



Gallerist Sarah Myerscough and venture capitalist Denis Shafranik with (from far left) lime-washed oak Vessel 4/230 by Ernst Gamperl, madrone burl hardwood Earthworks by Michael Peterson and ebonised oak Inner Rimmed Vessel ER3 by Liam Flynn

FINDERS KEEPERS

contemporary woodwork

With the help of a sought-after London gallerist, this venture capitalist has built an exquisite collection of wooden sculpture, says Kasia Maciejowska. Portrait by Andy Sewell

Looking at the wooden objects amassed by venture capitalist Denis Shafranik, what is most striking is just how wonderfully diverse this natural material is. A boldly striped chair by revered British furniture maker John Makepeace contrasts pleasingly with a smooth turned spherical vessel in muted pale oak by Irish artist Liam Flynn and neither bears any resemblance to the warm brown, rhythmically ridged oak form (bought for £7,500 in 2013, pictured above far left) by German carpenter-cum-sculptor Ernst Gamperl.

What these pieces do share, however, is distinguishing craftsmanship, tactile appeal and museum-grade credibility.

They have also all been brought into Shafranik's burgeoning collection by London gallerist Sarah Myerscough. "I first met Sarah in 2008 at her gallery in Mayfair," recalls Shafranik. "I had become really interested in design a few years before and was going to lots of the fairs and working out where my interests lie – in architectural pieces, craft texture and organic shapes." He bought his first pieces – three oak vessels (two of which are pictured above and overleaf) by Liam Flynn – all for under £4,000 in 2009, taking as thorough and informed an approach to collecting as he did to founding the venture capital firm Ernak Group in the same year, after nine years with Barclays' investment banking

division. "When I started investing in tech startups I met with more than 5,000 people in the field in order to get a real feel for it," he says. "In design it takes a similar process to discover what you like. But then, your taste keeps shifting."

It was Myerscough who turned him on to wood. Since his first purchase, Shafranik now has 10 pieces (and counting). He doesn't actually own the Trine chair by Makepeace – yet; Myerscough is giving him a private in situ viewing of the works by "the father of British furniture design" before they head to Design Miami/Basel. It would be, for Shafranik, quite an addition to his collection – and one that would cost around £16,000. "I asked Makepeace to produce it in a different

finish," says Myerscough, "so Denis is considering a version in scorched oak."

It's this kind of vision that has earned Myerscough her considerable cachet. The consultant to the Crafts Council opened her multidisciplinary gallery on Mayfair's Brook's Mews in 1999 and, ever since, her portfolio has gradually leaned further towards her love of crafted works in wood. Since switching her gallery space for a by-appointment showroom in Vauxhall earlier this year, she has focused on representing her growing stable of dynamic wood-based artists at international art and design fairs such as Design Miami and PAD London. From her roster, Shafranik has acquired pieces by Texas-born sculptor Michael Peterson and East Sussex-based woodturner and ceramicist Nic Webb, whose burnt-out bulbous lacedwood husk (pictured overleaf) he bought in 2014 for £5,500.

"This piece even smells incredible," says Shafranik, dipping his face into the hollowed and blackened interior of Webb's sculpture. The collector's fervour here is easy to understand: it is an exceptionally poetic object with

a subtly contemporary fluidity of form, while the scorched insides allude to the ancient and the primitive. When Shafranik places it temporarily next to Peterson's minimalist two-part *Earthworks* (pictured on previous page) – a bricolage stack of carved, bleached and sandblasted madrone burl hardwood acquired in 2016 for £9,200 – the many languages of woodcraft become instantly apparent. "Peterson is unique," says Myerscough. "He painstakingly searches the forests where he lives, on America's east coast, for the right fallen pieces. Sometimes the chunks of wood then sit alone for years in his studio, awaiting companions."

It is Webb's work, however, that has become something of a forerunner in collectable contemporary woodwork design. "People are beginning to recognise the refinement in these works," says Myerscough. "They are attracting an increased interest from auction houses and museums, and I expect prices to rise rapidly over the next five years."

But investment is not Shafranik's motivation; these are primarily things to live with, and can all be found dotted around the Hertfordshire home he shares with his partner Natalia Pochekutova, herself an entrepreneur. Behind the Georgian-style façade of their redbrick manor house, craftsmanship is evident at every turn – from bespoke carved wood sliding doors in the kitchen to inlaid bronze panelling in



the games room. Even the couple's everyday water glasses are custom-made. "If you're going to buy something, it's always better to spend your money with an individual maker than with a brand or store," shrugs Shafranik, adding that his and Pochekutova's respect for the human touch was fostered at an early age by their grandparents, who made objects by hand out of necessity when living in Soviet-era Siberia.

"It's really quite unusual to have a collector like Denis, who takes such an interest in the creative process," says Myerscough. "Sometimes I'll introduce him to designers, but often he'll go to them directly. He's a very good thing for the craft scene." Indeed, craft also makes its way

into Shafranik's work: as well as tech startups, he backs social enterprise and creative ventures, such as the architectural studio of Alessandro Isola, formerly at Foster + Partners, and Mayfair concept store The New Craftsmen. He also likes to be very hands-on with his purchases: "I love the commissioning process. The element of discussion and partnership is, for me, incredibly rewarding."

His and Pochekutova's newest commission, their largest wood work to date, is a highly original, postmodernism-inspired cabinet by progressive south London furniture maker David Gates, which cost £19,800. Made from a combination of European oak, 4,000-year-old bog oak, maple, rippled sycamore,

**Myerscough with lacewood
Scuttled Vessel by Nic
Webb and Shafranik with
ebonised oak Inner Rimmed
Vessel 091R1 by Liam Flynn**

cedar of Lebanon and Douglas fir, it features vitreous enamel tambour handles made by Gates's partner, art jeweller Helen Carnac. This contrasting detail is a clue as to what lies within the cabinet's cleverly disguised drawers: the couple's collection of art jewellery.

"I much prefer the craft world to the art world," says Shafranik. "All the gallerists I work with are open and unpretentious – like Adrian Sassoon, who I enjoy chatting to about ceramics. And Erskine, Hall & Coe put on very good exhibitions that I often buy from." He is also an avid supporter of contemporary dance, and recently backed South Bank Sky Arts Awards-nominee Alexander Whitley's new Sadler's Wells commission, *8 Minutes*, which explores parallels between scientific and artistic processes using video, audio and experimental choreography. "We're not quite commissioning new pieces in the dance field though," he laughs. "Not yet..." ✦
PAD London, October 2-8, Berkeley Sq, London W1 (+331-5330 8520; pad-fairs.com). Sarah Myerscough Gallery, by appt, Southbank House, Black Prince Rd, London SE1 (020-7495 0069; sarahmyerscough.com).