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AMERICAN WOODTURNER

Journal of the American Association of Woodturners

December 2024 vol 39, no 6 • woodturner.org

ALAN MEREDITH INTO THE FOLD

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THE ART OF WOOD 2024
AN ONLINE EXHIBITION
OF NEW ZEALAND
WOOD ART





ALAN MEREDITH INTO THE FOLD

Stephen O'Connell

Photos by Roland Paschhoff, except where noted.

Alan Meredith is an artist, an architect and designer, a furniture maker and woodturner, and a collaborator and craftsman—all of which raises the question, What is the sum of these parts?

Origin and influence

As if predetermined, Alan Meredith grew up at a place called The Oak, the location of his ancestral home and farmlands in County Laois, in the midlands of Ireland, an area historically rich in woodland and forestry, where the spectacle of native Irish trees is an everyday prevalence. It is here that his design studio and craft workshops are now based, located in an arrangement of old stone farm buildings and barns, that surround a yard, and which play host to a variety of purposes all connected to the studio practice, but also to the requirements of a working farm. From that perspective, it is a busy and dynamic site, a nexus of tradition and innovation, hard work and creativity, humankind and the animal world, a rich comingling of materials and machinery, demands and motivations.

Ireland is a small country, and within an even much smaller woodturning community, there are many points of crossover and influence, an intergenerational narrative that continues to produce some of the most exciting and innovative woodturners at work today. One of these crossovers occurred at Kilkenny College, where Alan attended secondary (high) school. Glenn Lucas, who will be familiar to many readers of *American Woodturner*, was also a student at Kilkenny College years earlier, and both benefited from the help of the same geography teacher who had an interest in supporting activities outside the curriculum. It was here that he was first introduced to woodturning.

Aged 15, Alan purchased his first lathe, a Scheppach DMS 900 which was central to an end-of-year woodworking project. After that, he and a friend had a small woodturning business making and selling bowls and other traditional turned items, for which they won a student enterprise

Architecture at work



A master's degree in architecture informs the aesthetic of Alan's furniture and turned work alike. Shown here, *DLR Red Jetty* (a large-scale modular wooden seating structure), 2017, by A2 Architects and Alan Meredith Studio in collaboration with DLR Architects Dept. and DLR Parks Dept.

Photo: Peter Cavanagh

award. Nothing too strange or startling, but a burgeoning familiarity and relationship with wood as a fundamental material was afoot.

Furniture making was central to these early years of working with wood, but, in parallel, Alan started to explore the further possibilities of woodturning through membership in the midlands chapter of the Irish Woodturners Guild (IWG). The IWG is the longest established organization of its kind internationally, and Alan notes the influence and encouragement of renowned woodturner and current IWG President, Emmet Kane. His final school year construction studies project was a spinning wheel made from plans in *The Woodworker*, which won the 2009 under-19 category later that year at the IWG seminar, for which the prize was a three-day workshop with Glenn Lucas.

Education continued with Alan graduating from University College Dublin in 2015 with a master's degree in architecture. Throughout his university years, he continued to develop his turning practice through the IWG and during this time was also introduced to another acclaimed and influential Irish woodturner, Roger Bennett. During this period, Alan

was able to lay some of the considerable groundwork that was required for him to begin to find his own distinct voice and style. Swift recognition of his early promise followed, with a litany of awards and prizes in 2016 and 2017, such as Winner of an RDS (Royal Dublin Society) Craft Award, Emerging Maker (Woodturning); Overall Winner and First Prize in the Artistic Category, IWG National Seminar; Design and Crafts Council of Ireland Future Maker of the Year; and Winner of the Tresor Discovery Award at the inaugural Tresor Contemporary Craft Fair in Basel, Switzerland.

