

A CERTAIN MATHEMATICS

A CONVERSATION
WITH JIM BARTON

“Everywhere I look, I see beauty and unactualized potential in raw forms. If I walk down the beach I see all this potential. I see things: a whale, a seahorse. I see a fish. I see a goddess.”

I turned off the street onto a dirt road and down a sharp embankment to wooded bottomland. Alongside the road I began to see carved statuary: buddhas, cranes and tree trunks encircled with carved salmon heading skyward. I knew I'd arrived at Jim Barton's property. Up ahead I caught sight of a large structure, actually a tent with open sides, Barton's work area. It was filled with carvings in various states of finish: statuary, wood screens, table tops, carved doors, special projects, commissions and miscellaneous other pieces along with massive slabs of redwood that Barton salvages himself with his monster chain saw.

To call Barton a chain saw artist would be misleading. He refines his pieces using traditional hand tools, carving and sanding to high level of finish. But he does use a chain saw—much the way Pablo Casals uses a cello. Barton's skill, honed in decades of work as a logger and, later, from years of work as an artist, allows him to slice massive, flawless, inch-thin sections of stock from snags and long-abandoned redwood stumps.

I first met Barton seven years ago. The meeting was brief but memorable. He drove me out to a wooded area where he was working “on a little carving project.” Stepping out of his pickup we walked through a stand of trees to a large wooden deck. What I saw there made an impression: twenty-five or thirty hand-carved Quan Yins, each three to four feet high. Looking at them, I made a note to self: come back in a year or two to find out more about this Barton fellow.

That day had finally come, a wet one, but the rain had eased off. Getting out of my car, I began walking carefully between puddles and muddy spots, heading towards Barton's work area with high anticipation.

Before starting the interview, Barton gave me a tour. I

didn't recognize it as the same place I'd visited seven years before. It was completely transformed. What about the Quan Yins? I wondered. He'd carved too many of them to count, he figured. Hundreds. He'd moved on; his subject matter had expanded. Finally he led me into a little area where we sat down for the interview. The subject of being an artist came up.

Richard Whittaker: You say you're “a good example of the life of an artist.” Would you say more about that?

Jim Barton: Everybody has an artist in him, but I think we have different portions and qualities that apply. I'm certainly enough of an artist to know the downside of being an artist. I will create a piece of art while the world is falling down around me. I just had an outhouse built after years of being here. We don't have any indoor plumbing. Now, *I don't care*. I'm out there creating art! But this is a very difficult thing for the world to understand, the mentality of an artist.

For example, I have a hard time just stopping to check the oil in my car. In my mind, I'm creating, even when I'm traveling. So, in a certain way, I'm not in touch with the necessities of the utilitarian world. I'll go without eating. I mean, these are things that normal people don't do.

Now even relationships. If you're an artist, your work is first. So it takes a very special kind of person to be in that relationship. Let's face it, there's going to be some areas where there's going to be some compromises if you're going to have a relationship with an artist.

RW: You're speaking from experience.

JB: Yes. I have a full-time relationship with a woman, so fear not. We've been together for ten years. Fortunately Lori enjoys the creative process as much as I do. But I'm absolutely honest. She has had to—there are some compromises. The upside is that there's a lot of magic in our life.

RW: Say something about the magic.

JB: Well, to see beauty in a raw shape. It's taken time, but over a period of years I'm beginning to see into raw material. Just raw, elemental mass. This rock. Wood. There's an aspect to this envisioning that's almost torturous sometimes.

RW: What's the torture?

JB: Everywhere I look, I see beauty and unactualized potential in raw forms. If I walk down the beach I see all this potential. I see things: a whale, a seahorse. I see a fish. I see a goddess. And it's really painful because some part of you wants to bring these things into being. So that's what I mean. That's an aspect of the magic, too.

When I'm taking an impression of raw form, I like to use the word *deity*. Now that's a little tricky. Everything has a lower and a higher. The sense in which I'm using deity, it would be the higher. Things are paired. Our energies are paired. You take anger, for example. If you get into the essence of anger, the Tibetans would say there's lucid clarity. That's the higher aspect of anger. So, as an artist, I use the word deity in that sense.

RW: When I first met you, you took me out and showed me all these Quan Yins you were carving. You've been doing Buddhas and now you're doing salmon and fish and cranes and dragons and a lot of things. How did you get located in the subject matter that interests you?

JB: There's no way to get around it. It's all about ourselves. The deeper we enter our own strata, the more we're able to see. So this whole endeavor is really a search into myself.

