

# Growing NOT against the grain: in search of the female identity in wood sculpture

Rathsaran Sireekan

In *C-ARTS* 2010-04-27 article titled *Pinaree Sanpitak Elegantly Stagnant Clouds*, conventional gender assignment is rejected when it comes to different mediums of artistic production.

Today's added support of advanced technologies and production teams are said to give a freer space where male artists can do delicate embroidery while female artists are no longer put off by more solid materials in metalwork, carpentry or welding.

Yet, for Isabelle Dethier who works alone without a team, carving trunks many times larger than herself, the medium of wood is still tied to the masculine gender.

"Unlike in the UK, Wood as a medium in Belgium is still very much associated with testosterone. Whenever I attend a workshop on wood sculpture, I would only be surrounded by a swamping majority of my lumberjack male colleagues."

Alienation is always a good ingredient for the recipe of individuality. As a female wood sculptor, she feels acutely that the square, hefty, massive and solid forms in the studios of her male counterparts are not for her.

Thus aptly observed Ros Falvey: "Here are no angular forms which jar". Indeed, central to Dethier's woodworks are the feminine shapes of curves, ridges, strata and ripples—all creating the admirable effect of dynamic quietude, soothingness and perpetually growing energy.

Isabelle Dethier's feminization of the masculine-dominated medium raises an important question of whether or not it feeds through to the male gaze—a possible depoliticization of her activism in this the medium's power politics.

The artist's mellow curve can be remarkably sensuous. Yet, with her unrivalled decoding and abstraction of the female nude as a genre which informs her various interpretations of nature, these curves are corporeal grace which, however, speaks for intellectual contemplation. *Vessel*, 2001-2002, a prototype of her work in this regard, stunningly unifies the sexual and intellectual emotion, with one cancelling out the other producing the effect of an existential equilibrium—the state in which libido and the intellectual curiosity which underlines it are redirected and pacified.

Unique to her feminine woodwork is also her predilection for ridges. Once again to the debate on male-gaze, these forms physically present

All images: courtesy of LKFF Gallery



*Untitled (Stratified floor piece), 2002*  
Carved weeping willow  
50 x 50 x 50 cm





▲ ▲  
Vessel, 2001  
Carved lime wood  
45 x 85 cm (diameter)

►  
Composition of 10 wall Strata, 2010  
Carved beech wood, approx  
65 x 200 x 11 cm

with high sexual innuendo; they are usually associated with the vaginal passage full of ridges. Yet, with her learned subliminal treatment of these shapes, as with the curves, she transforms earthliness into scientific studies: the multi-layered dissection of natural objects as exemplified by *Untitled (composition of 2)*, 2002; *Untitled (Stratified floor piece)*, 2002; and *Untitled (floor piece)*, 2002.

The intersection between Dionysus's passion and Apollo's wisdom in her art well reflects a crossroad in her life where she once had to choose between the study of art and biology—both, however, are deeply intertwined with the obsession with forms and their functions. "Although I chose art, I've always been fascinated by the subject of biology. When I don't work on my sculptures, I do gardening and enjoyed the rich biological spectra nature gives."

As if taking after the gigantic Atomium her Brussels has to show off, Isabelle Dethier's love of breaking forms and objects into molecular divides culminates in her highlight series of strata and stratifications.

If masculinity claims entirety and occupation of space—a form of aggression—the artist's deconstruction of such positive ontology deliberately defies it. Her strata and stratifications are importantly feminine because it offers a negation of such a masculine will to occupy: the solidity. The aerial quality outstanding in such a series as *White Wall Strata (5 versions)*, 2010, attracted a telecom company to commission her with the fluidity in situ *Composition of 4 Wall Strata*, 2009. Through each air-darting blade-sharp individual stratum, these composites of stratifications, she said, are attractive because they create intense movements of energy flowing in and out of the site—the theme of which she has also explored in other form which frequents her works: ripples.

Strata and ripples are two significant shapes in the artist's repertoire as they translate the artist's emphasis on "perpetual growth"—the organic development which positively affects the psychological state of the viewer.

Isabelle Dethier's work is contemporary because it not only represents, but also redefines femininity in a defamiliarized way:

something still recognizably feminine, yet challenging that very "femininity" we used to know of.

Not only her distinctive signature shapes, but also the working concept the artist adheres to does make gender central to her work. The binary male/female is echoed and paired, in her polemical statement calling for respect for nature, with that of competition/cooperation, defiance/respect, aggression/pacification, dictating/consultative, war/peace and inevitably capitalist/environmentalist.