Of architecture and woodturning

During these years, Alan's furniture making and woodturning practices operated in parallel with each other, one often informing the other in subtle ways. A further component of his evolving studio practice, which continues today, was the design and making of a number of public art commissions and outdoor installations, as well as architect-led design competitions, that involve work on a much larger scale. This is in keeping with his formal architectural training, but is noteworthy in terms of the variety of scales on which he works, ►



Residual Geometry V (table) and *Residual Geometry VII* (shelf), 2024, Fumed and sandblasted oak, Table: 79cm x 175cm x 45cm; shelf: 79cm x 160cm x 18cm

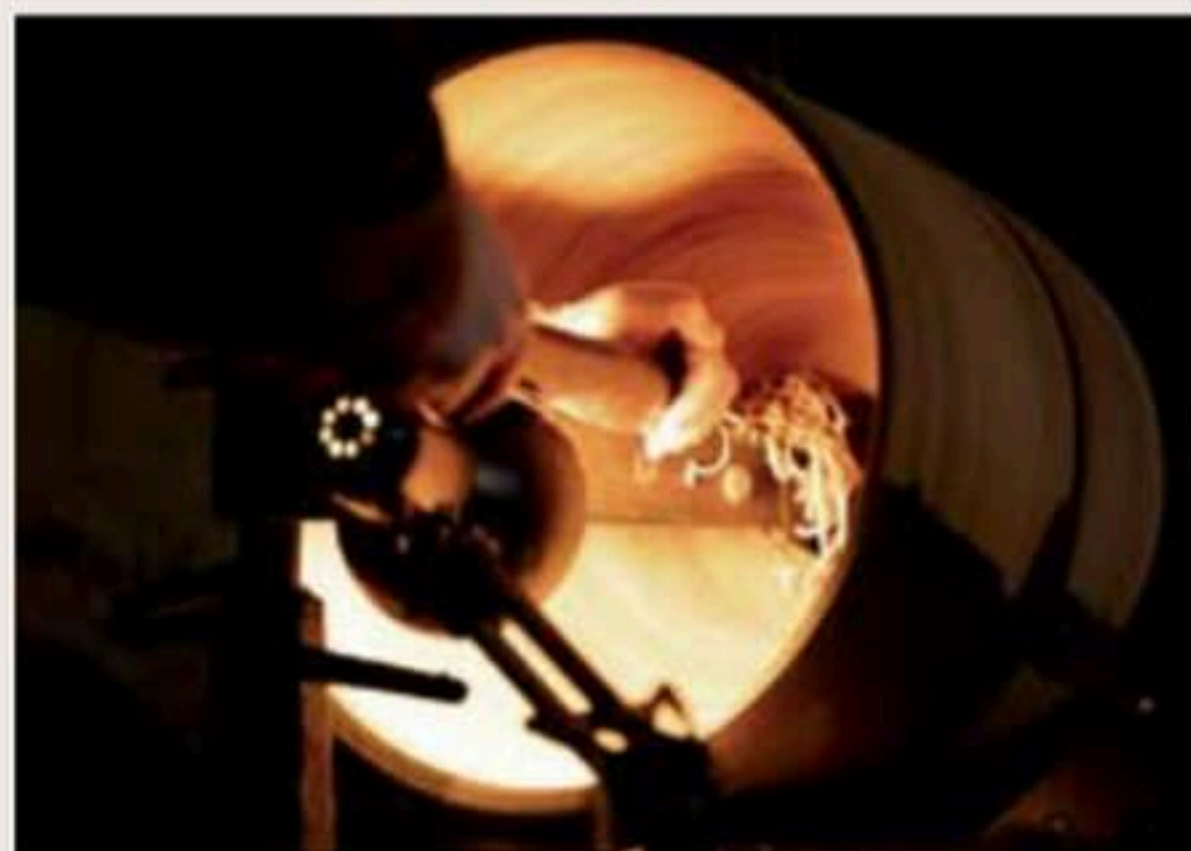
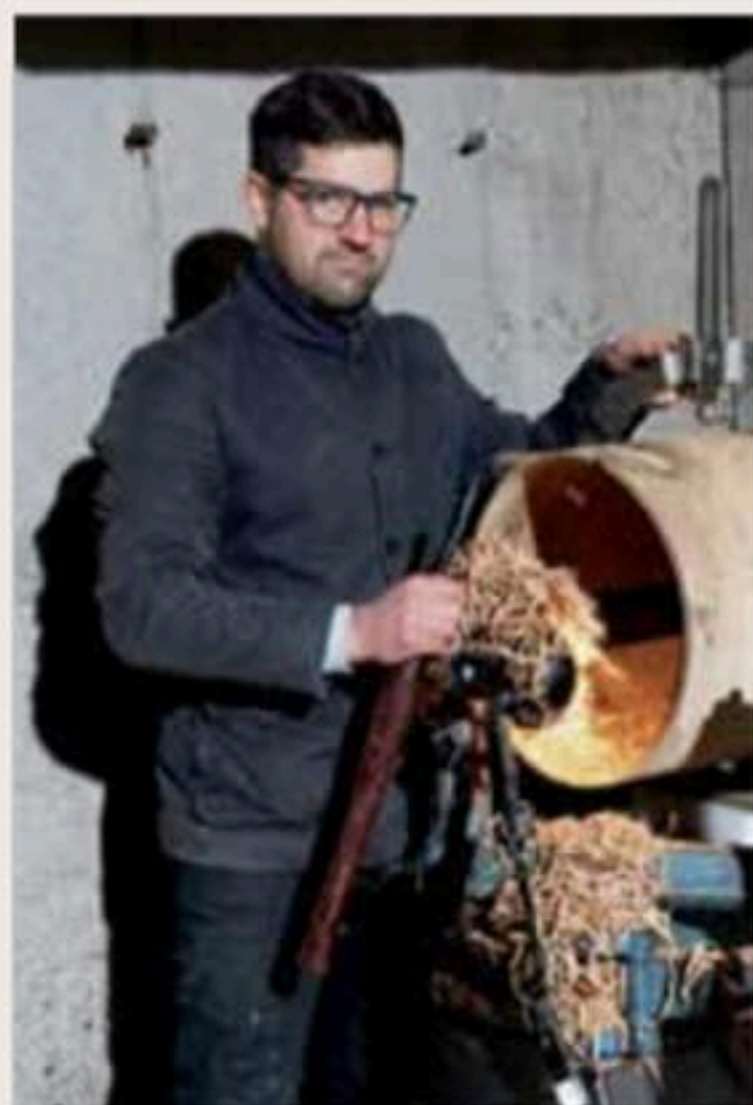
from the intimacy of a handheld vessel to the industry of a large-scale modular wooden seating structure that needed to be assembled, disassembled, and reassembled in multiple civic spaces. The architect Stephen Tierney, with whom Alan has collaborated on a number of projects, notes, “It is this back-and-forth rhythm of working that permits a particular patience, each discipline refreshing the other and allowing momentary breathing space from what can become a claustrophobic intensity—then back to work, invigorated with a

