on, well, focus.

"I can't tell you how many shows I've been in that were some variation on the words *blurring the lines between art and lifestyle*," says Anderson. Makes sense. His *stuff* may be shown in galleries from Palm Springs to Tokyo but they're just as likely to be found at home décor stores in Portland or NYC. It doesn't quite matter to Anderson how it's portrayed or consumed. "I get asked a lot about this. *Is it functional or purely art?* Even if it is just art, there's function there. Why do we make art? One reason is to explore be-

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Opposite page: The kitchen in the home of Anderson and his partner, photo producer Genevieve Dellinger, and their two kids, Uschi and Mars. Kitchen cabinets in fir plywood from a local lumberyard; a puzzle-piece backsplash; and a concrete poured kitchen island — all created by Anderson. A sculpture, *(No. 323)*, Claro Walnut, *2022*, by Anderson. **This page:** Glowing in the afternoon light, stands *Untitled (No. 261)*, Redwood, 2021.

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yond what we're capable of perceiving or articulating. That's the highest function that anything I make could achieve." Anderson's less concerned with blurred lines than sharp seams. "Anyone who's been behind the scenes knows that any great "artist" usually has a team of impeccable craftspeople behind them — if they're not an impeccable craftsperson themselves. You can't have one without the other."

In the pictures, Anderson's sunlit sculptures intersect the desert horizon. They are vertical beings. Like us. Like trees, they connect the earth and sky. They evoke transcendence as much as they embody restriction. They are representative of gods, and people. In other pictures, they gather around a table. They recall family dinners, bonhomie. They are high-touch elements of bespoke interior design.

What are we looking at? Is it furniture? Is it art? What's the difference? It doesn't matter. Not to Dan Anderson. What matters is the practice. "I'm just trying to be engaged, in conversation with material, with the experiences that I'm going to help generate." Looking inside Anderson's home, it's easy to imagine that experience in sum. The cedar cubes with tragicomic face engravings, hand painted or deeply burnished, settled around a dinner table. Wood panels in the conversation pit as logs burn in the stove. Wood everywhere. Books everywhere. Light filtering through citrus-colored glass. I can practically smell the homecooked meals, hear the kids playing outside as the sun sets and the high desert cools. He's no longer living like a dirt bag. It is equally clear, to me at least, how it feels to stumble upon one of his vertical-struck cedar totems at a gallery, say, in Vancouver. The height and weight, the expression, the felt presence of something immaterial lurking in the body. Either way, convene with Anderson's creations

and discussion will emerge. Set about home furnishings or less utilitarian objects, meaningful conversation is the only value I personally care to get out of the deal. Anderson is less quixotic. "When I put something into the world, that's the beginning. How it gets engaged with, that's what determines what it becomes."

What if it only gets engaged in sitting. What if it only becomes a chair?

"So, then it's a chair, something that someone's fond of. I find that to be incredibly valuable. But it could be a sculpture that evokes a feeling that, maybe, can be transcendent. I'm interested in creating experiences for other people, stories that will get told. The story, if it's a good one," he says, "will last longer than anything you can make."

Bernard Berenson said art is whatever makes life better. What is art according to Dan Anderson?

"It's a really nice way to spend my time," he says.

Sit on it. Set your dinner on it. Show it in a garden or a gallery. How we engage Anderson's stuff, however it's consumed or portrayed, we are, ultimately, the arbiter of its cause — we are the storytellers. Anderson understands this. As the novelist Robert Stone noted, "For a thing to endure it must be made of either granite or words." Anderson has chosen his medium wisely. His woodcrafts are words of art. UD

Learn more at danjohnanderson.com and mattermatters.com.
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Above: The open-plan living area. The house, originally built in 1959, has evolved and expanded into the family's own self-made and handcrafted home, since 2014. **Below:** Their sunken living room with a wood stove, for chilly evenings. **Opposite page:** Anderson with his bike. The backyard, with fire pit, is still a work in progress.