

Craft:

1. An activity involving skill in making things by hand
2. A boat or ship

Derived from the Old English *cræft* “strength, skill” and German *kraft* meaning “strength”

There is a rhythm to life – a spiritual thread that is woven through our life’s fabric connecting those things that we value and love, that shape us, and where we find our peace.

Sometimes we see it – that iridescent connector, shimmering as it catches light, reminding us that it all happens the way it is supposed to and is meant to be. Other times – and probably most often – it is elusive and mysterious. Times when the seemingly disparate parts of ourselves and our lives exist in distinctly separate spheres – work, home, family, self – and where their overlap feels microscopic.

This is a story of finding that spiritual thread – and realizing that ... when shared by many ... it becomes more of a chord ... one that resonates broadly and ultimately connects us all.

We met Michael Rumsey at The Boardroom, an international surfboard shaping show, held annually in Southern California. I’m new to surfing – an interloper, really. I’ve come to it almost through osmosis – we live in San Diego, my husband surfs, and I have always loved the ocean. At the intersection of all of these things is a surf culture that is as much about sport as it is about spirit and a way of life. It’s the latter that I’ve found so attractive. That sense of calm, a spirituality centered in nature and its awesomeness, fluidity – a symbiosis between man and water, a complementary relationship that isn’t about bending the environment to our desires, but about feeling a rhythm and a flow, and working within that space to find joy.

This perception of surfing is what inspired my own art and it is where I find my peace, my meditation. That said, the scientist in me seeks to validate that perception, and so what started out as a convenient subject for my photography, turned into a desire to understand, feel, and experience – to not just consume, but to understand, contribute, and share.

We walked into the show on its second day, not really sure what to expect – we knew there would be surfboards and shaping contests, but that’s about it. I am partial to longboards – there

is something understated, simple, and beautiful about them. They are uncomplicated and classic. Greeting us at the door were the boards that had won shaping prizes, and of course, the long boards were my favorite.

There, almost at the end of the “prize” boards, was a beautiful wood board with a ribbon, “Best in Show”. It wasn’t just a board – it was a work of art. Not a longboard. A sting. It was stunning. Beautiful lines and wood detail in varying color and grain, thoughtfully interwoven and meticulously placed, creating a wooden relief that exemplified “Flow”. Beyond a surf craft, it was “craft” in the purest sense of the word. Skillful. Strong.

There are master shapers and legends of surf – those who pioneered the sport and its craft. And while it was no doubt inspired by them, this board – ultimately gifted to the Aipa family – was shaped by a local woodworker, long-time surfer, and artist. A man who not only understands the ocean’s rhythm, a board’s feel, and how it complements nature and intention, but whose appreciation of wood’s grain, texture, and malleability allows for the creation of something truly spectacular – a board that, by its own beauty and craft, pays respect to the timber from which it was shaped and the ocean for which it is intended.

“You can ride any one of my boards,” he said proudly. Naively, my first thought was why anyone would want to ride such a work of art – and did it really matter if it was going to hang on a wall? I enthusiastically pulled out my iPhone to show Mike a picture called “Follow” – taken at Sunset Cliffs on one of our many walks with the dogs:

“Could you do that on a board?”

“I can do anything you want on a board. But I don’t usually do commissioned boards.”

“How long does it take to make a board?”

“From start to finish? Three or four months ...”

There was no salesmanship – no rush to please the customer. Just matter-of-fact honesty. Three or four months. I’m a photographer - images take 1/2000<sup>th</sup> of a second to take ... if you’re feeling crazy, a few seconds. Add in download and editing time, and ... at the top end ... an image that I may deem worthy of publishing takes thirty minutes. Maybe.

In today's world where we can seemingly have whatever we want, whenever we want it – where, if Amazon Prime doesn't ship chances are, you're not buying – this was its antidote. Slow, thoughtful, deliberate, and singular.

There is a resurgent appreciation for what is hand-crafted versus mass produced. In Western society, we seem to have come full circle – going from slow, manual processes to mass-produced, automated machining ... and now back again to slow and manual. Maybe it's nostalgia – maybe it's wanting the antidote.

The surfboard industry is no different. In the last few years, there has been a boon in shape-your-own-board offerings. Shapers Studios (San Diego, CA) will let you shape your own 9 and a half foot long board from a foam blank; if you're looking for something a little closer to the slow board movement, Tucker Surf Supply (California) or Grain Surfboards (Maine) will ship you long strips of balsa with instructions. I have vicariously experienced each of these processes with my husband – each was uniquely different (the foam board was shaped in an afternoon; the wood board consumed the better part of a Minnesota winter), but the resulting sense of pride was the same, especially when he took his boards out into the water.

