

A close-up portrait of Stuart Wallace, a man with a well-groomed reddish-brown beard and light-colored eyes. He is wearing a grey blazer over a dark shirt. He is leaning against a thick, light-colored rope that runs vertically down the left side of the frame. His right hand is resting on the rope, with his fingers slightly curled. The background is dark and out of focus.

STUART WALLACE

CURIOUS PIECES FROM "TRASH"

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Stay-at-home dad uses fire to create art

By Liv Hadden Photos by Rudy Ximenez

Stuart Wallace is no ordinary father. Even as he gently guides his one-year-old daughter around the house, it's easy to see how his unassuming and self-proclaimed title of "just a stay-at-home-dad" betrays the truth: He's about as far from *just* anything as someone can be.

Why? When he's not taking care of his two little girls or carrying out his duties as president and curator for the Georgetown Art Center, Stuart is using a flamethrower to create pieces for his art series, *Future Artifacts of Sprawl and Sting*. For hundreds of years, Japanese people have used the flame-throwing technique known as *shou sugi ban* to preserve wood from weather and bugs. But although Stuart spent seven years living in

Asia and Turkey, he didn't get the idea to try *shou sugi ban* until he was stateside, exploring woodworking as part of his art.

"You can gently kiss [the wood with fire] and still see some of the grain," Stuart explains. "Or you can burn it all the way and get that alligator-skin crackle. You can add dyes to get colors, like red or green." Watching him tenderly hold his daughter in one moment, then wield a giant flame stick in another provides perfect imagery for the

contrasts he achieves in his work. Each piece of art is at once beautiful and ominous. "I really like for my art to have a hyper-local feel," Stuart

says. "Ball moss and wasps are things you can see every day here going on a hike. But when I show this to my friends in Hong Kong, they don't have ball moss, so it's really interesting to them."

Despite the positive feedback he's gotten, Stuart knows people sometimes need to develop a taste for his vision. "My work doesn't have broad appeal," Stuart says, standing in front of a close-up photo he's taken of a wasp's head, framed with wood he burnt and painted gold.

The series features other photos, most of which show a young woman against a stark white background.

THE HEAT

The focus of each image relates to wasps, whether it's a part of the nest or a wasp itself. Different parts of the woman's body act as a prop. In one stunning piece, the woman's face is surrounded by gold wasps' nests. The smoothness of her youthful skin contrasts with the uneven, craggy nests to suggest danger, yet the

palette, in tandem with her wistful look, prompts the question, "What is she thinking?" The angle and perspective of each image leave the

distinct impression that the man behind the lens sees things that not all viewers do.

"I started to make art as an outlet. It felt really good to do something with my hands," Stuart says. "My art's progressed, though I don't have any formal training. I've learned through doing it." The art that comprises Future Artifacts of Sprawl and Sting speaks to this progression, resulting in a combination of burnt wood and assemblage (art that consists

of three-dimensional elements projecting out of or from a material).

Stuart visited many abandoned places while living abroad, and it's clear in his work that those visits inspired the post-apocalyptic theme of his collection. Though each piece stands on its own, there's an undeniable connection among them as well. Through color, perspective, technique, and the story Stuart tells, there's no shortage of things for viewers to be curious about. ►





For example, consider the combination of materials used in several of his assemblage pieces: burnt wood, ball moss, wasps' nests, rope, and the wasps themselves. Outside the context of the assemblage, the first word that might to mind when a viewers sees these things separately is trash. But none of it is trash to Stuart. Instead, he treats each item carefully, always with the intention that each element is crucial to the whole. Planks of cedar are burnt until they blister to a jet black. Ball moss is spray-painted red and mounted on the newly-finished wood. A wasp is painted gold and carefully placed off-center in the ball moss. Small pieces of wasp nest or rope are added to finish the piece.

Stuart's unique vision has transformed this "trash" into a story—into something curious, peculiar, beautiful, and slightly dangerous. Stuart has turned discarded, disparate things into something museum-worthy.



"I don't like to tell everything. I want it to be left up to the imagination," Stuart says of his upcoming exhibit at the Georgetown Public Library (January 28th to March 1st), where he'll debut the new collection. Stuart invites viewers to imagine it's the year 2052, seven

years after a catastrophic event has happened, and we've come upon these artifacts of sting and sprawl on an abandoned farm in Georgetown. "I want people to think about the choices that we make today. Is that going to bring on a post-apocalyptic event for humanity? And at the ►

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same time, I want people to see beauty in the very small, like the ball moss, and in the foreign. With the wasp nests, that brings up the idea of how we take care of our homes. I want people to come up with their own inklings." From there, it's up to viewers to not only ask their own questions but answer them.

Of his artistic concept, Stuart says, "I really like the idea of destruction making things beautiful. I see some parallels between that and what's happening in the world right now." Again, the contrast in both his personal and artistic life is mirrored perfectly by the concepts in his art. Stuart is right when he says that his art doesn't have mass appeal, but that's part of what makes it work. It's designed to encourage deep thought and, inevitably, conversation. It's designed to provoke.

Balancing his roles as dad, husband, and the new president of the Georgetown Art Center while putting his show together hasn't been easy. "I'd like to develop my career here a lot faster, but I'm wearing so many hats right now," Stuart says. "Out of necessity, my art comes last right now." But Stuart is persistent and confident because, he says, "I have a really clear vision of where I'm at and what I'm doing."

Stuart's personal culture shapes that vision as well. "My mother is English, and my father was Canadian, so I've always felt foreign



living in Texas," he explains. His sense of not quite fitting in translates to his art. "Take the ball moss," he says. "It's an epiphyte that grows on tree parts that have too much shade. They're foreign-looking things with visual interest, and I kind of feel like that. Texas is like the tree, and I'm the weird ball moss in its shadow."

Yet his art, with its noticeable contrasts and eye-catching golds, is destined to be in the spotlight. No doubt, Georgetown will look back with pride that Stuart Wallace's first exhibit took place in our public library and that, for a time at least, he called this place home. ■

Visit library.georgetown.org/events/stuart-wallace/ for more info about Stuart's exhibition at GPL. View a short video of Stuart at work at stuartwallaceart.com.

