



A 'Surfer's Guide to the Universe': How a wooden surfboard can improve our cosmic relationships

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Artists Imogene Drummond and Rich Blundell collaborated on the surfboard project. – Photo courtesy Pamela Benjamin.

Rich Blundell is a big thinker who has synthesized his views on the human relationship to our universe into a developing multimedia presentation named “The Surfer’s Guide to the Universe.”

Currently a doctoral candidate on the cosmic narrative at Macquarie University in New South Wales, Mr. Blundell, 49, is a Duxbury native and a continuous Island visitor who is using woodcrafting to seed money for his “Surfer’s Guide” project, designed to promote awareness of our cosmic relationships.

The artist has been busy working on a handmade wooden surfboard sculpture to support his cause. Titled “Pelagic Pulses,” the surfboard features an original painting by Imogene Drummond on one side, and a smooth, perfectly polished wooden finish on the other.

The board was built primarily out of sustainably grown and harvested wood, glass, and adhesives. There are no metal or plastic fasteners of any type. The internal “fishbone” framework, painted panel, and rails are made from marine-grade sapele and meranti plywoods. The planks and fin alternate between western red cedar, Atlantic white cedar, and Asian paulownia, protected by 10 coats of mineral spirits and pure tung oil.

According to his website, the sculpture “is the culmination of over two decades of wooden surfboard design, ride, creation, and evolution, now in collaboration with striking artistic expressions in paint. While the warm wood tones and gentle curves arching across one side invoke a sense of control and refinement, the abstract splashes of color on the other side provoke feelings commensurate with the exuberant complexity of the cosmos.”

The surfboard is currently on display through July 31 at the Workshop art gallery on Beach Road in Vineyard Haven, between the Times office and Seaworthy Gallery. Visitors to the Workshop or to his website, treetosea.org , are invited to participate in an online auction for the surfboard through the end of the month.

Mr. Blundell completed the board in the workspace of the Gannon and Benjamin boatyard, which is, you guessed it, conveniently located behind the Times and the Workshop. He has calculated that he he'll need \$23,000 to do the groundwork for the “Surfer’s Guide” components: a book, a documentary film, a lecture series, and website content.

So will the board raise \$23K? “I have no idea,” he laughed last week during an interview at The Times office. Nor has he calculated its value. “There are certainly hundreds of hours in it, not including the number of boards that did not make the cut, so to speak,” he said.

Mr. Blundell shows up as an energetic, regular guy who happens to be very, very intelligent, and as a man who has used far-flung and pragmatic life experiences in nature to hone his views.

The surfboard-making process is an example. “I developed a process I call ‘strip and feather,’ which allows me to create a seamless bond between the curved pieces of wood. Wood has to be teased and cajoled into taking the shape you require,” he said. Sounds like a cosmic relationship. Then there’s the relationship of wood to water. “The necessary characteristic of a surfboard is that it will surf well.

This one does,” he said. Pragmatic.



Rich Blundell's handmade wooden

Mr. Blundell's ultimate goal is to make the world, our cosmos, a better place. "We don't spend a lot of time contemplating our relationship with the biosphere, appreciating and reciprocating with it. The degradation of the biosphere is related to that lack of understanding. That's what I'm after, a frame of reference for living in our cosmos," said Mr. Blundell.

currently on display at the Workshop in Vineyard Haven with painting by Imogene Drummond. - Photo by Sophie Petkus

"We are a young country, a young species. We haven't come full circle to understanding who we are and where we're from," he said. "Where the cosmic story comes in is that it provides a framework for living, beyond our own personal problems or the economy or political circumstances."

For Mr. Blundell, that first transformative awareness came almost 25 years ago off Stellwagen Bank, as a commercial fisherman. "We had landed an 800-pound tuna, and everyone was high-fiving and congratulating me. It was about the money we would make.

"But something happened when I looked at this superbly designed, magnificent creature. As I watched the light go out of his eyes, I knew my initial reaction was wrong. There was no acknowledgment of relationship or gratitude for this creature. Now don't get me wrong. I like fish. I eat fish," he said.

That transformative moment led Mr. Blundell to take his geology/environmental science degree from Northeastern University on a continuing saga of life experiences in nature. "It was all for the life experiences – academics call it 'phenomenology,'" he said. And of those he has many, including three years sailing with the Sea Education Association out of Woods Hole, starting a company to run sealife study expeditions in the Caribbean, organizing campout bush safaris for students on Kenyan tribal lands, and eventually following a mentor to Macquarie University to pursue his imminent doctorate.

This month, the big thinker and pragmatist is taking another step toward his goal – to help our species play well with the others in our cosmos.

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