For example, when I first saw you seven or eight years ago, I was doing Buddhas and Quan Yins. I had to have a solid form, a Buddha or a Quan Yin—some *thing* that was deity. At that point, I couldn't *see* deity in a salmon. I couldn't see that a salmon was actually the raw image of abundance. The Buddhists would call it the *Ratna* energy of the five Buddha families. That's abundance. That's the color yellow. South. Earth. It's that elemental abundance, increase.

Now I don't have to have a Buddha or a Quan Yin. I mean, okay, take the crane. What does that represent? All indigenous cultures will have cranes in their imagery. What does it mean, essentially? See, there's something there we feel, but we haven't really formulated it. You take all this imagery that surrounds us, for example even the koi; that's joy. There's a very objective, higher quality that's embodied in that form. There are archetypal forms all around us. So we don't necessarily have to go out and find things that are new.

For me, to come to the point where I can work

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with this imagery with some intelligence and clarity, it's about actually clarifying the muddy waters in myself. In the beginning I needed a Quan Yin. I needed that hard form. But now I look and I see deity in a much larger sense.

In the Christian sense, God is everything. To use Christian terminology, everything is God. You just break it down, *everything is God*. Okay, but now, as human beings, we can't just start off there. We're pretty distorted. But, at a certain point, that's the direction, that everything is sacred. If something isn't, we better be checking our minds, our heart. So that's the quality that comes out in really great works. The artist has that knowing. That's its magic. That's what enables him to be a channel and the ordinary becomes extraordinary, so to speak.

Now I've had some teachers who have helped me, who have at least tried to steer me in the right direction. I'm very stubborn. There's no way I'm going to take direct instruction. I'm going to have to do everything backwards and work it out myself. But nonetheless, when I look way back, I see there is a part of me that is listening and taking something in. I've had two root teachers who really have had some understanding.

RW: Who are they?

JB: Mrs. Stavely would be one and then Chagdud Tulku Rinpoche would be another. And then I've had influences at certain key points from some magnificent human beings.





JIM BARTON, CARVED QUAN YIN FIGURE

RW: The Rinpoche, if you don't mind saying, where did you find him?

JB: He came to the farm in Aurora and gave a lecture. I felt something and then I found excuses to go see him, and a relationship came from that.

RW: So you've carved lots of Quan Yins and lots of Buddhas. Where do these go? And did they take you to interesting places?

JB: Oh God, yes!

RW: Tell me about some of the most interesting ones.

JB: That could take hours, but this just came to mind. I made a big Buddha out of a redwood root—a big one. *Huge*. Good God, what a gorgeous piece! A guy in Seattle, Ben Abram, he lives right on the waterfront in Seattle, five minutes from downtown. He bought the piece just from a photo through a friend of mine. He sent me a check, and that was it. He didn't want it right away. Well, a year later I delivered it.

He has this piece of property on the waterfront. There's a beautiful little cove and sailboats out front. He wanted it out on a point between his property and the next. He had a little access walkway and obviously no idea that he'd bought an 800-pound chunk of wood. There was no way that Buddha was going to go down all those steps. So there we were. Meanwhile, Ben was back in Miami. But he was having some work done out front and had a contractor friend there who says, "Let's just get a barge."

So we made some calls and for 1500 bucks we could get this Buddha on a barge and come around through the bay. This was like an old WWII landing craft. So the next morning, we got the tide just right. We had to actually drive down the beach with a forklift and load the Buddha onto this landing craft. It took about an hour and a half going up the canals to get to his place.

Of course, we had to wait for the flood tide and time it right. So we came in, this landing craft with this big Buddha. And it was a beautiful thing, coming down the bay in the grey mist past all these two-three-five-million dollar homes! They're all oriented towards the Bay so you see the backs of them. It was Saturday morning and all these people were watching football. When we came floating by, they all got up and were at their big picture windows watching. And

we're floating down this bay with a big Buddha on the front! It's hard to know what's going on in people's minds. I mean, this was one of a kind!

So we actually got lucky. We came right up and there wasn't an inch to spare. We placed the Buddha on the point and slowly backed away. That was surreal. It was a wonderful setting with the sailboats and all. Talk about magic!

RW: That's great! Tell me another one.

JB: Okay. Well, I was at an outdoor market a few years back and I was absolutely broke. It was the last day of the season. This was around Christmas and that was it until March. I mean \$2500 is my low end with these Quan Yins. So it's not like you can make a lot of sales at local outdoor markets. And things were not looking good.

This guy walked up and said, "I'll take that one, that one, that one and that one." These were big pieces. So I had twelve thousand dollars worth of sales, just like that!