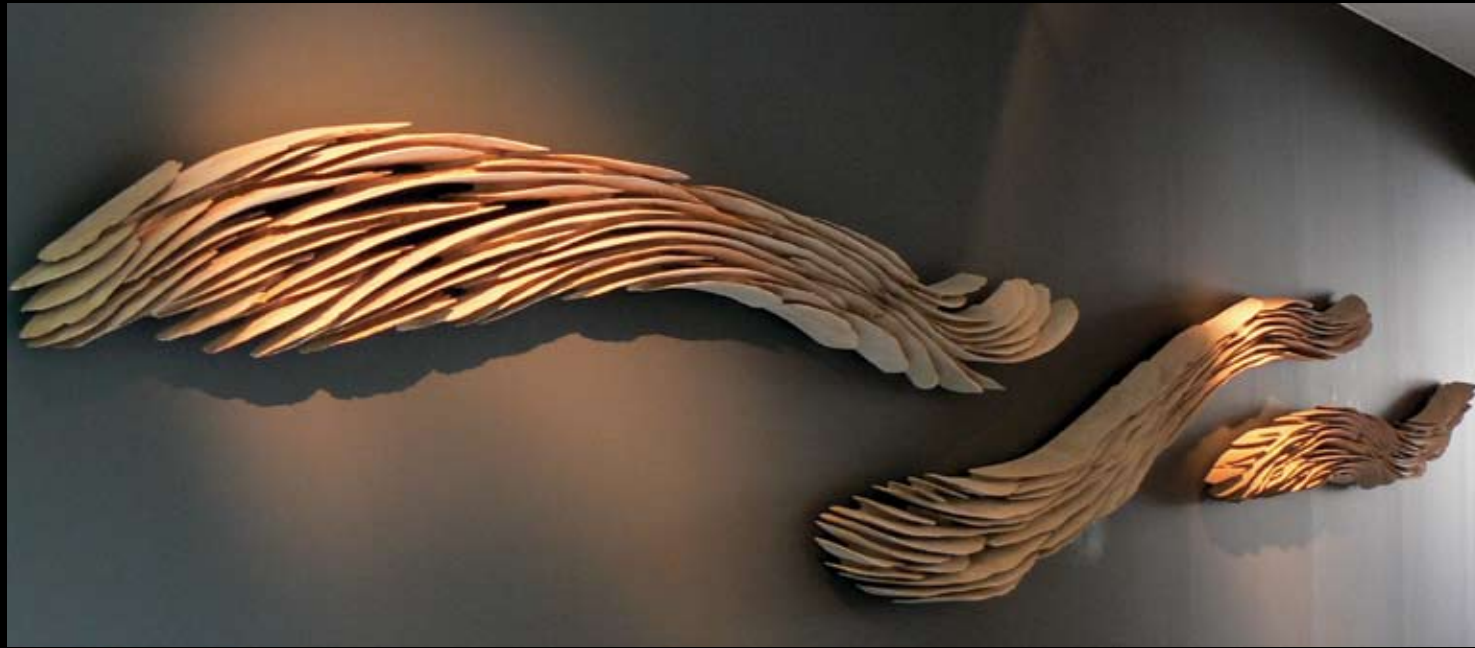
"Of all the lime, pear tree, sherry, maple wood I work with, they all come from fallen or sick trees. I don't cut them merely for my artistic purposes," said the artist.

Eco-feminism, indeed, runs deep in her work. The flow of energy unmistakable in the uninterrupted movement of the grain in her wood sculpture underlines not only her good understanding of organic design, but also the strong environmental conscience closely associated with the feminine gender of her work's identity.

As gallerist Mijntje Lukoff put it "She does not try to dominate nature, but rather evolves with it toward the final artwork. When in doubt, she would rather trust nature to have its say."

Isabelle Dethier's love for wood as her primary medium did not come to her immediately, but came after trying almost everything available—wood, metal, plastics and ceramics—during her years from 1979 to 1982 at Brighton Polytechnic (University of Brighton)





Composition of 4 Wall Strata, 2009, carved beech tree, whole series approx, 35 x 150 x 13 cm



▲ White wall Strata (5 versions), 2010, carved beech tree, unique, approx, 15 x 40 x 12 cm

▼ Untitled (composition of 2), 2002, carved plane tree, unique, 40 x 90 cm (diam) and 30 x 90 cm (diam)



where she trained in advanced techniques, the artistic/aesthetic and historical sides of sculpture making.

Here in Sussex, she was intensely pushed for her individuality, which, as she singled out, has been a life-time search for her feminine identity in the tradition of sculpture making.

In 1983 when the renowned Uffizi did not need a two-hour queue to enter, she went to Florence to study art history and started stone carving. In 1985, when she came back to Brussels, she embarked on a paper sculpture project which made use of five tons of scrap paper. The work which was sold has the design pattern one can recall in her current wood work. The last medium she used before adopting wood was alabaster which she said, unlike wood, was too cold, too translucent and heavy for her. "I love to work with wood because it smells nice; it is lighter and gives out this warm tactility which I need."

As a surviving true Romantic whose artistic ingenuity is believed to derive from her direct "correspondence" with Nature, when asked who her influence has been, she simply said without a second thought: "nature, travels and people".

Isabelle Dethier's current exhibition at LKFF Gallery on Brussels's Rue Blanche (the hip Avenue Louise neighborhood) features 13 sets of works comprising the artist's latest *Elan Vital* series, however not with a conceptual theme attached since her work is consistently interpretations of nature on wood. The price ranges from EUR750 to EUR23,000. [\[4\]](#)

Rathsaran Sireekan is a freelance contemporary art contributor to the Bangkok Post and the Thai editor of the Bangkok Art Map. He is leaving Bangkok to base in Brussels this coming September

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