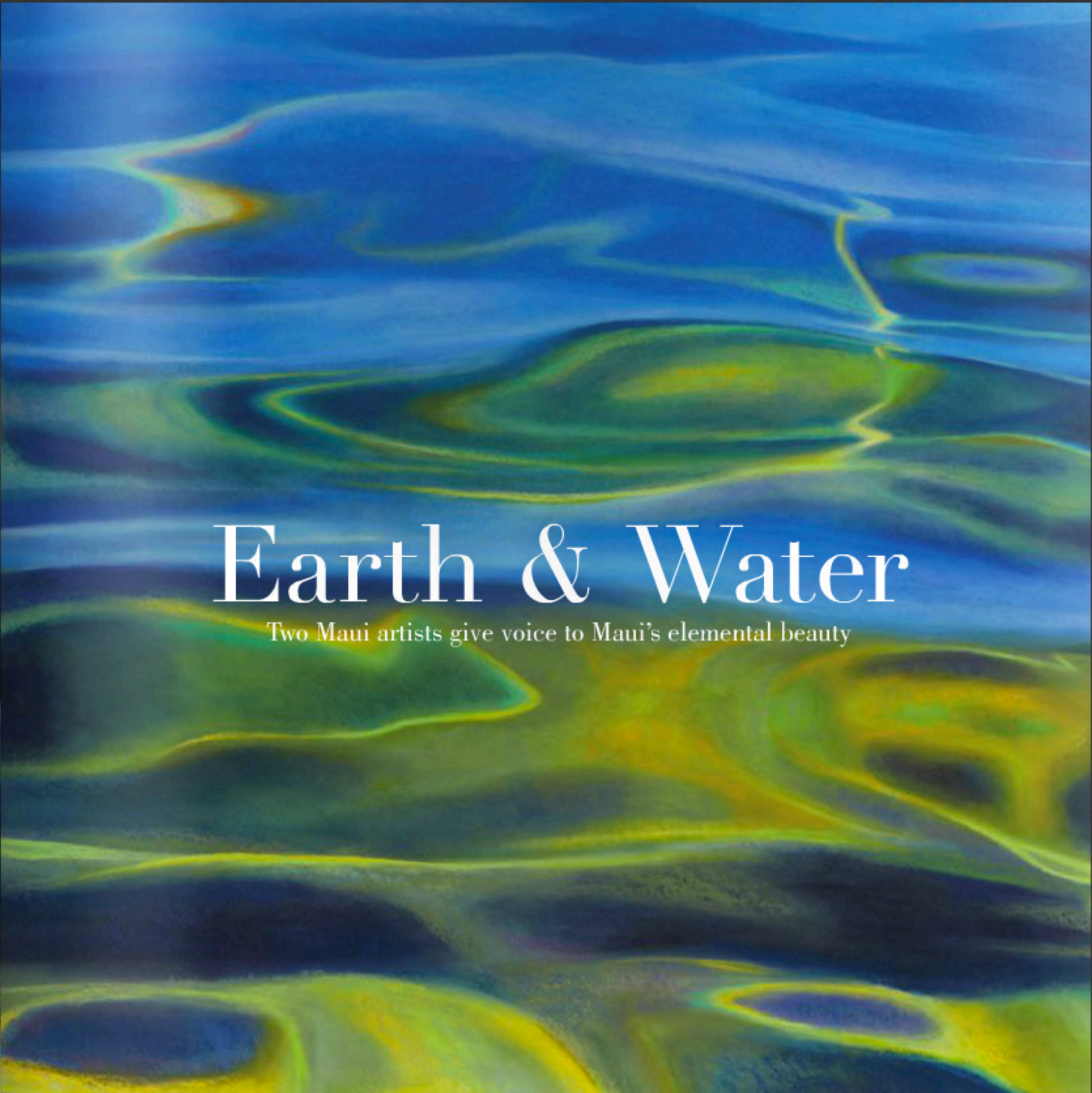


INSPIRATION

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Earth & Water

Two Maui artists give voice to Maui's elemental beauty



Mountain & Motion

By **PAUL WOOD** Photography by **RACHEL OLSSON**



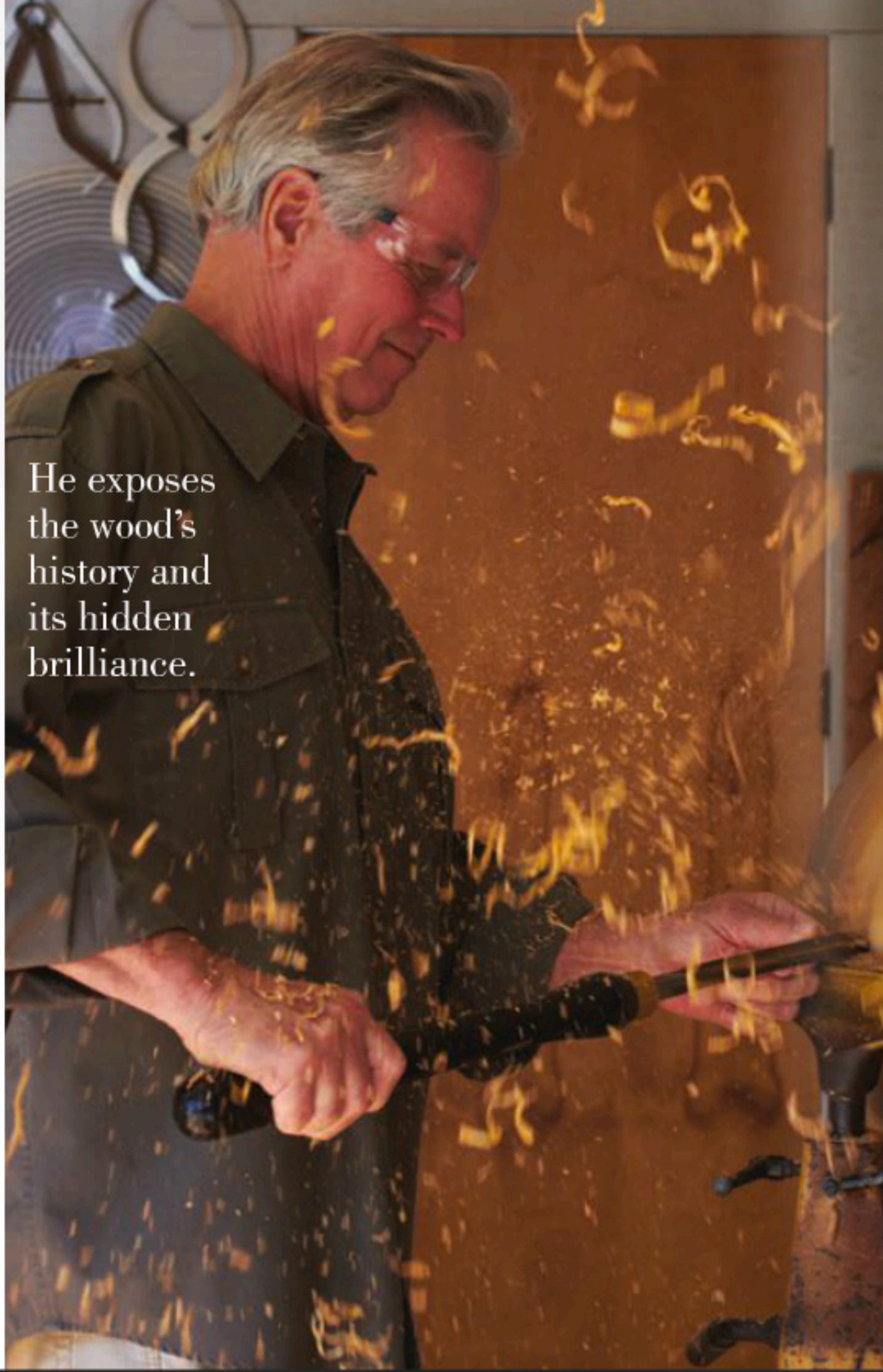
Jim Meekhof is a man in love with wood—downed logs, windfall timber, trunks cast aside by roadworkers. Patiently, with skills acquired over a lifetime of singular focus, he exposes beauty hidden within the dense flesh of trees. Diana Lehr, on the other hand, grabs ephemeral moments. She's renowned for painting slant-lit clouds, moments of bold brilliance that shift away in an instant. Now she herself has shifted to watery subjects, especially tidepools, their transparent layers ceaselessly scrambled by incoming surf. Both are Maui artists of the highest regard, both are represented in Wailea and neither has met the other.

These two have contrasting responses to the same island—he solid and centering; she fluid and volatile. He mountain; she motion. Like all good opposites, they equally attract. Considered together, they exemplify the great diversity you find in the field of artistic expression on this island. Certainly this diversity reflects the multiple moods of the island itself. Diana Lehr says, “The landscape is dynamic here. There's so much going on here in nature, almost like a candy store.”


Jim Meekhof turns wood on a thousand-pound lathe bolted to the concrete slab of his under-house studio in Kula. Out on the side lawn catching some Upcountry rain is a pile of thick logs, Norfolk Island pine, cut to four-foot lengths. The logs are “spalting”—taking on a natural coloration from controlled decay, a process that’s probably similar to letting cheese turn *bleu*.