spell at a different scale and tempo. The curves of turning a reprieve from the straight lines of CAD and likewise the collaboration of design projects a social pause from the solo concentration of the lathe” (*Quercu* exhibition catalogue, 2024).

I had the pleasure of working with Alan to curate his first solo exhibition here in Ireland, at Cork’s Lavit Gallery, earlier this year. Entitled *Quercu*, Latin for oak, it included work reflective of the multiple strands of his creative vision, particularly a significant

body of oak furniture—the *Residual Geometry* series—hewn from a single tree that grew at the aforementioned family place. While not immediately or intentionally related to his vessel forms, this body of work shares some common characteristics with Alan’s turned work in that they both are the outcome of reductive processes vis-a-vis the material. The result is that alongside the *Residual Geometry* series, and a further group of sculptural cabinets, the doors of which are formed from dramatic cuts of burl oak, the now advanced understanding of his chosen material and intuitive handling of its physical properties and artistic possibilities are made clear for audiences to see—a deeply literate rendering of his material intelligence.

Hollowing



Meredith’s vessels are hollowed from unseasoned oak to as thin as 1/8" (3mm) in preparation for the cutting and folding process.

Turned vessels

The *Quercu* exhibition included the first significant display of the largest of his turned vessels to date (24¾", or 63cm, tall). Following a Golden Fleece Special Award in 2023, a highly-regarded prize that equally recognizes those practicing in the fields of visual arts, craft, and applied arts, Alan received funding specifically designated for the upscaling of his vessel turning. Among other



Containment, 2013, Birch, elm, holly, beech, apple, oak, cherry, yew, ash, 7½" × 15¾" × 15¾" (19cm × 40cm × 40cm)



Organic Geometry, 2013, Fumed Irish Oak, Largest: 4¾" × 12½" (12cm × 32cm)

things, this allowed for the purchase of a mechanic's engine hoist for lifting and fitting large sections of timber to his lathe, some of which weigh up to 132 lbs. (60kg), as well as other components that help stabilize larger pieces while turning. When Alan is working these pieces, modified toolrests, a large steady rest, larger chucks, and longer tools are essential. Reducing the vibration through various means allows the walls of each vessel to be turned to the required thinness.

To fully appreciate the current forms of Alan's turned vessels, it is important to understand the influences that played a part in his earlier years. None was greater than that of the late Liam Flynn (d. 2017) who Alan says opened his eyes to the possibility of artistic woodturning. Roger Bennett, who has witnessed Alan's progression from an early stage in his career, recalls:

Early in 2017, Liam had an exhibition in the Oliver Sears Gallery, just a few weeks before his passing. It was, as always for Liam, a fabulous exhibition of his work, and it was beautifully displayed by Oliver. Liam was in great form at the opening. He had



Ebonized Triptych, 2019, Ebonized oak, Largest: 13¾" × 6¼" (35cm × 16cm)

become a keen cyclist, and he looked very fit. And smart—he was wearing a lovely new jacket. It was a most enjoyable evening, with lots of chat, craftspeople and friends catching up with each other. As I was leaving, I saw Liam and Alan, serious and concentrated, deep in conversation at the side of the room, probably talking about shapes or tools or finishes. That was the last time I saw Liam. I

often think back to that moment: for me, an image of the transmission of knowledge from the revered master to the brilliant young rising star. With hindsight, a passing of the baton.

While Alan's early work displayed a keen sense of inquisitiveness, and could be said to have explored a number of different paths stylistically, at no point did this work appear ►

overburdened by the ideas or the inspiration behind it. There always appeared to be a carefully considered, restrained approach. His architectural training has undoubtedly played a part in the development of his aesthetic, too, in the form of early precursors to his current work. Pure cylindrical forms, their bodies emboldened with incised bands, represent the first iterations of his folded forms, as he describes them: “sculptural vessels exploring the tension between the geometric nature of process and organic qualities of material.”

The non-functional sculptural vessel form has emerged since then to become the focus of Alan’s

woodturning practice, with oak as his preferred medium for this continued exploration. In response to the question, *Why oak?*, his answer is multifaceted: its longevity, recognized quality, character, and strength—all of which are tested throughout his approach.

The title given to this ongoing primary series of vessels is *Dearcán*, the Gaelic word for acorn. From that point of view, it is a clear statement on the direct relevance of the material to its form. It references a somewhat organic influence, that of the unseasoned, green material he uses, and also a poetic symbolism: the embodied potential for growth, beginnings

and change, and perhaps a nod to a nobility of form sought. This rightness of form he acknowledges as a further influence of Liam Flynn, where the careful selection of the initial blank from the source material, based on how it is expected to move and change shape as it dries, through the rhythms and effects of the workshop processes, are combined in a resultant delicate balance, arrived at through a measured yet expressive approach.

Alan’s signature fold

As with Flynn’s innovative, signature inner rim, Alan Meredith’s hallmark is the fold. While folding may have some parallels in the world of



(Left) *Dearcán Diptych* #157, 2024, Oak, clear and white oil, 21½" x 14" (55cm x 36cm)

(Right) *Dearcán Diptych* #133 & #134, 2024, Sandblasted, fumed, and oiled oak, Taller: 13¾" x 9" (35cm x 23cm)

(Left) *Dearcán Diptych Bán* #169 and #170, 2024, Bleached oak, Larger: 10¾" x 9½" (27cm x 24cm)

(Right) *Dearcán Diptych Dubh* #155, 2024, Ebonized, sandblasted, and oiled oak, 22½" x 16½" (57cm x 42cm)



ceramics, for example, it is his signature in the field of contemporary artistic woodturning. Indeed, its presence in the work often causes the viewer to question what a piece is made from, frequently mistaking it for ceramic or leather, or other such malleable materials. The *Diptych* or *Triptych* in the title of the pieces refers to the number of folds, the inspiration coming from Renaissance altarpieces.

