

# Fritz Dietel / 25 Years



LIST GALLERY SWARTHMORE COLLEGE



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# Fritz Dietel: Taking Form

By **Andrea Packard**, List Gallery Director

The List Gallery is pleased to host *Fritz Dietel: 25 Years*, a selection of key sculptures that demonstrate the artist’s evolving vision and mastery of craft. Expressing his lifelong fascination with organic forms such as seeds, shells, vines, and carapaces, as well as handcrafted tools, canoes, and containers, Dietel reinvents his sources of inspiration, selecting materials, textures, and proportions that make them appear both animated and larger-than-life. Embracing unexpected juxtapositions, he harmonizes varied materials, including steam-bent wood, handmade papers that are variously molded and layered, copper wire, pigmented epoxy, and lighting elements. Whether they are hung from the ceiling, mounted on the wall, or standing free, Dietel’s sculptures spark the imagination, reawaken our senses, and call attention to nature’s dynamism.

Born in 1960 in Northampton, Massachusetts, Dietel grew up in Troy, New York, where his father was principal of the Emma Willard School. From the age of 10, Dietel lived on a 48-acre farm in Connecticut, where he spent free time exploring the woods and hiking in the nearby Adirondacks. Dietel’s upbringing and subsequent artistic career have sustained family traditions that prize technical innovation, creative problem-solving, and an appreciation for beauty in nature. Dietel’s maternal grandfather, Edmund Lyon (1855–1920), was an inventor whose numerous patents include a locomotive turntable. Lyon also authored a phonetics manual for the deaf and designed a sign language transcription device for Hellen Keller. Dietel’s paternal grandmother, Zillah Dietel, juried flower competitions and was highly regarded for her mastery of both interior design and embroidery.

While his father worked as an educator and his mother began raising sheep, Dietel grew up participating in 4-H projects and taking care of capons, goats, and prize cows. Through his farm work and love of fly fishing, he developed an affinity for the varied textures and life cycles of plants. He closely observed processes of growth and decay and developed an appreciation for tools used in agriculture and fishing such as netting, basketry, and the ribbing on canoes. He also learned to operate and maintain farm machinery and baled 20 tons of hay each spring. In doing so, he developed an ability to learn experimentally and solve unexpected problems. His versatility and passion for self-directed learning have sustained his evolving career for more than three decades.

Dietel’s early interests in agriculture and forestry began to inform his artistic pursuits after he enrolled at The Wooster School in Danbury, Connecticut, which awarded credit for classes taken at the Wooster Community Art Center. As a result, Dietel studied side-by-side with adults and took diverse classes, including figure modeling and drawing, ceramic slab building, bronze casting, welding, and art history. Encouraged by the director of the art center to apply to art schools, Dietel chose to attend the Philadelphia College of Art (now The University of the Arts). There, he studied with Thomas Stearns, a noted glass artist who emphasized sensitivity to the intrinsic character of materials. He

*Champignon*, 2006  
Pine, cedar,  
pigmented epoxy  
73 x 42 x 42 inches

also studied slab building with William Daley, one of America's foremost sculptors working in clay, and pursued broad-based studies, gaining familiarity with different types of welding, stone work, and concrete forms.

In 1985, a year after graduation, Dietel purchased a studio building in Pennsport, an area of Philadelphia that was home to numerous Mummers' clubs. The neighborhood was the scene of frequent street fights, but his studio provided 3,000 square feet of space in which to begin assembling a mature body of work. Because zoning regulations prohibited open flames and he started out with little more than a table saw and other basic tools, he built upon his experience as a carpenter for a renovations firm and worked primarily with wood. He also made a series of curvilinear sculptures constructed with large sheets of paper abraded with graphite, laying the ground work for future experiments with handmade paper.

Early works such as *Trex* (1987) emphasize hard-edged interlocking geometric forms and reflect Dietel's admiration for artists such as Richard Deacon. Painted with smooth and brightly colored applications of semi-gloss paint or stain, his highly polished wood surfaces model a high level of craft and finish that echoes the language of industrial design more than the natural world.

