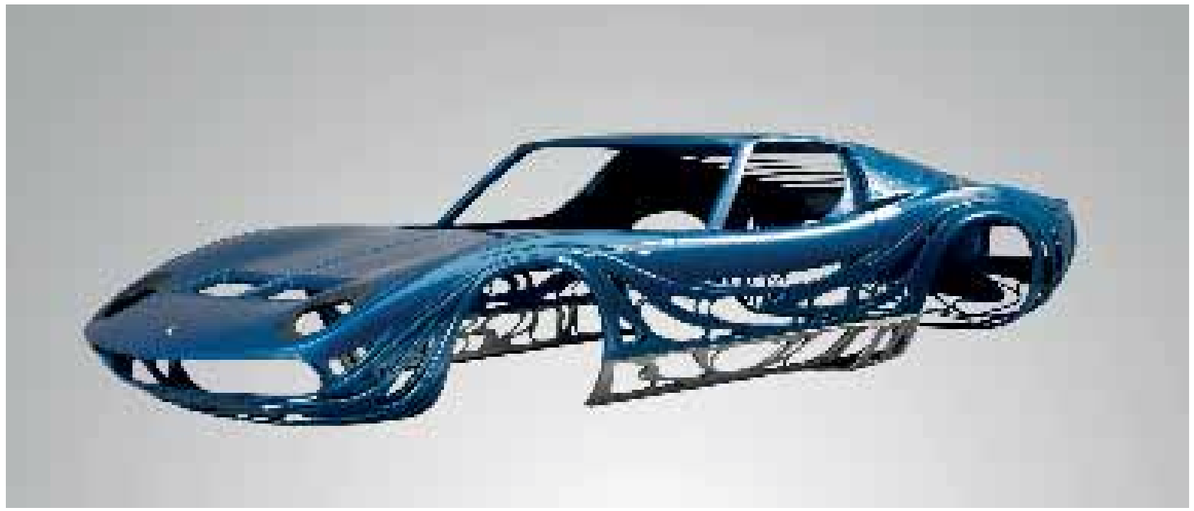
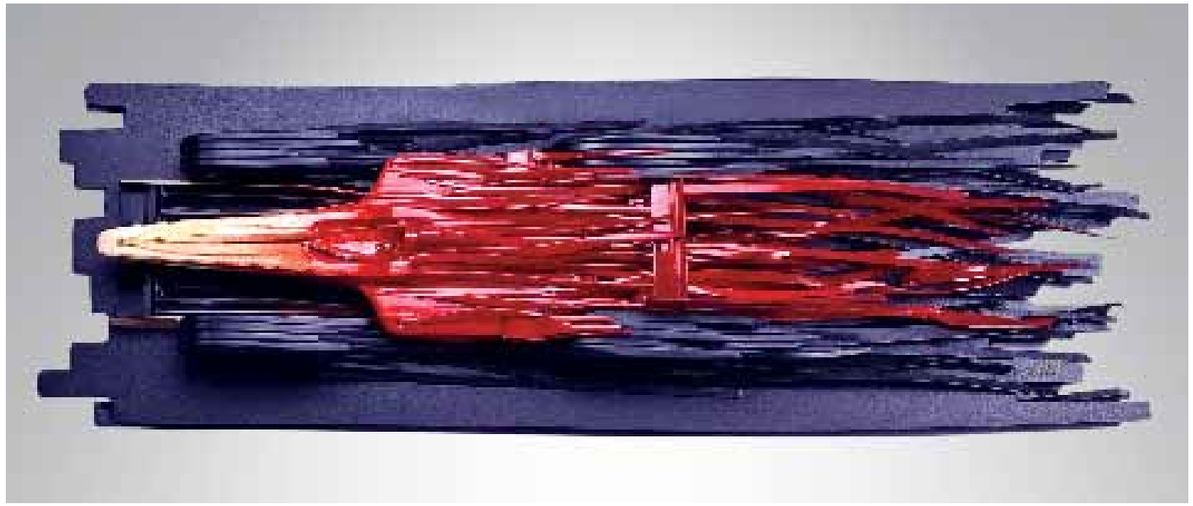
DENNIS HOYT

MOTORING ART'S 'GOD OF WOOD'

American sculptor Dennis Hoyt creates motoring art like no other, spending months at a time carving his work from huge pieces of wood

WORDS David Lillywhite





ART SHOULDN'T BE a literal interpretation of something,' says Dennis Hoyt, as he runs his hands along the crazy rooster tail of his *Psychedelic 917* sculpture. 'You're buying an artist's work because you want his imagination. If it isn't engaging, no-one will want it.'

