

Sanding Smooth

Shannon Wardell

The sculpture is about 15 hours away from being perfectly finished. Whether it is perfect or not is a different question entirely, one best left to others to decide. But it will be as perfectly finished as I am capable of, it being a single massive block of cherry ca. 45 cm at its base from which rises up the neck and head of a female figure. The “skin” of the figure has been given a facial with 60, 80, 100 grit sandpaper; now on 120, I am having a Pygmalion moment.

Some figures are best with a rough-hewn surface. However, this cherry is begging for a fine finish that will allow its gorgeous red-brown grain to be seen in its full flowing glory. At this point, all of the cut marks have been removed to reveal a powdery, baby-cheek smoothness that invites touching. The scratch marks from the sandpaper’s grit are too subtle to be discerned with my eyes, yet they can be felt. In fact, the best way of knowing that a certain grit is finished is to gently rub the surface with my fingers to feel for any inconsistent patches where coarser marks from the previous grit have not been thoroughly sanded out. Any missed marks will turn out glaringly obvious later after finer grits of sandpaper. So I end up touching all of the skin areas with my fingers quite often, searching for missed marks that later would look like outrageous blemishes. Were someone to be watching me, they might well think that I looked like a lover caressing the face of my beloved. But that is not what the Pygmalion moment is about.

I love sanding curves in wood. The complex, laborious stages of inception, negotiation, planning, blocking, chain-sawing, chiseling, rasping and rough smoothing have been completed. The activity of sanding is repetitive, low-energy, undemanding intellectually and thoroughly meditative. While my consciousness unites with the work and process, my body is engaged and occupied with a relatively simple task that can easily be maintained for hours. Meanwhile, my thoughts can fly into the stratosphere on their own without any worry that I will hurt myself using sharp tools. They gaze down upon this rich and utterly bizarre human world of timelessly temporal obsessions, mythological truths, cat videos and the dilemma of recognizing simplicity within the complex world that surrounds us.

The story of Pygmalion has become iconic if not archetypal. A sculptor (or king, according to some), finding his contemporary society to be disappointingly superficial, unsustainably materialistic and boringly trivial, retreats into the fruitful, productive world of his studio to devote himself to making a sculpture that visibly incarnates his ideal of an inspiring, beautiful female partner whose outer surface conveys an inner perfection of *sophrosyne*, that particular archaic virtue which blends soundness of mind, moderation in desires, discretion and temperance. During the arduous process of making, Pygmalion falls hopelessly in love with the sculpture and what it embodies. He begins to treat the sculpture as though she were his beloved: dressing her, pampering her (his?) every vicarious whim, even praying to Aphrodite that he might find a living woman in the likeness of his sculpture. For whatever reason, the goddess grants his wish; his sculpture metamorphoses into a living human being.

While a literal interpretation of this narrative is slapstick comedy (a beta-version robot with divine software?), the idea of such a creation has inspired thousands of paintings, novels, plays, operas, TV shows, movies, podcasts, if not the idea of animation in itself. However, on a metalevel of personal reflection, this myth can speak to each and every human individual who has ever made something that seems to take on a life of its own in some way: a birdhouse, a delicious dinner for guests or a start-up enterprise. Entrepreneurs, inventors, makers, industrialists, CEOs, chefs and children in the act of drawing may tap this archaic theme more than others, yet the experience is shared by every human individual. We all know what it feels like to make something that moves us more than anything else in the world – if only for a while. We feel in our hearts when a beautiful, if intangible idea becomes visible, tactile and alive.

As I hold the sandpaper in my fingers and touch it to the left cheek of this cherrywood face, the left eyelid seems to flinch ever so slightly. This is my Pygmalion moment. Of course I can intellectually convince myself that I am merely seeing things – it is a block of wood, after all – yet my stratospheric thoughts tell me otherwise. I continue sanding as they banter about all kinds of wacko explanations for this visceral phenomenon, including one plausible suggestion which maintains that the flinching is simply a prod of my imagination to encourage me to look more closely at the transformation of an idea into reality. Any person may well be able to take an idea and fashion it into a tangible work, yet without an audience, this work will at some point become irrelevant, forgotten, neglected, sold off, dismembered, renewed into something else.

Pygmalion's original sculpture does not exist in any museum. No Art History scholar claims to know what it actually looked like or what happened to it. Yet this idea and story remains utterly present in our western psyche and international culture, especially when we recognize human robotic innovation as being a contemporary manifestation of this archaic theme.

We can also interpret the sculpture in the story as a figurative symbol, a vision of some external thing that is missing in the surrounding world, a work that appeals to a very high standard of aesthetic to which one strives, all the while hoping to meet other like-minded individuals who are also craving such a physical embodiment of that worthy vision. To realize such a vision is a challenging goal. Without the divine intervention of one as powerful as Aphrodite, few could ever hope to achieve such a dream, unless we connect with those like-minded individuals.

Did Pygmalion want merely to find a partner who embodied the ideals of beauty which he carved into his sculpture? Or did he also want to inspire other like-minded people who also at times felt frustrated by a contemporary philistine society with a worthy vision that they could also respect and adore? Was this inspiring-vision-made-incarnate the idea that Aphrodite allowed to morph into living entity?

I cut off another strip of 440 grit paper, fold it to better fit above the right eyelid. A few hours more and my ministrations are finished here. Again I notice a slight flinching. But I am glad that she will not wake up. With only a neck and head attached to a block of cherry stump, we could never go hiking through the larches.



Shannon Wardell

Born in New York City, he currently is Resident Artist and educator at Graz International Bilingual School in Austria. Since 1994, he has exhibited artwork and performed lyric narratives in Australia, Europe and the USA.