As I began to spend more time with Mike, I came to appreciate that *of course* the boards are made to be ridden. And that's where "craft" comes in. Because the art isn't just about the beautiful woodwork and inlaid artistry. It is about knowing where the center of mass will be when you paddle, when you stand, and how water and wood harmonize to create uninterrupted fluidity and maximize synchronicity - with the wave and the rider. It is knowing that the board is never a singular thing – it cannot exist in isolation. There would be no surfboards without water – and so if one is to honor the board, and honor the wood from which it was shaped, one must also have an intimate knowledge of and respect for the wave.

Mike was born and raised in San Diego, California – fourth generation, which – if you are at all familiar with the region – is rare. Mike is the great-grandson of Claude Kuebler, owner of the largest ranch in Otay Mesa dating back to the late 1800's. Originally a horse ranch until World War I, the family trade transitioned to raising cattle and farming, and making hay. Mike spent a lot of time on the ranch as a child and he discovered surfing at age twelve in Imperial Beach. His first board was a 9 foot long South Shore board, "The big guys would be what seemed like miles

out ... we'd be on the inside getting torn up." He's remembering, laughing. "Surfing was my babysitter. No one worried about kids then. Parents would drop you off saying here's \$5 – we'll see you at 5." Mike surfed the Tijuana Sloughs and made his own surf wax from paraffin and lemon. "There was this kid from Mexico who would paddle up and back the same day!"

His early lessons in board building came from breaking and reshaping the ones he had – and maybe this is where he first learned an important lesson – in surfing, and in life: "You can ride anything. Kelly Slater rode an upside down table! So much about shaping is a personal interpretation because we all ride differently ..." And here comes the kicker: "How right do you have to be?" You'd never think this, though, looking at Mike's Best in Show Aipa-inspired Sting at The Boardroom Show.

When you see Mike's quiver of impeccably crafted boards, you start to understand the tension that exists between the exacting board-shaping craftsman, and the creative artist who hears the wood, feels it, and allows just enough of himself to permeate the board. It's a welcome tension ... one that fosters a warm ambiguity vs. a vision at cross purposes. It is here where Mike seems most comfortable. There's a board complete with a flagellated tail, an asymmetric board, and on his drawing table, a sketch of a board with *working* internal wooden gears. None of these is like anything you've ever seen on the water – but therein lies their beauty. You can ride anything you can imagine.

Mike wasn't always a board shaper, though he'll tell you he's always been an artist, and he's always loved wood. At the age of 16, he went to work part time in a lumber yard. He later went to college, majoring in art. He started drawing, painting, and sculpting and realized, as many artists do, that what feeds the soul doesn't always feed the bank account, especially with a young family. So, he put his art aside, and began working full time for a lumber company. Hard-working and driven, he quickly rose through the ranks. Mike retired early from the lumber company after a barefoot water skiing accident in 1988 caused severe injuries, permanent brain damage, double vision, and seizures. He resumed his art as rehabilitation - his *therapy* - as he calls it.

While still recuperating from the accident and wheelchair bound, he recounts, "My friends came and got me in my wheelchair, took me to the beach, carried me in my wheelchair across the

sand and dumped me in the ocean." It sounded a little sketchy to me, but his friends clearly knew Mike, his love for the water, and the healing powers of the ocean. He later revealed it was his best friend, Sam, who positioned him on a board and pushed him into the surf. There is healing in the water. Isak Dinesen once said, "The cure for anything is salt water – sweat, tears, or the sea." For some, it's all of the above. But beyond the ocean itself, there is that flow – that resonance and rhythm. The ability to float and ride ... and the means by which that happens. If you've surfed your whole life, there is more than just muscle memory – there's a spiritual memory, and it's something your soul craves.

There is famous guitar maker, Wayne Henderson, who – through no formal training – has become one of the world's most sought-after luthiers. He, too, doesn't shine to custom orders, and – in his almost 70 years of life – has made only 300 guitars. Eric Clapton waited almost 10 years for his. In his book about Henderson and Clapton's guitar, Allen St. John – writer for The New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Rolling Stone, among others – sought to understand what "differentiated a magical guitar from a merely great one". His conclusion: "An instrument is the sum total of not only the builder's experience, but his *experiences*. You need to be a good man to build a good guitar ... You can't keep your personality out of the work. It's impossible." I set out, interested in the craft of board building and Mike's artistic inspiration, but what unfolded was much more – I got to know him as a person, and it became clear that his boards are a clear expression of Mike as an individual ... careful, thoughtful, with a hint of quirkiness and appreciation for coloring outside the lines.