Ralph was his name. He'd owned a beautiful place above Rosario Resort on Orcas Island. I didn't know any of this at the time. He asked, "Will you deliver?" and I said, "Sure." So I had to rent a U-Haul truck and delivery involved a ferry ride to the San Juan islands.

Anyway, we got up there and he put us up in a beautiful oceanside resort. We put the two biggest pieces up on a bluff above his house, above the ocean. It took a couple of days. We had to get some help and use come-alongs to winch them up the bluff. It was kind of like the pyramids or something. We got these big chunks of wood up the hill and onto a rock platform. It's a beautiful setting, all in madrone woods with a rock bluff as a backdrop for these two pieces. The images were carved from a big redwood root, nine to ten foot high, split in half, a carved Buddha and Quan Yin, a matching pair like a butterfly. Just beautiful!

RW: Do you mind telling me a little about your own roots and where you come from? Here you are living in this unusual way.

JB: I'll read you a little thing here. It says, "Jim Barton grew up in a little logging community in the Pacific Northwest. His grandfather owned and operated a sawmill thirty years before he was born." And here I'm

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quoted, "My own father did the same. By the time I was a freshman in high school, I was already working part time in a local sawmill pulling lumber on a green chain." I grew up in little logging communities.

RW: Where about?

JB: All up and down the north coast—Alesia, Oregon, for example. In my freshman year in high school there were seventy kids, eighteen in my freshman class. Every girl in my freshman class was pregnant!

RW: Really?

JB: Yes. This was a little logging community. It's not what it's cut out to be. A lot of people never made it out of that valley. It's a degenerate mentality in many aspects. There's a lot of alcoholism. I don't know what picture people have of loggers in the Northwest, but people did not live well in many respects. There was a lot of violence and so on.

RW: Is it true that you also lived in Alaska?

JB: Yes. Logging, fishing, hunting. We lived off the land. My father was a bush pilot in the real sense of the word. I spent most of my time flying around with my dad.

RW: Do you want to say something about him?

JB: Well, he certainly wasn't one to shy away from a



RALPH KAPLAN WITH HIS TWO PIECES OF BARTON'S WORK IN PLACE ON ORCAS ISLAND

risky situation and I was too young to know the difference. After my dad wrecked his third plane my mother managed to maneuver him out of Alaska. In some sense, this was regrettable. My father should have died in a plane wreck out in the bush. Alcohol, chain smoking and the boredom of an eight-hour-a-day job finally killed him. Actually every last one of the bush pilots I knew from flying around with my father died in plane crashes. Every last one of them! But that's another story.

RW: What period of time were you in Alaska, then?

JB: Between seven and fourteen. It was the real thing. There was a little fishing boat that came to our float house twice a summer with fresh fruit. I mean there's the good and the bad. It wouldn't have hurt

me to have had a better education. But then again, you're not being imprinted by the mainstream. It's kind of risky just being yourself, being just an essential creature. There are a lot of pitfalls in this world: alcoholism, drugs, small-mindedness in general.

RW: It seems to me, just being here with you today, that you've established something here.

JB: Yes. There's some understanding that I've come to. But then again, as I've said, I've had some help. I'm very hard-headed. It almost took surgery for those influences to make an imprint on me. It was very critical for me, that level of influence by people who had that level of knowing. They didn't relate to you as you were, but they related to you for your potential *and they could see it.*



You and I, we look at each other and we judge each other. We put each other in our place pretty quick. They didn't do that. So that kind of influence is critical. It allowed me to grow. Although I was a pain in the ass, they gave me a space to grow.

For me to come to some understanding, there has been a real struggle. I guess there has to be some fire, some hurdles. Personally, I've had my share. I've spent more time in prison in the 90s than on the street. But I did learn how to meditate in prison.

RW: In prison?

JB: Yes. I had all the teachings. I had this, I had that.

But I wasn't ready for it. I had to swim or drown. In prison I had to pay attention to my mind, or go crazy. It was one or the other. I had no alternative. I had to be forced, so I was forced. You go to the hole for ninety days in this cement box looking at the wall. People are going crazy all around you; the energy is so intense and so negative, that there's no gray area. You've got to be practicing in the moment, or you're crazy. There's no in-between. So I learned something about being in the moment. That was the good part.

RW: Yes.

JB: But back to that platform, understanding, and this

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is my own language. The normal person walking around, it’s about what he can *get*. So I’d say that’s the first stage, and I still have a lot of that in me. It’s about what we can get, whether it’s a relationship or money or whatever—our own satisfaction, our own gain.