Other early works reflect his affinities for nature and admiration for varied artists including Martin Puryear and Kiki Smith. Yet even works with organic themes, such as *Seed* (1992), emphasize a closed, polished, and symmetrical form. Through casting the work in bronze, which is associated with traditions of fine art, elegance, and permanence, Dietel conveys technological and conceptual ideals more than the irregularity, fragility, and mutability of seeds.

In contrast, *Current* (1992), Dietel's 10-foot-tall wooden construction, demonstrates the more refined, polished, and streamlined aspects of his early aesthetic, while also revealing his burgeoning gift for dynamic and interactive forms that invite us to move in space. Recalling the currents of a river or grasses swaying underwater, this open-formed and curvilinear work evokes patterns that appear both changing and timeless.

Dietel's List Gallery exhibition represents a small sampling of his creative output—approximately twenty sculptures from a career spanning more than three decades—but it conveys the variety of his aesthetic and his readiness to embrace new mediums. Although his sculptures have generally become more attenuated, rough-hewn, and irregular over time, he returns periodically to forms that are more self-contained, polished, and seemingly essential. Like *Seed*, his earliest piece in the show, his most recent work, *Sentinel* (2017), explores notions of perfection and symmetry while reveling in the innovation embodied in technological design.

Dietel's many mid-career works featured in this survey reflect his ongoing appreciation for irregularity in nature and large-scale forms that confront us with an animistic presence. Works such as *Purple Hive* and *Tendrils* (both 2003) suggest embryonic casings or shells. He constructed these works by cutting strips of cedar on the band saw, shaping them into pieces with a utility knife, and adhering them with pigmented epoxy. The resulting forms call attention to contrasts between interior and



*Current*, 1993  
Oak, mixed-media  
120 x 24 x 60 inches

exterior, the visible and invisible. Their highly textured surfaces recall a variety of natural patterns including those found in fur, river currents, and bark.

The green stems of *Thistle* (2004) and *Tufts* (2006) introduce elements of descriptive color, but Dietel's minimal palette most often defers to the evocative qualities of his forms, materials, juxtapositions, and process. Using a stitch-and-glue method often associated with boat building to create the stalks for each work, he steamed and reassembled thin strips of oak, bound them with wire into a vine-like shape, and dried them over a temporary support. By retaining the wire ties used to hold the strips in place during drying, Dietel draws attention to the aesthetics of craft while evoking natural forms such as the growth nodes on bamboo.



*Tatters*, 2004  
Oak, cypress, mixed-media  
87 x 20 x 20 inches



*Tufts*, *Thistle*, and similar works also capture our attention through their dramatically textured surfaces. Dietel combines small spiky wood chips, adhering them with dense epoxy; their forms repeat, shift, and coalesce to create larger ones, implying a capacity to increase indefinitely.

Through its title as well as its form, *Tatters* (2004) especially calls attention to its process of construction and, conversely, its capacity for decomposition. Again, drawing on boat building techniques, Dietel arranged thin slats of steam-bent oak into parallel lines, twisted them into a loose spiral, adhered them with epoxy, and sealed them with varnish, which he then sanded to reveal wood grain and convey weathering. The dynamic seven-foot-long form appears to simultaneously ravel and unravel, its open form and frayed ends dramatizing the ephemerality of both nature and craftwork.

Whereas *Tatters* suggests entropy, the bud-like form of *Chalice* (2008) places greater emphasis on the notion of generative potential. Its symmetrical form appears just about to open and transform into to something new. Although its title makes one think of an open vessel or container, its content, the potential blossom, is hidden, leaving us to imagine its character.

*Champignon* (2006), Dietel's six-foot-long mushroom-like form, is at once formidable in scale yet fragile and airy. Its surface is composed of pine and cedar chips adhered with pigmented epoxy and burnished to a nearly translucent thinness. By incorporating many chinks and cracks into this latticework, Dietel calls attention to tenuousness in nature and the beauty of light where it penetrates the form.