What makes Dennis's sculptures particularly engaging is the material they're made from: wood. 'It's very sensual, very tactile,' he explains. 'There's a warmth to it.' And it's true: where bronze is cool and remote to the touch, you can't help but want to feel the contours and grains of the wood.

Ask why he chose to work with wood, and he'll initially tell you: 'If I'd chosen to paint, there were 300 other painters; if I'd gone into bronze, there were 30 other sculptors of bronze; but no-one was pushing wood, and 28 years later there's still no-one, so I must be crazy.'

Yet delve deeper and you'll find that Dennis, now 65, has a long history of woodworking – his father having taught him the his carpentry skills – and a fascination for cars. At the age of six, again with help from his father, he built a dragster using tractor tyres at the rear, wheels from his brother's tricycle at the front and a bathtub for the cockpit.

A few years later, when his family moved to a farm in Idaho, Dennis would sit in a tree at the side of the main road watching the cars pass by; once he even spotted a Chrysler Turbine. This proved more exciting than academia...

'I didn't do too well at high school,' admits Dennis, who now lives in Oregon. 'I found classes boring, the teaching too conventional.' And so he went on to dabble in architecture, drawing, sculpting and music until an epiphany later in life.

'I married late, at 35, and for the first three months I kept talking about cars. So my new wife says, "Why don't you do something about it then?" That really pissed me off! But I went out and did a 911 in wood – I wanted to give a different perspective on the Porsche.'

That was in 1984 and the result was a sensuous sculpture of the 911's distinctive rear quarter. Though beautiful, it feels tame next to his later work, which quickly evolved into much wilder, more imaginative pieces of art. In 1988 he →

Above and right
The *Psychedelic 917* takes shape in Dennis Hoyt's studio – note how the body and tail were created separately; *The Ragged Edge* Ferrari sculpture was created in 1993 as a tribute to Gilles Villeneuve.

A FERRARI 312 SCULPTURE IS BORN

From tree trunk to art (in approximately four months)

Basic shape
Dennis has become handy with a chainsaw, using it to cut tree trunks or logs to the correct rough shape. The quality of the wood is, of course, critical to the success of the sculpture.

Hollowing out
It can typically take 40 days to get to this stage, with the wood shaped and hollowed out. Dennis tries to minimise the number of pieces used to create the sculpture, to maximise impact.

Assembling the pieces
As the separate parts go together, Dennis also has to consider how the sculpture will be mounted. One work, 9ft long, cantilevers out from the wall, without visible supports.

Adding the dye
Dye rather than paint provides the finishing touch but that in itself is a black art, because the dye soaks away almost instantly, and is seen again only with the application of a clear fixer.

Right and below
Ferrari F50 gives the illusion of speed with a long, complicated rooster tail and two sets of rear wheels to create a speed 'blur'; Dennis sprays dye onto the *Psychedelic 917* Porsche.

became the first artist to be unanimously elected to the Automotive Fine Arts Society and by 1991 he was the toast of the art display at the Pebble Beach Concours with *Into The Night*, a 3.66m-long sculpture of a Ferrari 512 and Porsche 917 taking the Mulsanne Corner at Le Mans. Not only did this catch the attention of motoring art collectors, it also won Dennis the coveted Peter Helck Award.

Two years later came another turning point, with a homage to Gilles Villeneuve called *The Ragged Edge*, the start of Dennis's experiment with creating the feeling of speed and movement in his sculptures. More recently some of his work, often created for himself rather than for customers, has become more abstract.

'I want to push it even further than this,' says Dennis, gesturing towards the *Psychedelic 917*. 'I want to fool the eye and fool the mind; I'm looking at creating a 32ft-long F1 car sculpture that people can sit in and become involved with. I want to show just how far automotive art can go.'

However wild the sculpture, Dennis is sticking with his method of dyeing rather than painting his works.

'Paint hides the grain,' he says. 'Dye soaks deep into the wood – I had to teach myself how to use it. I called so many people, but no-one knew. When you spray dye onto wood, *woof*, it's just gone, and you can't see it until you apply a clear fixer. Where I don't want the dye to soak in, I use liquid latex.'

Now Dennis has also started to combine metal with the wooden sculptures, merging one material with the other; the Ferrari F40 work is typical of this, but Dennis is sticking with wood as his main medium. 'That's what I'm known for. People have called me 'the god of wood!' End

SEE MORE of Dennis's work at www.dennishoyt.com.