

Saugatuck Center for the Arts: Tim Folkert
Long Haul Productions // MCACA Creating Connection project

Tim Folkert: It wasn't really until college that I thought much about surfing. I mean, growing up around West Michigan, you'd go to the beach with your family, jump in the waves. But the idea of actually riding a wave or anything like that didn't really cross my mind. I remember one guy having a board, but it seemed ridiculous.

But right after I had moved to Santa Cruz a few months later, I was back home for Christmas on a walk out by Big Red, the lighthouse in Holland. And it was a blustery, cold, snowy day. And there were about five or six guys in the water at Macatawa, the surf spot just off of Big Red on the south side of the pier there. And having become a recent surfer myself, I was completely [LAUGHS] like, blown away, like, "What are you guys doing??!" And I ended up talking to a couple of 'em, and they were sharing their experiences and stories of Great Lakes surfing, and they had been doing it for a good number of years already. And I was just kinda taken back and like, okay, this is more of a scene here than I had originally thought growing up. So that was kinda my introduction to Great Lakes surfing.

SURF SOUND

Being a board builder in the Midwest is a rare and weird thing, and a lot of people don't get it. And so the first few years moving back here was a hard time just trying to be understood and why I would choose to do this, 'cos it's not very lucrative. I do it for the passion of it.

SURF SOUND

I have experienced things out in the water on the Great Lakes that you could never experience anywhere else. Oftentimes we surf in the coldest, harshest conditions that are imaginable. That's why the community here isn't as visible, 'cause we're not out in the summertime when it's all sunny and beautiful. We surf when it's fifteen degrees out and the windchill is negative seven. And there's these big systems that are rolling across the lake when everybody's huddled inside. We're going out to brave the elements. That's really a unique aspect of surfing the Great Lakes, is you just put yourself in the middle of these big

weather events and experience what's happening out in nature in a completely unique way.

SURF SOUND

The beauty and the solitude and sheer moments of what these weather patterns can do and produce is as beautiful as anything I've ever seen.

SURF SOUND fades to SPRAY PAINT SOUND

One of my pieces is called Wind Shift. It's these sets of triangles that are symmetrical to one another. And they kind of emanate away from each other, signifying the wind moving in opposite directions as it changes. And that's something we experience here all the time. It's part of surfing on the Great Lakes, as you're often either waiting for the wind to shift to be perfect, or the opposite is true. It's gonna go bad really fast [LAUGHS].

SANDING SOUND

A lot of my art is influenced by the stories of the lakes since man has engaged with the Great Lakes. You know, eight, to ten thousand years ago, when glaciers receded. There's been this story built on First Nations and the Voyagers and colonial rule and all the bad and the good and ugly that came around. I mean, the Great Lakes has its own history and we are an extension of that history. We are not an extension of the history of Hawaii and California. We're part of something much bigger. And I think that has been what I'm attempting to tell with my artwork, along with my personal experiences on the lakes.

SURF SOUND

We see five, six foot days that resemble oceanlike conditions. The lineup, you can get good turns in, you get a few dozen surfers out there and everybody's kind of wide eyed and like, "Whoa, is this really happening here? This is special." It feels incredible. It's this release of tension that you've been waiting to release since the last time you had it. And it's just this unique sensation.

SURF SOUND

It was hard to convey to people what I had learned out West, how accomplished I was in eight years of building custom surfboards out in California under some of the absolute finest craftsmen in the entire world. And so coming back to an area that doesn't appreciate that skill set and trying to, I guess, validate myself in a lot of ways, like, "Hey, I'm actually really good at this," but not really being able to connect with people at that level. And for people to like, really comprehend and understand it, it was a struggle at times.

But in January of 2018, I was contacted by the Saugatuck Center for the Arts, their marketing director, who said I might have a really neat opportunity for you to display some of your surfboards for this show, Surface Tension, at the Center for the Arts. So I head down to Saugatuck to talk about ideas of how we wanted to incorporate my boards into the gallery space. My wife had encouraged me to bring a piece of art that I had created and just put on my bedstand. It looked nice and I had no idea what to do with it. So I was like, "No, I don't need to bring that, they're more interested in my boards. That's kind of what I want to showcase." She was like, "No, it's really unique. You need to bring it." And to kind of appease her [LAUGHS], I brought it, and I didn't even bring it in. I left it in the car. 'Cause I was a little sheepish about it. I had never shown any kind of artwork or anything before.

So they started asking me about what my process was like. And I mentioned that actually had been starting to play around with doing my resin paneling as wall artwork, the same process as I do on a surfboard. But it's on a panel instead of foam. They continued to press me on this and I was like, "Okay, I have an example in the car." [LAUGHS] And so I brought them out to my car and I was blown away that they would even be interested in this.

They started asking me, "How many have you created?" And I'm like, "Whoa whoa whoa! This is all new to me. You are the first people other than my family who has seen this piece."

I'd been using leftover materials from the board building process. So this piece kind of appeared over several months. So they wanted five original art pieces, including three to four surfboards. It was the second week of November, and the show was opening January 12. And at that point, it was just like, "Yes. And I don't know if I can do this." [LAUGHS] So we pulled it off and created five original art pieces, ended up selling all five

of ‘em during the show, which was completely mind blowing to me, at a much higher price point than I ever thought possible [LAUGHS]. And it kind of opened the door for me to realize, like, this could actually be a thing and could be a good addition to the boards that I build. So that was the catalyst for it.

SANDING SOUND

So this is a piece that I'm working on right now, putting the new resin panel on. I just laid down the color on it.

SANDING SOUND

The opening for Surface Tension was a really unique experience for me. Every time they would introduce me as an artist, I really struggled with that title. ‘Cause I was like, “I'm not an artist. I'm a craftsman. This is what I've been dedicated to. I'll take the title of craftsman any day.” But “artist” was really kind of, ah, “I don't know about this.” They were, “Trust us. You are an artist.” I’m like, “Okay. Yeah. I’ll only take it because you guys are saying it, ‘cause you deal with it a lot more than I do.”

So it's turned into a unique outlet for me where I've been selling more pieces. It's still not a full-time thing for me by any means, but it's a good supplement to the boards that I'm building.

It was really a conduit for people, my friends and family, specifically to be like, “I get it now. I get what you're doing. I get that your skill set is valuable, is unique, is special.” And I think maybe that was the moment of validation that my friends and family, and people that I haven't seen in years saying, “Wow. What you're doing is really cool,” and understanding it for the first time. Also understanding what surfing means to me in my life. And that, yes, this surf scene is real here and it exists. And you are actually serving a really interesting purpose around the Great Lakes. I'm part of the community. Yeah.

MUSIC