Then, at a certain point, I think—if a person is really going to grow—it has to dawn on him that real happiness is about giving. To the degree you can give something back to life, that’s the degree to which you can feel some satisfaction. That’s just how it’s put together. So that’s understanding. I mean, there’s no exceptions to that! That’s what I call understanding.

So, at this point, when I have a moment of clarity, I understand that very deeply. And when I’m working on my artistic endeavors, that’s the spirit of it. It’s putting something back. I’m just an artist. I’m nobody in the bigger context. But in my own context there’s an effort to try to put it back, to share the magic.

You see people who have all these gifts but who haven’t found a way to give them back. You see the consequences to varying degrees, the confusion, loneliness, heartache. It’s the physics of energy. We personalize it, but it’s also pure mathematics. So I mention understanding, and that’s the platform. It’s important to have that platform.

Young artists come up to me all the time at shows. “What the hell is going on here?” Because they know *something* is up, and they know they’re *missing* something. But it’s all confusing out there in the artist-world, for the most part.

RW: Right.

JB: So what I say to them. I say, well, if you’re trying to find direction and meaning, first of all you have to ask a question in the right way. It’s not about what you can get. You have to ask a question, ask your essence. Mrs. Stavelly said, “*Jim, you can ask your essence a question.*” You can do it! But you have to do it in the right way. You have to ask, “What do I have to offer?”

That’s the way you find your direction. That’s the way you find what you need to do next. But people haven’t been trained to ask that question; they haven’t had teachings. So they’re running around like chickens with their heads cut off—artists, per se. But I think everybody is in this boat. It’s just a lot of heartache.

RW: Do you think artists, even though they’re out there confused, do you think they’re more sensitive to the need to find something? Or can you make any generalizations at all about artists?

JB: I think the confusion is pretty prevalent, regardless. Artists, their sensitivity—now emotionalism isn’t particularly sensitivity. We can be very emotional, but that doesn’t mean we’re sensitive. I mean you can create a piece of art that is totally abstract confusion and there might be a lot of emotion there, but that doesn’t mean it’s *sensitive*. Sensitivity is basically where you’re putting something else before yourself. You’re not the center of the universe. I mean that’s where the edges of sensitivity would *begin*. It’s where it’s not about me. So sensitivity is a little bit out of the box.

RW: Sometimes I feel that artists are people who feel an instinctive drive to find a real self, and that’s a search.

JB: Yes. I mean I’m playing one edge kind of hard. In old world Buddhism, artists usually were not required to follow the same practices that most people follow. The artist kind of has his own path because he has, back to my original point, he has something to offer.

Most people have to go through this long search before they can figure out, kind of have a sense of who they are. And, at the same time, it will be revealed to them what they have to offer. The whole process is coming to the point where you ask, “Who am I?” Then, if you get deep enough, everybody has a blueprint. Everybody, without exception!

Now artists have a gift and they start off on a little

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different level. That’s why artists have a different teaching. It’s kind of like the package is there. But there again, artists are some of the biggest misfits. But I see what you’re saying. Artists have intuitively the desire to offer something beautiful. We can get very confused about all that. You understand what I’m saying?

RW: I think the confusion is a tremendous problem. We’ve got the big, big confusion about money, too. We don’t need to go there. I think you’ve said it well.

JB: Unless you’re able to come to that point where it’s not about fulfilling your self-centered desires or needs. Even with an artist where you have these gifts, it’s inevitable that there will be confusion and loneliness and, in the background, a real sense of emptiness and longing.

RW: And how do you get to that point where you begin to get it that my self-centered wishes are not going to pay off so well? How do you start to realize that? You know what I mean?

JB: You bet I do! There are no shortcuts! Everybody has to be responsible for their own energies and their own experiences. The blueprint is in everybody. So it’s not something you could beckon from an outside source. *Everybody* has the higher. Part of the higher is that instinctive impulse to offer—just like the sun shines.

RW: That’s nice.

JB: The blueprint, the analogy, is like the sun. The sun may be hidden behind the vale of an overcast sky, but the sun is there even though you can’t see it.

Traditions can lay out certain methods, but it’s all about eventually coming into your own ground, developing a relationship with your own sun. I mean, where you’ve got a pea brain, *but you think for yourself*. Where you actually have the data to make decisions from within yourself. You don’t have to rely on this or that. It’s in you.

And it’s not a *trick*. There’s no shortcut. It’s all about your own energies and reflecting on yourself



with a certain objectivity and accuracy. And sometimes you need some help. We tend to be very slippery and self-indulgent. And knowing when enough is enough, too. I'm talking about teachers and traditions.