In 2006, after appreciating the delicacy of *Champignon* and other works exhibited at the Schmidt Dean Gallery in Philadelphia, Susan Gosin, co-founder of Dieu Donn  Papermill, in New York, encouraged Dietel to research papermaking techniques that would facilitate his growing interest in organic irregularity and translucency. After working primarily in wood for two decades, Dietel was ready for such a change and he accepted her offer to take an intensive course in papermaking at Dieu Donn . He was drawn to the lightness, permeability, and strength of paper and found it a more forgiving and malleable medium. Further energized and supported by a 2007 Pew Fellowship in the Arts, he set up a papermaking station in his studio where he continues to create large sheets of abaca and sprays paper pulp over constructed forms.

Dietel has created numerous hybrid works that seem to demonstrate Albert LeCoff's observation that "wood is very thick paper and paper is very thin wood." Constructed of parallel slats of Spanish cedar, *Casing* (2009) recalls the husk-like forms of earlier works such as *Tendrils*, *Orange Hive*, and *Purple Hive*. But whereas he covered such previous sculptures with a spiky layer of wood chips, Dietel sprayed the exterior of *Casing* with premium abaca paper pulp, a material that evokes the elasticity of wasps' nests, birch bark, and other organic materials.

Dietel went on to construct subsequent works, such as *Matrix*, *Hull*, and *Twisted* (2015), from hand-made paper. Rolling abaca into strips and draping them over supports carved from foam, he created hollow interiors that recall nests, coral, and hives. *Hull* and *Twisted* were additionally coated with sprayed pulp, which produces a dripped residue. Together, the works call attention to the beauty of forms that are malleable and lightweight but surprisingly strong.

Similarly, works such as *Lumen V* (2014) were created by overlaying plastic supports with numerous layers of hand-formed paper and coats of methylcellulose; when dry, Dietel removes the temporary supports to reveal a hollow interior. Dietel textures his surfaces through rolling paper into long slender strips and arranging them in sinuous lines across the surface. He embraces the unexpected buckling, shrinking, and tears caused by the drying process. Such sculptures reflect tremendous labor and deliberation, yet celebrate the consequences of entropy and chance.

Fascinated by the way sculptures as diverse as *Champignon*, *Matrix*, or *Lumen V* call attention to effects of natural light, Dietel became interested in the possibilities of incorporating electrical lighting elements into his sculptures. He experiments with LED components as the technology advances and incorporated them into several new works, including *Sentinel*. Although over his career he has explored a more organically expressive and open-ended aesthetic, works such as *Sentinel* reflect his continuing interest in technology, design, and functionality.

Fritz Dietel is one of those rare artists who models an authentic and evolving discipline. As he tacks back and forth between different inspirations, methods, and aesthetics, he invites us on a journey that embodies engagement, hybridity, and openness to change. Harmonizing the familiar with the unexpected, Dietel connects us more closely to the transformative forces in nature and art.



*Seed*, 1992  
Bronze  
10 x 4 x 4 inches



*Purple Hive*, 2003  
Cedar, pigmented epoxy  
43 x 12 x 12 inches



*Tendril*, 2003  
Cedar, pigmented epoxy  
71 x 10 x 10 inches



*Casing*, 2009  
Abaca paper, copper  
Spanish cedar  
60 x 15 x 15 inches





*Flicker*, 2006  
 Apple wood,  
 pigmented epoxy  
 57 x 13 x 14 inches



*Thistle*, 2004  
 Oak, maple,  
 pigmented epoxy  
 60 x 24 x 24 inches





*Chalice*, 2008  
 Abaca, mahogany,  
 pigmented epoxy  
 53 x 22 x 22 inches



*Orange Hive*, 2003  
 Cedar, pigmented epoxy  
 36 x 13 x 13 inches



*Lumen V*, 2014  
Abaca paper  
100 x 26 x 26 inches



*Flame*, 2016  
Cypress, redwood,  
pigmented epoxy, aniline  
dyes, 112 x 28 x 28 inches