On my first day with Mike, we toured his workroom which connects to his back yard – a veritable oasis, complete with palms, water features, and plastic lizards (each of whom are named) strategically placed throughout. On his work bench, was his grandfather's tool kit, and the frame of his next board. He pulled out one stick of redwood, his eyes glinting with a boyish smile: "Look what I found in the cull pile at Home Depot!" He wet a paper towel and smoothed it along the length of the wood – and there it was. Water. Inlaid in the wood itself, nature's patterns mimicking themselves. "This is going to be my next board."

I would discover that Mike's inspiration for board shapes and designs occurred very much like this – a single piece of wood with unique grain, or sitting under a palapa and noticing the patterns of the palm fronds hanging from above ... it's why Mike doesn't shine much to

commissioned pieces – it's his own creative vision that he prefers to pursue. Shaping the board is only part of the process – arguably the smaller part. The larger part is the artistry .... taking strips of wood from different trees – paulownia, koa, redwood – listening to their voices and bending them into shapes of waves, palms, fish, or the subtle gradient of a sunset.

Most every piece of wood is salvaged, or given to him, and the community that contributes to a finished Rumsey board is entirely local. Mike's craft is his therapy – his meditation. A physical release, a spiritual voyage, a tribute to a greater life force that has brought him to where he is.

That first day, I got a glimpse of a Rumsey board in every stage – from the initial sketches, to gluing the frame, sanding a board, and visiting G&S Surfboards (another San Diego surfing institution) to see a board being glassed. I hadn't brought a camera or a notepad. I really just wanted to talk and experience, and not be distracted by the need to memorialize every moment.

I began with a question I'm often asked – “How did you get started?” That's when I learned about his family, the ranch, his grandmother's recognition and encouragement of his artistic proclivities. College. And then – the unexpected sojourn into lumber and executive leadership. “Have you ever ridden one of your boards?” I was surprised to learn that he hadn't, despite meticulous attention to how he shaped each board, proper rocker and dome on the decks, and the slight concavities in the hull - all with careful consideration for how water flows and engages with the craft, and where a rider's center of mass is held when she paddles, and when she stands. Maybe he was afraid to damage a board. I certainly would be.

He has a quiver of foam boards in the corner of his workroom which are his daily riders. Mounted just above them, is a simple, beautiful, hollow wood 10'6" longboard. It doesn't have the same signature artistic inlays as most of the other Rumsey boards I'd seen, but it was classic. “That's the first board,” he said. “My best friend Sam, who had recently passed away shortly after he'd been diagnosed with ALS (Lou Gehrig's Disease) asked me if I'd help him build a board.” I understood by the fact that the board was in Mike's workroom, that Sam's spirit lived on – even if his physical body hadn't. Sam is on Mike's mind with every board he makes – he

sent me an email a few weeks back: “Did I tell you I glue a penny inside every board? It’s for Sam.”<sup>1</sup>

In the end, I spent a few days with Mike over the course of as many months – some days gave a hint of his accident of over 20 years prior; most days, you’d never know. Every day, there was a smile, an intrinsic joy and enthusiasm – a story about the wood, about starting over, about next steps. I learned a little about shaping. Most of all, I learned that we all end up exactly in the place we are meant to be – even if the journey itself is nonsensical as it happens.

Mike has been surfing for over 50 years – it is where he finds his peace ... and it has been the one constant thread woven through the fabric of his life. Art and craft – the art of craft. More than just the handiwork of making a board, but putting a piece of you and your life into it. You have to be a good man to build a good board. I hadn’t been sure where to start with Mike – I’m not a shaper, and only a fledgling surfer, but I am an artist. Thus, I understand it’s never just about creating *The Thing*. It really is the sum of an artist’s experiences that result in what we put out into the world for consumption.

With Mike, part of my interest was in the pure craftsmanship of shaping the board and the artistry, while another part was my deep sense and appreciation that this was Mike’s creative outlet ... that he had evolved to this place from somewhere quite different, and I wanted to understand that journey a bit better. It was ultimately fairly simple – a love for surfing, art, and wood ... and a life catalyst. An event that put life in perspective – that distilled everything down to its elements. There is healing in the most unlikely places. Wood. Water. Go with the flow. Ride.

Mike recently sent me a photograph of the board we’d started together – the one containing the wood strips with the rippled pattern. He named it, “Hydrotherapy.”

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<sup>1</sup> These aren’t just any pennies. Sam was an enthusiastic coin collector. Mike and his wife, Leanne, ended up with coffee cans full of pennies after Sam died. Only one of Sam’s pennies is glued to the inside of every board.