Like the Buddha said, "I'm a dreamlike teacher bringing a dreamlike teaching to a dreamlike people." It's like Gurdjieff's "toast to the idiots," you know. All these different places where even the gods have their feet nailed to the floor. So all the time we have to be objectively cutting through our subjectivity. There are no shortcuts. The traditions will give us kind of the framework. But we've got to do the work and then after that, you have it within yourself. Sometimes you have to put yourself out on a limb, go against the current.

RW: Yes. Let's shift gears. That chain saw you were showing me, I think you said it was a sixty-inch bar?

JB: A sixty-inch bar. I went to college for a few years. It was a waste of time.

RW: You were there on a basketball scholarship, you said.

JB: Yes. Sure. I was a total jock. My whole worldview was from small logging communities. And I was a sports hero! I was probably going to end up a coach somewhere. God, help me! You know?

So even though I tried to play the game, the bottom dropped out and I just left school. I went up to Alaska and just started working logging camps. I mean, I was looking, but obviously, what I'd been doing was a farce. It didn't resonate with me and so I fell timber for a number of years. That's where the money was. You were your own business. You would go out and you'd live or die.

RW: What do you mean, you'd live or die?

JB: Well, you're falling trees all day long. I was a "faller." That was my job title and that's what I did all day long.

RW: There's a danger there.

JB: Oh yeah! It's *very* dangerous. And you better be savvy. You get paid by how much you do. And the elements—it's *no joke*. It's very adrenaline, very animal. You better have a good sixth sense. Usually people

don't retire from that line of work healthy. They retire because there's an accident. Eventually something gets you. It's never what you see. I was fortunate enough to get out of it. I mean, I could sit here and tell stories all day long.

I was falling timber in a float camp out of Sitka, Alaska and we were getting in a boat to go to work up the bay, and I had a real bad feeling that morning. I had enough sense to listen to it. I got in the boat that morning—and then I got back out.

RW: Wow!

JB: Yeah. [with some emotion] I said, "Get me a plane." And I flew to town. I sold everything I had, and that was that. I never went back.

RW: That's *amazing*.

JB: I was fortunate. You know, I was young and I went for the money. I took a lot of risks. I got away with a lot of things. But at a certain point, there's mathematics. So I had enough sense to get out of it. I had enough sense, and so that was it! Last time.

Anyway, through the years of every day falling timber, I learned skills with a power saw, you know, big saws.

RW: The big chain saws.

JB: The big chain saws, yes. All day long. And now the saw I'm using here is a bigger saw, and the skills are more refined. I'm actually cutting these big boards where's there's only an eighth of an inch differential on a huge plank. Then I clean them up with my hand tools. So it's a skill that even people who run chain saws, they don't do what I'm doing with a chain saw. But that's okay. It's just taking an artist's mentality with a big piece of equipment and extending it a little.

The big power saw is a real animal. It's not just something you pick up. It's a high skill. You really have to have a sense for what that monster's doing. The way you sharpen the chain, the bar you use, what direction you cut your wood. All these are things, and that's probably why no one is going to take my place doing what I do. That's a skill that I couldn't teach anybody.

RW: And you seem to have a natural feeling for design and image. Would you agree with that?

JB: Yes. It seems to be that way. I do have certain blockages that I come up against over and over. I don't have any art training. Maybe that's a blessing, too. I don't have any criteria I try to follow other than the raw material itself and the emotional sense of what's hidden in that mass. Sometimes you get it and sometimes you don't. But that's why I'll work with six, seven, eight, ten—you see those planks out there with the deer? I'm doing a number of those consecutively. With each one I get a little better. There's a sense of what you're looking for.

RW: What's that like when you catch it?

JB: Well, there's a moment of magic. You connect with it. There's an emotional sense of something, and you know it's there. If you have a deer and it's leaping, it's that freedom. It's the spirit you're talking about. The deer is just a form, but there's a movement you're trying to capture that speaks to our essence, that freedom of the spirit, the grace. You know it's there, but you might miss it. So you do another one.

RW: Something inside is the measure.

JB: Sure.

RW: And when you hit it?

JB: It resonates.

RW: That's how you tell.

JB: Then you got it. Then you move on to something else.

RW: Where are you going right now, would you say?

JB: [silent pause] As I am, I have moments of clarity where I kind of understand where I'm going. Then I have periods where I'm just going through the motions. Now it's an odd thing. I'm sitting with you and you ask me a question like that and I can't bring that up. But that doesn't mean it's not here.

We can actually have moments of clarity and then we can lose that. In the midst of all this talking, I don't know if I can answer that question, because I'm not there. But it's about offering, putting something back into this ocean as positive as I can, back into life.