In the open-air studio, beautiful old hand tools are within reach, carefully organized. A rack of big gouges and chisels affixed to long wooden handles stands like a display of antique harpoons. Each is razor-sharp. (Jim bench-grinds them maybe 20 times for every bowl he makes.) There are tool rests, widespread calipers, narrow rasps, awls, and a fine old brace-and-bit (manual drill) that once belonged to his grandfather. A cabinet of drawers contains sanding pads neatly graded from 80 grit to 2,000 grit. Nearby are stacks of buffing pads. Two chain saws. And there’s Jim’s kiln—an old refrigerator gutted of its motor and lit inside by a 40-watt bulb. It is stacked with rough-turned projects, the walls of each about an inch and a half thick and waxed to keep them from splitting. Jim keeps about 80 projects going at any one time, and each one

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(This page) Norfolk Island pine makes a luminous bowl, and Meekhof and the lathe cause tissue-thin wood curls to fly. (Opposite page) The artist and his tools create a dynamic energy in his studio as the bowl comes to life.



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spends about two months in the kiln, until it's dried to 5 percent humidity. That way, if a piece ends up in the zero humidity of Las Vegas, as many of Jim's pieces do, he knows they won't crack.

After, he turns them again to a glass-like thinness—a 16th of an inch, a width he senses with his fingertips. Then there's the finish, a Jim-invented combination of oil and hardener that took him eight years to develop.

"Feel this," he says, holding a bowl with a watery-curved rim as soft and shapely as a fresh rose petal. "It's like a car finish. I sand to 2,000 grit, then take it beyond there with buffing. I don't know if there's a 3,000 grit, but that's about where I get."

His home gallery is loaded with such pieces. Some are sconces and lamps, luminous as amber, all turned from single chunks of Maui hardwood. He raises an amber-colored bowl that feels as light as a bubble. "Black walnut," he says. "Look at the eyes. It's just on fire. It changes mood as you turn it."

Often after he's done with a piece, he won't let it go for some time. "I can sit for hours just looking at it." Wood like this would otherwise rot on the ground and be lost. But as Jim moves inside the salvaged chunk, he exposes its history and its hidden brilliance. This is not unlike the Hubble Telescope peering into the strange central beauties of the universe.

Jim Meekhof and his work can be met at the Grand Wailea on Tuesdays from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m., also at the Four Seasons on Wednesdays from 8 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. Studio visits are welcome. Jimmeekhof.com.

If the soul of a tree can be caught slowly by a wood-turner, imagine the swiftness of an artist who can catch the soul of a cloud that surges wave-like in the setting sunlight. Or the transparent inches and surfaces of a tidepool, seen in a glance. Diana Lehr is a master of this—the caught instant.

(This page) Diana Lehr, who has captured Maui's elemental beauty in her esteemed career as one of the island's revered artists, enjoys a quiet moment in her studio.

Hers is a dangerous occupation, by the way. We're not talking about Great-Aunt Sally with a roadside easel. This woman puts herself on the line. Example: Not so long ago Diana was filming downward close-ups of tidepools on a remote coastline. The stony shore was backed by stony cliffs. Suddenly a rogue wave crashed into her, lifted her and smashed her onto a rocky ledge, then sucked away all her stuff, cellphone and all. Sometimes being "in the moment" takes all you've got. That's how Diana Lehr paints.

The paintings you'll likely see—we don't want to pin her down, now—for example at NaPua Gallery in the Grand Wailea Resort, arise from layers of watercolor on the heaviest of Arches paper. Then she works thicknesses of pastels over the watercolor base. Sometimes she reconsiders the piece in mid-process, then hoses the whole thing down, trusting the paper's grit to help her capture, for example—and here's a phrase she used—a diaphanous squall. "I don't consider myself a traditional landscape painter. My subjects are moving."

Later: "It's not the land or the sky—it's the merge. And it has an enormous amount to do with light, glowing shadows, almost a hallucination. Anyone who's been Upcountry under perfect conditions knows this. I hope."

She says, "I'm interested in activity, action." Clouds hit the land. The surge-struck tidepool turns pale aqua with all the subsequent bubbles. "This is great inspiration." Most recently she has turned to video, capturing astounding footage of water in motion. These videos linger on long sequences of the sort of evanescent moments she loves to paint. Maybe video will free her to paint entirely new subjects now, she says. She can't tell. She's an artist in constant motion.

Diana's sharp observation: "An artist is someone who transcends what they do." Surfers can do that; so can gardeners, she says. Diana Lehr transcends the snapshot. Jim Meekhof transcends whittling. Without such artists, much lively loveliness would all be lost.

(Clockwise from top) Diana Lehr at work on her current series on water; and the pigments and tools that enable her to capture Maui's ephemeral and elemental beauty.

