



## **"The Tool at Hand" cracks open a compelling dialogue**

By Bobby Tanzilo

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Imagine you're organizing an exhibition of art that you've never seen in person before. That'd be a little risky, right?

Now imagine curating an exhibition of art which doesn't even exist yet.

That's exactly what Milwaukee's [Chipstone Foundation](#) embarked upon last spring when it sent a video invitation to 18 artists, asking them to participate in what would become "[The Tool at Hand](#)," currently on view at Milwaukee Art Museum.

"The challenge presented to the artists sounds simple: create a work of art with one tool. The material and tool to be used were left open-ended, with the purpose of encouraging creativity within the one-tool constraint," said Ethan Lasser, the exhibition's curator.

"For centuries, artists and artisans have felt a particularly intimate connection to their tools. Tools have been described as extensions of the body, and in certain cultures, they have been revered as sacred objects with lives of their own."

Sixteen artists – including four from Wisconsin – took Chipstone up on its offer and in just a few months created works that can be seen in the small but incredibly engaging show on view in Milwaukee Art Museum's Decorative Arts Gallery, on the lower level, through April 1, 2012.

While the works themselves are visually interesting, of course, what's most exciting about the show is the dialogue it cracks open about what qualifies as "a tool." Among the 16 different artists are nearly as many ideas about what each one believed was the tool they used.

Hongtao Zhou said he used his hands as the tool to create his Burnature chair made out of wax. But, the Madison-based artist used a double boiler to melt the wax. Is that a tool? Is the wax itself – in addition to being a medium – also a tool?

And if the hand is a tool, shouldn't all of the artists have had to stop there?

Jon Prown used a single knife to carve his piece – a curvaceous wooden spoon – or did he?

Watch the [video](#) that accompanies his work (each artist made a video; see them [here](#)) and you can see Prown using a hammer to tap the knife through the wood, a pencil to mark cut lines and a file to sharpen the blade, too.

This is not a criticism of Prown or any of the artists in the show. Opening this dialogue is what the show is all about said Chipstone's Claudia Mooney.

Could an artist use multiple brushes to paint a work in oil on canvas and still be said to use one tool? Or would that artist be limited to a single brush?

For her contribution to the show, painter Joy Garnett opted for one brush.

But silversmith Ndidi Ekubia used a range of hammers to create "Connection Vase" for "The Tool at Hand."

"It was an experimental show to see what the constraint would cause artists to think," said Mooney.

"Whether they would see it as a constraint or an opportunity to experiment or an opportunity to use a tool that they don't normally use, or to use (a tool) in a completely different way. We were open to whatever they made."

What is also interesting is to see which tool each artist chose. In Prown's case, he chose a tool he knows intimately and with which he has much experience.

One of the most interesting approaches was taken by UW-Madison metalsmith Lisa Gralnich. Instead of calling on one of the tools of her trade, she turned to a brush she's had that has sat idle for decades and used it to paint images of the tools she uses when creating her metalwork.

"We didn't know what we were going to get," said Mooney. "So it was cool to see when the work started coming in that it was really good. We knew what the artists did normally, but since we didn't know if they were going to do something in the vein they usually do if they were going to do something completely different, so in some sense (we knew).

"That's why we picked the artists that we invited because at least we knew what kind of work they did do and we knew we'd get something, or we hoped, we'd get something good. Something that was sound."

Mooney said that it wasn't until shortly before the show was installed that she, Lasser and the rest of the Chipstone team knew what they were getting.

"Most of (the artists) tried to keep it pretty secret," Mooney said. "Most of them gave us some hints. By the time they were mailing them we kind of knew what they were like."

And what they're like is pretty compelling.