Now I go out to shows and I'll have this art and it

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stops people in their tracks. It really touches people. It changes their state. They will ask questions.

RW: Is that something you find meaningful, just this interaction with people?

JB: Very much so. Now some people, you can tell, are just filling up space. But a lot of people are really touched and there's an opening. They connect with the magic. The conversations are very meaningful. They can be powerful. In my own way, it's something I can offer back.

I go into a show where there's fishing boats, Toyota trucks, fluffy ducks. The stuff I have is in a different category. You get a whole line up of this art and the people who are a little bit open, it stops them. And that's good.

RW: I would think so.

JB: Stops them in their tracks. And in these shows you might have 90,000 people come through. So I'm just small, but there's an effectual impact and exchange. This allows me to grow, too. To the degree you can put something back, that's the degree to which the shutters will open. No exception. If there



BARTON WITH POWER SAW, 2008

was a shortcut, God only knows, I'd take it! But there isn't.

RW: Thank you. There's a lot here. I wonder if there's anything you'd like to add.

JB: [long silence] There's one thing I'd like to touch on and that's suffering. This parallels what we have talked about. Really, how to understand waking up in the morning, getting out of bed and hurting. Or to be more refined, the trauma, almost, of being an artist.

RW: Please say more about that.

JB: You're standing in front of this mass, and there's something in it. And it hurts. There's an element of stretching. On some level there's an element of tension. Just so there's no misconception about satisfaction and joy. Part of the physics of this is suffering. If you're going to put something back, that's essential from your own blueprint, there is going to be an element of suffering.

I don't mean morbid suffering. I mean, you're going to have to stretch, internally. You're going to have to struggle. You're going to have to sweat. You're

going to have a few sleepless nights where something is there, but you don't know quite what it is.

How to hold a question? You look at a big god-damned old chunk of wood and it weighs ten-thousand pounds and you know something is there, *you sense it*. How to hold that question? It's painful! How to hold the question in a very gentle way?

This allows something to come in and reveal itself. In relation to what we were talking about, the satisfaction, the joy—these are by-products. The work in the trenches—there are some sleepless nights.

RW: I'm glad you've added this. It's not just one big happy romp.

JB: No. You have to be able to hold the question until something reveals itself. To channel what needs to be channeled. Part of that is being able to take some heat. And rejection. I've been to shows and never sold a damn thing. Not a friggin' thing!

RW: How do you deal with disappointment?

JB: The beautiful thing is the body. I just go to work. I just put one foot in front of the other, go out and get

a piece of wood and go to work. Whether it's domestic strife or rejection or whether it's temporary insanity that we all have bouts with [laughs].

I just go to work. Then it all comes back. You're grounded. Emotional states come and go. If we want to find some sanity or clarity of mind within the context we're talking about, I mean, we have to travel certain grounds.

This is an example. A number of years ago I was having real trouble with my wife and I was as jealous as hell. Holy shit, I was even hiding in a woodpile one night trying to catch her cheating on me. *I had it bad.* Mrs. Stavely said to me, "Jim. You have to learn that *there's no problem outside of yourself.*" See? Now that is a key. That is the kind of thing where if you're really able to work and take it to heart, it will change your life.

So whenever a problem is out there, a little light needs to go off. Then I just put one foot in front of the other and kind of let the demons rattle a little bit, but I get my hands and my feet going, and I get back. It's practice. I've learned that my demons have *no ground* except what I give them. *Nothing.* There's no problem outside myself. *That's understanding.*

But that's in movement. I mean I have spells of insanity. But how long do I let it go before that little light comes on? So these points come closer and closer together. Before it could go for two or three days, months. Years! Now sometimes it's getting down to just a few minutes or maybe I even catch it in the moment! If I had to work on computers, I don't know what the hell I would do! I can only speak for myself, and I'm fortunate that what I do is very physical.

RW: Coming back to the body? To sensation, right?

JB: Oh, when you grab that big power saw, for example. Holy shit! You better be there! [laughs] That sucker will take a leg off! You know? The rest of the demons will flee. [laughs]

[I turn off the recorder, but we are still talking and soon I turn it on again...]

JB: Part of what really has meaning for me is that *everything I use is salvage.* I mean, it's basically stuff that has no commercial value. Those doors, for instance. I found a whole pile of doors at an old school that was being torn down. They were covered with lead paint. Nobody wants to tackle all that old lead paint, but



BARTON'S TREE HOUSE BEDROOM WITH INLAID FLOOR

underneath that lead paint were these beautiful fir doors. So that's an example. A lot of the raw wood I use comes from old snags.

RW: Tells us what a snag is.

