

## Creating ☿ Rideable ☿ Art

*Local board culture allows for work and play in the Comox Valley*

☿ Five longboards shaped out of figured maple, with tiger stripes and birds' eyes shimmering in the sunshine, hang on the wall, fanned out like a peacock tail. The eight-foot "Maple Monolith" longboard towers beside the door, two surfboards painted with West Coast surf scenes hang above the window, canvases of mountain landscapes decorate the rest of Tarbell's Coffee Bar, and Nick Hutton-Jay, artist and longboard designer, is on a plane to LA. He left just after the show was hung, and won't return for a month and a half, just after the show has ended.

Hutton-Jay has worked as a professional artist for almost a decade, traveling North America, creating mythical worlds as settings for an indoor laser-tag game. His job has not only taken him to every corner of both Canada and the US, but also challenged his artistic skills with giant murals, textured floors, and 3D landscapes. In a lot of ways it's a fantasy job for an artist, but over LA and on the hundreds of other planes he's fallen asleep in, Nick mostly dreams of the Comox Valley – the culture he calls home, and the personal artistic pursuits it inspires.

"I wanted to live in a place where I could snowboard, surf, and skate...this was the optimal place, and where the people and the culture was my kind of game," he says. "This is the spot, it's pretty obvious."

Hutton-Jay's move to the Valley five years ago was inspired by a dream to rebuild the oldest log home in Comox, then turn it into a community art studio and gallery (a dream that later turned into a logistical nightmare). Partnered with his father – Bill – they purchased the historic home for a dollar, bought a 2-acre lot in Merville, and rented a truck, hoping to transport the cabin before it was flattened by a condo

development.

Under a looming two-week deadline, they frantically dismantled cedar shingles, hardwood floors, giant log beams, and enormous windows. Once the home was stacked into a pile of historic wood beside the Merville property's doublewide trailer, father and son looked into the permits required to re-build a log cabin. This, they discovered, was a bit of a problem.

Homeowners face serious restrictions when it comes to building on their own land – particularly when building with previously-used materials, something they quickly discovered.

For years, Hutton-Jay, his father, and friends sat around the drawing board, brainstorming ideas – the log home could be built as an attachment to the trailer; it could be built on a barge, in the middle of the Strait, where no municipal building codes exist. What if it weren't a home, just an artistic installation that looked a whole lot like a log cabin? What if the log home was secretly built then dropped with a giant parachute from an aircraft? One day, it would mysteriously arrive on the property, quite literally, out of the blue...Would that not count as an act of God, and not a heinous crime committed by the owners?

For an artist, there's nothing more frustrating than building codes; for Hutton-Jay and his dad, it was a frustration that burned in their creative bellies for far too long. Perhaps that's why, shortly after the log home dream suffered its logistical death, Hutton-Jay started carving longboards.

Right from the start his boards didn't follow conventional designs. Their shapes were a combination of his own ideas and the traditional curves of old-school surfboards: "I pretty much only carve

old-school designs; no twin tips yet, they're too new-school – maybe in five years I'll carve a twin tip." Furthermore, the illustrations – symbols of nature entwined with wood grains – were refreshingly different from contemporary skateboard art's colorful urban, or fused nature-urban, graphics.

Around the same time that Hutton-Jay began designing boards, Benn Pridham opened up FusionBoardWorx in Cumberland. Most skate shops wouldn't look twice at boards made by an independent, or any products not supplied by one of Canada's major distributors of sporting gear, but Pridham had a different kind of store in mind. The distribution monopolies and mass-produced clothing culture associated with skateboarding didn't interest him. Pridham immediately started contacting board designers directly, searching for ethical clothing producers, and connecting with the local scene.

It didn't take long for Pridham and Hutton-Jay to cross paths and become friends. FusionBoardWorx, already looking more like an art gallery than a board shop, already selling equipment for more kinds of riding than most know exist, was a perfect place for Hutton-Jay to display his boards. Shortly after Pridham moved his shop to a bigger location on the main strip in Cumberland, Hutton-Jay stocked FusionBoardWorx with a complete collection of *Canadian Maple Mountain Cruisers* – his first line of boards.

The old-school, surf-styled shapes and subtle artwork gave the line an antique look, but the characteristic that really set the boards apart from mainstream designs was there even before Hutton-Jay started shaping them. "I've always appreciated nature, and that's why the boards are the focus, not the artwork," he says. "The artwork is entwined with the grains, sometimes incorporating the grains into the patterns of the art, but all my boards look different because of the wood."

