

Frame Work

A Portland woodworker with a keen eye for the beauty in old boards is turning out frames that are suddenly all the rage. By Christine Carson.

IN the Portland studio of Duane Patricio, rows of rough, aged boards line an entire wall. Sawdust blankets the floor. Scraps and laths and hunks of wood are heaped in disarray on every available surface. An antique prosthetic leg dangles by the doorway. An unsuspecting visitor might logically wonder why the place is littered with so much junk.

But it is this very “junk” — wood salvaged from weatherbeaten Maine barns and houses and outbuildings — that has



Making It In Maine

thrust Patricio's woodworking business into national prominence.

Patricio has developed a niche market using salvage to craft elegant, one-of-a-kind frames and mirrors (as well as other objects) that can be found in tony retail stores from New York to Aspen to Tokyo. In fact, MTV recently commissioned from him six free-standing, full-length mirror frames for its new studio's dressing room. A nod from this music television channel, considered to be cutting edge, and brisk sales reflect that Patricio has tapped into something out of the ordinary.

"There's so much happening with all this wood," he says, standing in front of a stack of boards that might look more appropriate heaped beside a rusted pickup and washer at some back-road farm. Yet, where the unfocused eye simply sees a dull gray board, Patricio sees history, texture, and tone — possibilities waiting to be explored. "Look at these colors," he says, rubbing a thumb over the mottled surface of one, paint flecking to the floor. Upon closer examination, the color that at first seemed gray is actually pink over blue behind green — paint that has been layered up over the years and battered by the none-too-kind Northeast elements for generation upon generation. What time and weather have done to these boards is not unlike what the ocean does to bottles to create sea glass. Edges become soft, colors muted. These are the hues of a barren landscape, a forgotten time, history. It takes a particular eye to find the beauty in a discarded thing. Patricio clearly has the eye.

HAWAIIAN-BORN, Ohio- and California-raised, Duane Patricio, 44, exudes the energy of the highly motivated and productive. Even sitting for an interview, he is up and down, fetching this or that, twirling a slat of wood in his hands as he speaks. He explains that he has always been handy. From the surfboards he made as a youth to the prostheses he fabricated at Maine Artificial Limb for more than five years, he has spent a lifetime creating things. "Let's just say I can make the most out of a tool," he says, with a wry grin.

Over the years, he has traveled extensively and worked at a number of vocations: He ran a sailing school in Martha's Vineyard, worked as a cook on a scallop-

er out of Alaska, and has had a long career picking up the occasional waiting and bartending gig. Even with the raging success of his vintage frames — each piece he makes is commissioned, everything is sold before it's begun — he still does conventional woodworking. One wonders, when does this man nap?

Patricio was first introduced to what he refers to "old wood" by a neighboring artisan in the Calderwood Building, a former Maine College of Art facility on Pleasant Street, Portland, which houses twenty-three studios, including his. He was at once struck by the beauty of what nature did to paint on wood. Year after year, he explains, coats of paint went on, and year after year, in turn, the weather stripped them away. Some of the boards he uses



Framemeister Duane Patricio and his irreplaceable assistant (and son), Kai.

display only one color, others show a number of layers. While he demurs that there's nothing complicated — in terms of woodworking — about what he does, one can see that the art in his craft resides in how he uses his eye to put the pieces together.

He creates his frames with dimensionality in mind. He often combines sections from different pieces of wood, playing off the colors of each to work with whatever he's framing. He prefers to collaborate with his clients and have them pick out the wood he will use — although he will help steer the choice, if it's apparent they don't have an eye for color. "I always see the whole picture before I

start," he says. "The wood dictates what I make."

He begins by applying a sealer to the wood before working with it, to ensure the paint adheres. He will occasionally glue cracks or do a light sanding, but never compromises the integrity of the wood by painting or stripping it down. When the piece is finished, he applies several layers of sealer, which, he explains, makes the colors appear richer. The exterior is finished with butcher's wax simply because of the textural appeal. "People like to touch them."

And, indeed, after the first visual impression these frames make, the hand is at once drawn to their seemingly bumpy and rutted — although remarkably smooth — surfaces. Beneath the sealer and the wax, the ancient paint takes on a mosaic quality, as though one were looking at, not beads and flecks of ancient paint, but teeny tiny tiles. The outside edges of the frames might be smoothed where he has made a new cut in the old wood, or he might opt to expose the rough texture of an old saw mark or simply the paint. He does not work from a formula, each piece is its own creation, and he's not interested in mass production. (Although one would not be surprised to soon see knockoffs of his work appearing in one of those Martha-Stewartier-than-thou home-furnishing catalogues.)

What most impresses is that the wood means something to him. He can imagine the farmer slapping on coats of paint year after year, screen doors slamming, buildings falling to disrepair, being abandoned, forgotten. He assumes his clients are initially attracted by the colors, but he suspects there's something more. "People are buying a piece of history. This is not a faux finish, it's something very real," he says. "The piece is already timeless because it's already old." With these frames and mirrors, under the sealer and wax, he has stolen and preserved a moment of Maine time.

A neat trick, considering he starts with a heap of junk. ■

Patricio's uniquely framed mirrors are available at Abacus American Crafts in Portland (207-772-4880), Boothbay, Freeport, and Kennebunkport. His studio at 61 Pleasant Street in Portland is open by appointment: 207-773-5430.