As previously mentioned, the process starts with the careful selection of the initial piece of wood for turning. Often this will be chainsawn from a much larger trunk section, with consideration given to grain direction, the occurrence of natural deviations such as branch sections, and sections that may incorporate some contrasting sapwood or other features.

Mounted on Alan's Vicmarc lathe, each piece is turned green to a thickness of 3mm to 4mm ($\frac{1}{8}$ " to $\frac{5}{32}$ "), this being a key part of the formula. Externally, the vessels are worked with a variety of parting tools, skew chisels, and scrapers. For the larger pieces, the process of hollowing can take up to twelve hours, with an almost unbroken attention required since the piece would otherwise start to change shape too quickly, having an unintended premature effect on the outcome.

The next step is the cutting and folding, which is carried out on the same day as the turning. Again, consideration is given to how each piece will respond to this intervention. The vessels are cut upside down on a table saw before being placed in a steam box for an hour. The box is fed with steam from a wallpaper stripper, softening the wood and forcing moisture out. At this stage, after what



Fuinseog Diptych #152, 2024, Sandblasted and oiled ash, $11\frac{1}{2}$ " x $12\frac{1}{2}$ " (29cm x 32cm)

Dearcán Diptych Dubh #166 and #167, 2024, Ebonized and oiled oak, Larger: 11" x $9\frac{1}{2}$ " (28cm x 24cm)



might be termed the slower work of turning, expediency is required, as the timber will only remain pliable for a couple of minutes. The folds are made by hand, the artist knowing from experience how much pressure can be applied, as the fibers of the timber at first yield to the pressure before signaling, *Enough!* The bent wood is then secured and tightened with cable ties and left to dry at room temperature before attention turns to the finishing process.

Finishing

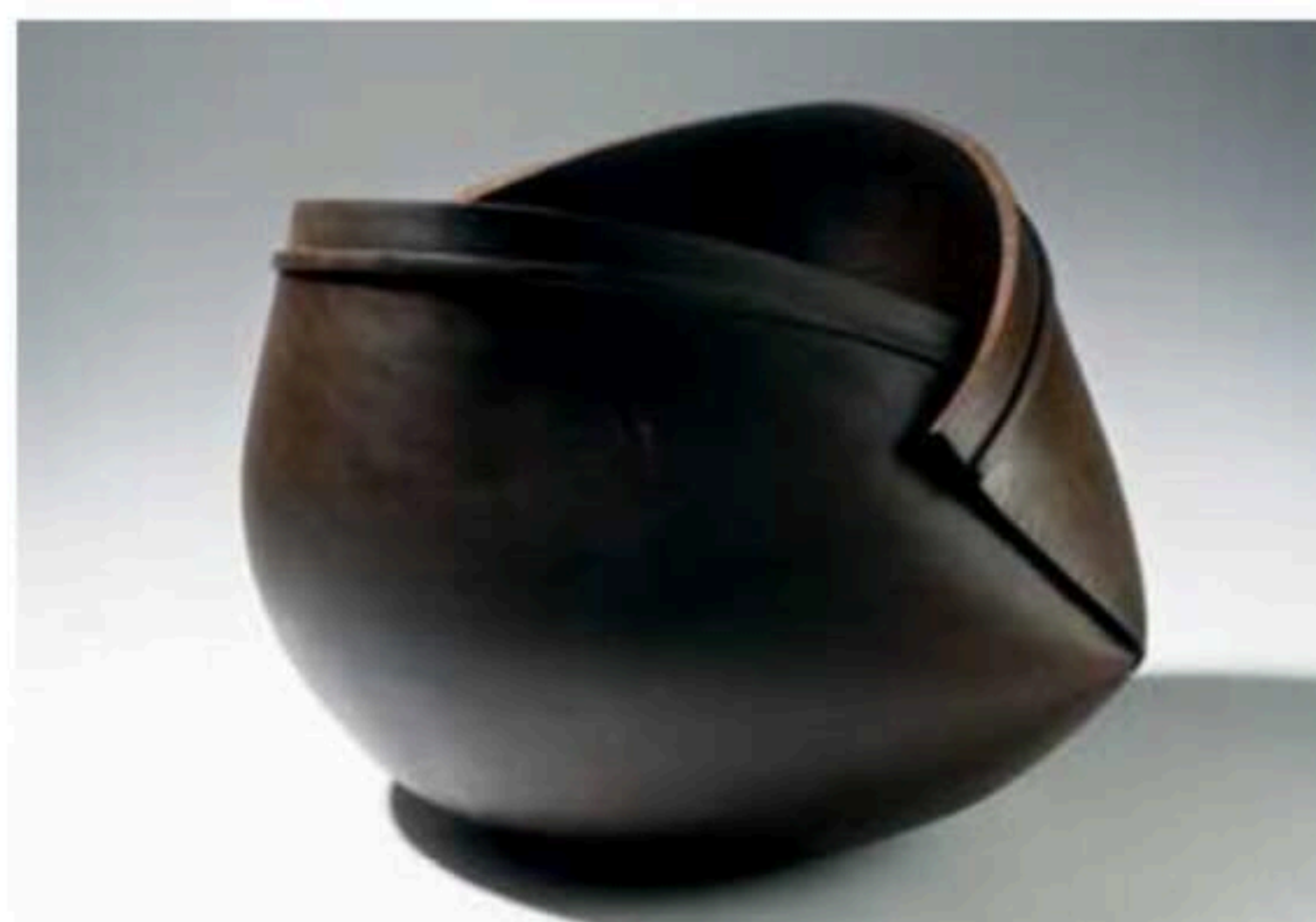
As with the gradual, studied exploration of the possibilities of the form impacted by scale, so too is there a continued dialogue with the possibilities of finishing each piece. In that sense, Alan is akin to other contemporary European masters, such as Ernst Gamperl, where a light but knowledgeable hand is applied, allowing for the natural qualities of the wood and grain pattern to be seen and admired. Finishing processes and materials ►