*Matrix, Hull, Twisted*, 2015  
Abaca paper, foam  
89 x 36 x 36 inches



*Sentinel*, 2017  
Douglas fir, epoxy,  
LED lights  
109 x 11 x 11 inches



*Cluster*, 2014, abaca paper, pigment, wood, copper, 150 x 114 x 120 inches



# Biography

**Born** 1960, Northampton, Mass

**Education**

1984 BFA Sculpture, University of the Arts, Philadelphia, PA

**Selected Individual Exhibitions**

- 2017 List Gallery, Swarthmore College
- 2015 315 Gallery, New York, NY
- 2011 Schmidt Dean Gallery, Philadelphia, PA
- 2006 Schmidt Dean Gallery, Philadelphia, PA
- 2003 Schmidt Dean Gallery, Philadelphia, PA
- 2002 Milton Hershey School Art Museum, Hershey, PA
- 2000 Schmidt Dean Gallery, Philadelphia, PA
- 1998 Schmidt Dean Gallery, Philadelphia, PA
- 1995 University of the Arts, Philadelphia, PA
- 1992 Jessica Berwind Gallery, Philadelphia, PA

**Awards**

- 2017 Donald J. Gordon Visiting Artist and Lecturer, Swarthmore College
- 2007 Pew Fellowship in the Arts
- 1990 Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, Fellowship in Visual Arts

**Installations and Commissions**

- The Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts, Philadelphia, PA
- Blank, Rome, Comisky, and McCauley, Philadelphia, PA
- Keyhole*, Milton Hershey School, Hershey, PA
- 1991 Sculpture Series*, Abington Art Center Sculpture Garden, Abington, PA
- Three Rivers Arts Festival*, Pittsburgh, PA
- Altered Sites, Sculpture Outdoors*, Horticulture Center, Philadelphia, PA
- Cindy and Michael Veloric, Gladwyne, PA

**Selected Group Exhibitions**

- 2015 *On / Of / About / Paper*, DM Contemporary, New York City
- 2014 *Drawing on Nature*, Schmidt Dean Gallery, Philadelphia, PA
- 2011 *Science & Art, Buds, Blooms & Berries*, The Everhart Museum of Natural History, Scranton, PA
- 2011 *C3: Create. Connect. Collect*, Main Line Art Center, Haverford, PA
- 2011 *Art & Work*, Coventry Corporate Center, Fort Washington, PA
- 2009 *Paper Works!*, Art in City Hall, Philadelphia, PA
- 2009 Perelman Medical Center for Advanced Medicine, Philadelphia, PA
- 2005 *Lamentations*, The Redhouse, Syracuse, NY
- 2001 *Un / Natural*, Main Line Art Center, Haverford, PA
- 2001 Portland Museum of Art Biennial, Portland Museum of Art, Portland, ME
- 1999 The Sculpture Guild, Grounds for Sculpture, Hamilton, NJ
- 1998 Portland Museum of Art Biennial, Portland Museum of Art, Portland, ME
- 1998 *20X12: A Generation of Challenge Artist*, Samuel Fleisher Art Memorial, Philadelphia, PA
- 1996 *Biennial 96*, Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington, DE
- 1993 *Contemporary Sculpture Directions*, Payne Gallery, Moravian College, Bethlehem, PA
- 1993 *Fleisher Challenge Exhibition*, Samuel Fleisher Art Memorial, Philadelphia, PA

**Selected Private and Public Collections**

- American Bank, M.B.N.A., Newark, DE
- Ted & Barbara Aronson, Gladwyn, PA
- Ballard, Spahr, Andrews, and Ingersoll, Philadelphia, PA
- Mr. Graham Berwind, Philadelphia, PA
- Blank, Rome, Comisky, and McCauley, Philadelphia, PA
- Camden County College, Blackwood, NJ
- Coventry, Fort Washington, PA
- Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington, DE
- The Vanguard Group, Valley Forge, PA
- Johnson and Johnson Company, New Brunswick, NJ
- Mehri & Skalet PLLC, Washington, D.C.
- Perelman Medical Center for Advanced Medicine, Philadelphia, PA
- Wooster School, Danbury, CT

# Acknowledgements

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**Photography**

Joe Painter

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*Since 1991, The List Gallery, Swarthmore College, has mounted exhibitions of both established artists and emerging talents. For more information, please visit: <http://www.swarthmore.edu/list-gallery>*

**Frontispiece**

Detail of *Lumen V*, 2014 (page 16)

**Front cover**

*Tufts*, 2006, wood, pigmented epoxy, 72 x 56 x 33 inches

**Back Cover**

*Dome*, 2016, abaca paper, 22 x 22 x 16 inches





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