For each board, Hutton-Jay spends a lot of time searching for the perfect piece of figured maple to begin with. Maple is an ideal medium because it comes

in a variety of shades and colors, not to mention the twisted, knotted, bird's eye, and tiger stripe grains that ornament its surface. Each piece he finds has its own swirling and shimmering landscape of images – a quality that has made the boards look just as good on a gallery wall as they do bombing down a hill.

Tarbell's Coffee Bar is just across the street from FusionBoardWorx, but when Hutton-Jay's longboards moved from one to the other they entered a whole different world. Displayed on racks and against the walls of Pridham's shop, next to an assortment of colored wheels and high-tech metal trucks, they inspired visions of cruising down coastal hills, carving up sharp turns and pumping down quick drops. Hanging on Tarbell's walls in an ornamental display, however, they seem a part of a bigger story; a story of the history, landscape, and culture of the boarder life style; a story that only a mix of mediums can tell: figured maple boards, painted surfboards, and, of course, traditional canvases.

Years of back-country snowboarding, West Coast surf trips, longboarding on remote roads around the continent, and many adventures along the ridges of mountains, have left Hutton-Jay with a memory full of images that – combined with the cultural experiences of riding – have turned a number of canvases into an epic tale of their own. Bold, rhythmic contours; monochromatic colors; and subjects that blend into their environment have made for landscape paintings that don't really fit in the genre of landscape painting, though they are definitely consistent with the overall voice of Hutton-Jay's collection.

Board art is nothing new (even the art world's elite are showing up at skateboard art shows), but the simplicity of Hutton-Jay's boards, their exhibition of nature's complex forms, their representation of the history of board sports, and the ease at which they can move between sport and art (not to mention beneath rider's feet) feels somehow local, like an art show that's truly a Comox Valley phenomenon.

The Valley is a unique mark on board sports'

cultural map. Unlike most urban centers, riders here are constantly expanding into new forms of carving: from street skating to snowboarding on Mount Washington; from snowboarding to skimboarding at Miracle Beach; from skimboarding to kiteboarding near Goose Spit; from kiteboarding to carving up one of the many bowls; and from bowl skating to longboarding.

All-terrain riding is a major part of the Comox Valley's board sport movement, but what's really giving the culture personality is the diversity of people getting involved. Ever since the movie *Dog Town and Z-boys* came out – recounting the birth of modern skateboarding in the 70s and early 80s – the sport has revived itself in the first generation of skateboarders. The Valley is home to an interesting mix of people from that first wave: artists, small business owners, academics, idealists, parents, and – more than any skateboard culture of the past – members of the community.

Pridham is a good example – he's skateboarding again and running a skateboard shop, but more to contribute to the local culture than to make a profit. He also organizes events, mentoring programs, and venues for artists and board designers.

Riders like Pridham, who remember board sport culture as a positive and healthy influence, are doing their part to pass the knowledge on to the community. Their message has even reached public schools. Realizing the benefits skateboarding has on social skills and creative thinking, many schools across the continent have introduced the activity in physical education classes.

Part of what makes board culture such a great experience is the supportive relationships it creates between riders. Not to say there isn't the occasional cocky, get-out-of-my-way pro-star at the skate park, but modesty, self-sufficiency, and an easy-going at-

titude in the face of conflict are the qualities most respected in the culture.

When confronted with building codes, Hutton-Jay started carving longboards; and his dad – Bill – went ahead and created a community studio and art gallery anyway, renovating an old workshop – first by laying beautiful antique hard wood flooring salvaged from that log cabin. So today, Nick does much of his painting and carving in the place of the original dream.

Pridham – frustrated with the way his culture has mass-produced itself – started a board shop that, instead of fighting for the business of large suppliers, took a more discrete road of finding independent, community minded, and culturally vibrant characters to supply, support, and visit his store. Now, FusionBoardWorx has become the main node for an exciting cultural movement that the Valley can call its own.

Skateboarding has always kept one wheel in the art world, one wheel on the stage, one in competitive sports, and one in the streets, free to turn out new ideas and run over old ones. Perhaps that's why it's such a strong addiction to some, and such an enigma to others.

Art shows like Hutton-Jay's can help clarify what a culture is all about, but anything that leads to an art show is generally more confusing than any one person can work out – hence the art. But that's what's so great about board sports – it's just a piece of wood; just a sideways standing piece of wood that follows a curve, and what's so complicated about that?

It's suprising what a rider learns in the gentle physics of carving. Whether pushing a board against the light resistance of snow, the heavy roll of a wave, or the tight grip of fresh cement, one lesson is always clear – for every kind of resistance, there's a board that can carve a line right through it. 🏇