The folds are made by hand, the artist knowing from experience how much pressure can be applied, as the fibers of the timber at first yield to the pressure before signaling, *Enough!*

for the most part include traditional methods such as ebonizing, fuming, bleaching, and liming, as well as the use of certain oil finishes where appropriate. Sometimes layering is employed to create subtle shifts in warmth and tonal effects, but never to the extent that it could be said there was a separate surface atop the timber itself.

The finished forms are possessed of a surprising lightness and delicacy that sometimes feels at odds with the austerity of the oak itself, or in contrast to the rich, dense, woody figuring of recent ash and elm pieces. This lightness makes them all the more pleasingly tactile—easy to handle, caress, and investigate in the palms of one's hands, an opportunity to feel the care and respect afforded the material.

Alan Meredith's work to date has straddled the boundaries of contemporary



Dearcán Diptych #136,
2024, Fumed and oiled
oak, 11½" x 17"
(29cm x 43cm)

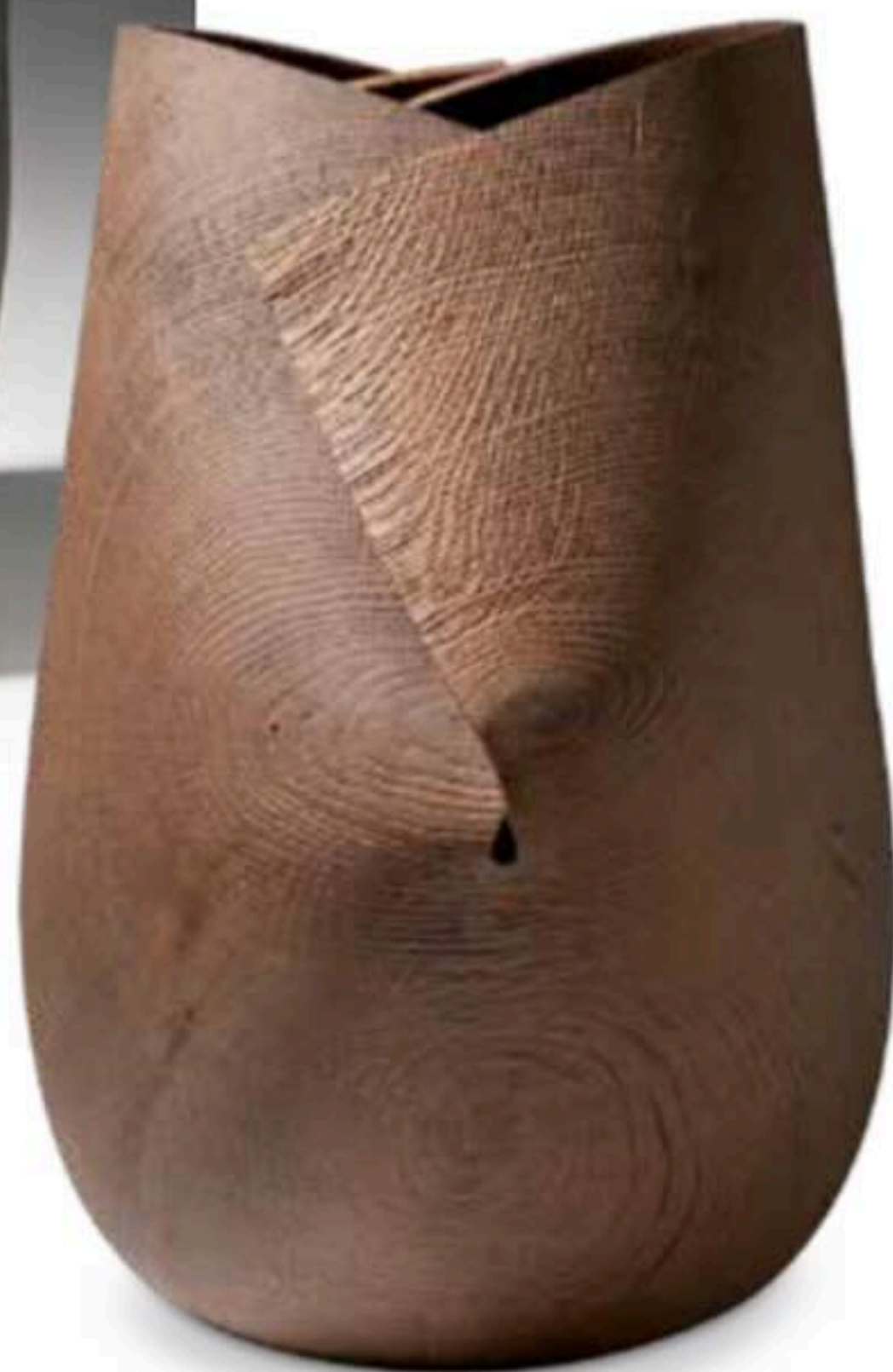
craft, sculpture, and architecture, and it is his turned vessels which perhaps best answer the question posed at the beginning of this article. His vessels are the representative sum of those individual parts, and they reflect Alan's continued dialogue with his material, literally and metaphorically pushing the boundaries of what can be achieved. His folded vessels represent a combination of the artist and artisan, realizing ideas in a way that only "craft skill" enables—the finely balanced vessel that is the result of the surefooted movement between these varied and complementary perspectives.

For more, visit alanmeredith.ie. Alan's turned work can also be seen at Liz O'Brien Gallery in New York (lizobrien.com).

Gallerist and curator Stephen O'Connell owns and runs O'Connell Gallery in Clonakilty, West Cork, Ireland (oconnellgallery.ie). The gallery specializes in craft, presenting work by both established and emerging artists and makers. Stephen previously worked as a furniture and decorative arts specialist at Christie's auctioneers in London and holds a master's degree in arts policy and practice from National University of Ireland (NUI) Galway.



Dearcán Triptych #147, 2024,
Sandblasted, fumed, and oiled
oak, 16" x 15¾" (41cm x 40cm)



Leamhan Diptych #162, 2024, Elm, white oil,
10¾" x 9" (27cm x 23cm)