

Diederick Kraaijeveld plans to purchase an abandoned bank building in Alabama and turn it into a gallery. "I will use wood from the building," he says, "and turn it into a coin and a bank note for an upcoming Money Show."

Reclaiming the Past

DUTCH ARTIST HAS CRAFTED IMAGES OF CARS AND SNEAKERS FROM OLD WOOD. NOW, HE'S SHOOTING TO RECREATE COINS AND BANK NOTES

By Edward Kiersh

SCAVENGING FOR WOOD in abandoned or ruined buildings doesn't sound very glamorous, let alone artistic.

But for Diederick Kraaijeveld, a Dutch newspaper and television journalist turned photorealistic artist who's exhibited all over the world, recycling aged wood with a boundless array of colors and patinas is "reclaiming the past, giving it new life."

His most celebrated time capsules honor America's Golden Age of mid-20th century Pontiacs, Oldsmobiles and Mustangs. Meticulously assembled from his vast collection of colorful wooden planks, these mosaics — whether they are cars, portraits or Converse high tops — take weeks to complete, as each one is painstakingly hand-sawed and glued piece by piece.

Foraging for wood in Detroit and on North Sea or Indian Ocean beaches, then trying to tell "specific, authentic and documented stories" through his trial-and-error work can be grueling. But converting flotsam into art has paid off handsomely for his followers. It's also given him lots of "satisfying magical moments."

"I love old wood, how it survives time and makes me a historian," Kraaijeveld says while working in his studio near Amsterdam. "Like a journalist, I'm again using small bits to create a narrative. I never use fresh paint, just wood I have salvaged from all over the world."

Though busy finishing a Union Jack that's slated for the Plus One Gallery in London, Kraaijeveld interrupted his work to answer questions about his distinct art, which numismatists and philatelists might find interesting.



How did this love affair with ruins begin, and isn't it a bit melancholic?

As a young boy I was always searching for stuff that washed up on beaches, particularly parts of boats. I fantasized about what exotic place they came from. In Holland, there is an expression for people who comb through garbage. "Morning stars." It's like looking for that wonderful morning star, so scavenging is not a sad pursuit. Finding relics, parts of buildings with a history eventually leads to a rebirth. That gives me and people pleasure.

You collect already colored wood. Wouldn't your work be viewed as more original if you painted the wood yourself?

No. I love the layer upon layer of painted pieces. This uniquely breathes history, stories, a past I don't always know. That makes my work mysterious and intriguing. I once created a very specific green Porsche someone was racing. I used over 20 different green shades to get the right green. He loved it and I didn't use a drop of green paint. To him, it was art.

What do you say to people who regard your work as merely a collectible, not true original art?

When I show my portraits, there are tears and there is emotion. So I am convinced that what I do is true art. But it is collectible art, for I feel the definition of art is whether it touches someone emotionally.



Kraaijeveld has turned old pieces of wood into photorealistic images of Kennedy half dollars, \$100 bills, stamps and Converse sneakers.

Could you define photorealistic painting?

It paints the object in an even more realistic way than reality. I sort of paint with already painted pieces of wood. My big hero is American painter Chuck Close, who does huge photorealistic portraits.

Some observers have described you as a "recycling genius." What's your reaction to this?

It is amazing to see what people throw away. I love the fact that I can re-use part of that garbage and turn it into desirable objects.

Describe the mosaic element of your work.

It is too simplistic to say I just do mosaics. I want to create very realistic pieces/images. When you are standing close to one of my pieces, it is a "mess." But when you step back, all the "messy" pieces flow into a realistic image like a photo.

What is the most difficult aspect of turning "messes" into art?

To give my pieces a soul. Even a can of Coca-Cola or a car has a soul. An object just can't be done in wood. It has to breathe, to speak to people.

Has this "speaking to people" ever proven impossible?

I still want to do a portrait of my wife Aulia, but I haven't been able to photograph her in such a way that would be a good reference point. I think she would be great in wood.

What did you think of your Detroit adventure, evading police and gangs?

It's a very interesting city. I sometimes create Converse sneakers, and I specifically went looking for wooden floors of basketball courts. We were trespassing but I felt the risk was worth it. We were in a school and three patrol cars showed up. The officers didn't go into the building. Perhaps it was too dangerous. I hid in the basement for a few hours. I usually bring a crowbar with me to get wood pieces. That's considered a burglary tool, and I would have been arrested for sure.

Any other great adventures?

Looking for painted wood on the beach of Mombasa, Kenya, was really fun. A lot of pieces from sailing boats wash up over there and their colors are so bright!

What's your next major project?

I am going to buy an abandoned bank building in Seale, Alabama, and turn it into a gallery. I will use wood from the building and turn it into a coin and a bank note for an upcoming "Money Show." I'm also going to build a raft out of found materials and float down the Chattahoochee River to the Gulf of Mexico. The raft will be a floating gallery.