JB: A snag basically is a dead tree. Most of them, like these red cedar snags you see here, are kind of decayed in the middle. I'll take portions of them and make sculptures. It's just like the big redwood root you saw out front with the three spirits on it. That's just a piece of a stump that was logged back in the 1880s. It's just salvage. Some is debris laying out in the woods, some are these old stumps. I even had stuff with springboard marks on it.

RW: What's a springboard?

“Part of the physics of this is suffering. If you’re going to put something back, that’s essential from your own blueprint, there is going to be an element of suffering. I don’t mean morbid suffering. I mean, you’re going to have to stretch, internally. You’re going to have to struggle.”

JB: That’s where the loggers were using these big crosscut saws. They’d get way up on these stumps to get above the swellbutt. See, down here it might be twenty feet in diameter, but if you go up twenty feet you’d be talking about a ten foot diameter. If you’re doing this by hand, then you’re going up. They built these platforms and the springboard marks were the notches that would hold the springboards. This is old stuff!

The redwoods in particular, good God! Energetically—I showed you the planks out there that I’m carving—six hundred and seventy-five years in just that one plank! That’s amazing! Columbus wasn’t even here yet, was he.

RW: You’re right.

JB: So that’s some pretty amazing mojo, energetically. It encapsulates something. There’s a lot of power in that.

RW: It must be satisfying to use that material that’s been overlooked and that no one is ever going to use.

JB: Absolutely! It really is. It’s a lot like what our teachers do for us, I guess. We’re all kind of like throw-

aways. It’s probably true for most everyone who seeks deeper meaning. You don’t seek because you’re feeling good. You’re a wreck. Your life is a wreck.

It’s not like you’re looking for this new, perfect piece of wood. Actually, inevitably, the most difficult piece of wood I can find might turn out to be the best. I’m not just saying that. I’ll be damned if it isn’t true!

The biggest, ugliest, orneriest piece of wood always turns out to be the best! Even though I say this to you, there’s always a certain amount of disbelief, but it happens that way every frickin’ time!

I’ll take pieces of wood and I’ll set them aside because I can’t use them. I go back a year or two later and, of course, my vision has become refined, and I’ll see something in it that I couldn’t see a year ago. And it always turns out to be the best. I’m not kidding! That’s the way it is [laughs].

RW: That’s beautiful. And as you’ve suggested, there’s the hopeful thought that there may be some analogy to us here. Some of us screwed-up people may, God willing, have something to offer.

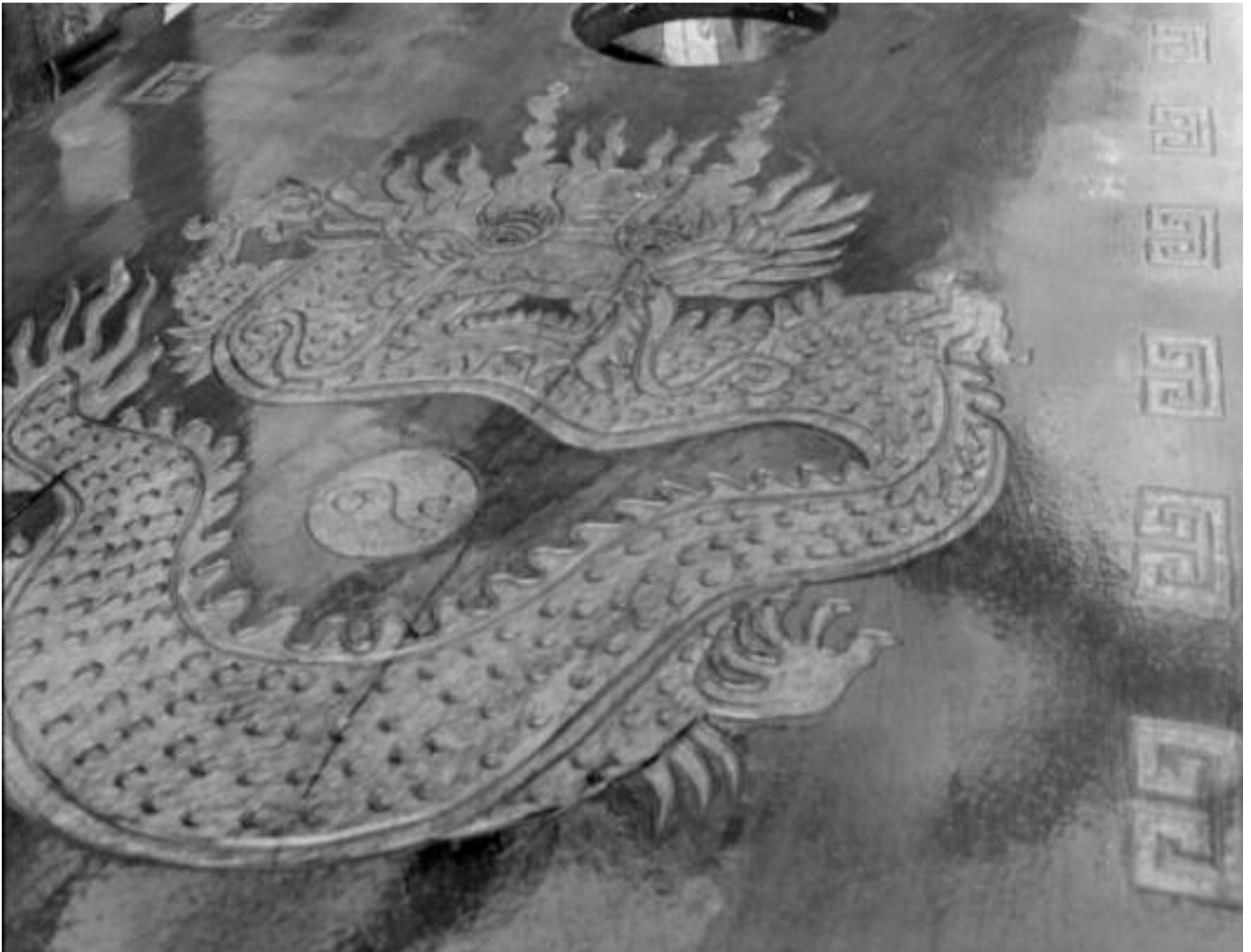
JB: I talked with a man who was really close to Trungpa. He was running a center in Colorado. Of course there would be young people flocking there and coming and going and he’d pick out the ones he thought had the most promise. So Trungpa would come and sit down and he’d ask, “Who’s new?” And he’d tell him about the ones he thought were promising. Well, Trungpa wouldn’t be at all interested. He’d want the troublemakers. These are the ones he’d be interested in. I just had to laugh when I heard that story. What can I say?

RW: You identified a little bit with that.

JB: Sure. Well, in all traditions you have these stories of these guys who misconstrued the teaching. Of course, when they got it together, they ended up doing just fine. [laughs]

Like I was saying earlier, everything is polarized. So to whatever degree our affliction is, if we can transform that, that’s our saving grace. It’s very, very interesting.

RW: Now you mentioned earlier that most of the nineties you’d been in prison. Do you want to say something more about that?



LARGE HAND-CARVED TABLE TOP IN PROGRESS

“Actually, inevitably, the most difficult piece of wood I can find might turn out to be the best. I’m not just saying that. I’ll be damned if it isn’t true! The biggest, ugliest, orneriest piece of wood always turns out to be the best!”

JB: I’ll fill that out a little bit. Earlier I was talking about, as an ordinary person, we’re pretty much interested in fulfilling our own self-centered desires. But a person ideally can evolve. And part of that is where it *slowly* begins to dawn on you that you’re never really going to fill yourself up by accumulating outside things, whether it’s fame, power, a beautiful woman or money. Now most people don’t make it that far.

Now back in the late 80s I was, we use the word “busted” for growing marijuana. I had the biggest indoor growing operation in U.S. history. I mean, it was a very serious thing. The feds wanted to put me in jail for forty years. Now this all relates, in the bigger



CARVED PANELS HIDING BARTON'S FIREWOOD STORAGE

picture, to my selfishness. So here I am now an artist. That same energy that took me so far down allows me to have the view that I have now. They're not really separate. So that's a key point.

So as far as my experience in prison, I mean, like they say, be careful what you pray for. I remember I was so belligerent I'd say, "Well God, if what I'm doing is wrong, then let me have it. To hell with it!" It's not like I didn't have some idea of the higher, but I was still stubborn as a fucking mule! So, *if it's true, then show me!* You know? So anyway, I got drilled.

RW: You got drilled?

JB: I got arrested and sent to federal prison. I mean I

needed to be really crunched! *Really crunched.* Because I was just so stubborn that I wasn't going to get it—even though I'd been given *all* these teachings. Even though I could talk the talk, the fire just hadn't burned hot enough. I just wanted to fill out that part about the prison. I've been talking about the energy, the physics, the mathematics, the heat, the desperation, even the suffering and difficult times. I think these are the important ingredients. I think it's important to throw that out there. Even though I have a certain stability now, there's a price.

RW: You've paid the price.

JB: I'm paying. There are degrees. It doesn't end. ♦