

Cabinetmakers bring fine furniture to show

By SEAN REAGAN
Staff Writer

WILLIAMSBURG — When the people behind Studio Cochineal — the same two men who comprise Essence Woodworks in Williamsburg — unpack their latest creations at the Philadelphia Furniture and Furnishings Show this week, they're taking more than just another step in their career.

It's a flying leap of faith.

Over the past year, owner Carl Schlerman and his employee, Bart Niswonger, have been discussing, designing and finally building a broad range of furniture that pushes the limits of what most people envision when they think of a table or a trivet.

"It's nice not to get stuck in a rut," said Schlerman, who describes their work as a blend of traditional high-end cabinetmaking — what Essence Woodworks has always done — and art.

"We've put a lot of time and energy into this," he said. "It's going to be interesting to see what people think of it."

The juried show in Philly, which is celebrating its 10th anniversary, brings together makers of studio furniture and hand-made functional and decorative objects from across the country.

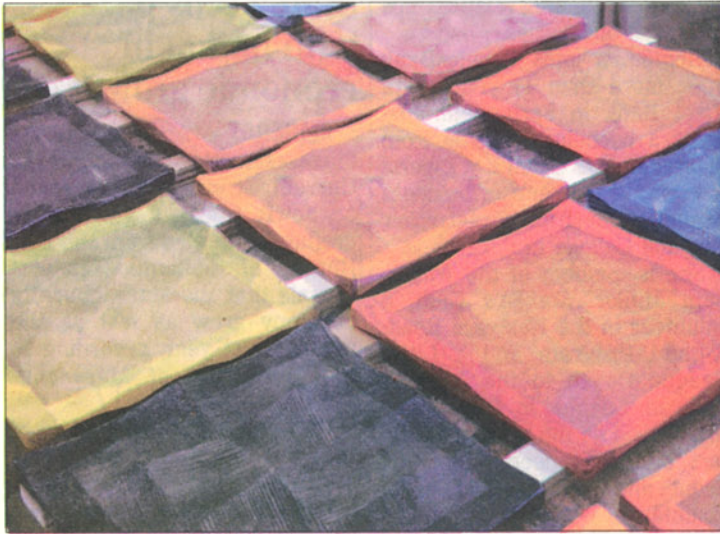
For Studio Cochineal — named after an insect that was used to create the traditional red dye of pre-Hispanic Mexico — it's a chance to see if the vision that's been driving them for the past year is going to drive others as well.

Schlerman, 46, an engineer by training, has been working in carpentry since he finished high school. At 19, he owned a construction company in Seattle. He has operated Essence Woodworks since 1995 when it was located in Easthampton.

In 2002, he moved it to its present location at 2 Depot Road in Williamsburg.

In 2003, Schlerman designed and built the enormous white oak circulation desk that now graces the renovated Meekins Library. He spent over two months building and installing the donated desk, which he says has an estimated market value of \$20,000.

Today, the desk is the library's vital center where staff and



CHARLES ABEL

Essence Woodworks wood trivets are being readied for a show.



CHARLES ABEL

Bart Niswonger, an employee at Essence, prepares frames for a final coat of paint.

patrons meet.

Also that year, he began to work with Niswonger — a disaffected computer scientist who was building furniture in his apartment during graduate school.

As the two built cabinets that they would eventually transport and install in Boston area homes, their conversations always turned to furniture of a different stripe.

"It really was an iterative process that happened at lunch," said Schlerman. "We would try and figure out how to do something, like sculpting a dish into wood, and then what it would be good for — how could you integrate it into something useful?"

The result of those conversa-

tions — now scattered throughout the 2,000 foot square shop — is impressive. Tables and chairs, chests, trays, trivets and picture frames all blend classic forms with vibrant colors and subtle alterations in texture.

"It's really important to me that people can use this," said Niswonger, 30. "It's very functional and not delicate."

That is a critical distinction for both men, particularly Niswonger, who said he turned away from a career in computers because "the tangibility of furniture appeals to me."

"It's exhausting and it's challenging," he said. "But it's something that you can see at the end of the day."

Schlerman said that while tra-



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Essence Woodworks owner Carl Schlerman sets out wood trivets for a final coat of color in preparation for a juried show in Philadelphia this week. Schlerman's shop is on Depot Road on Williamsburg.

ditional cabinetmaking continues to challenge him — he has no plans to put Essence Woodworks on the shelf — he still appreciates the opportunity to diversify and push the boundaries of his chosen medium.

"I'd love to build a whole kitchen that looks like this," he said.

He may yet have that chance.

Even though Schlerman and Niswonger are sanguine about their prospects in Philadelphia — conventional wisdom says you have to attend the same show several years in a row before you make a sale or get commissioned — they know they could strike gold at the same time.

For the moment, however, they're staying focused on the

work, carefully honing it in preparation for their first foray into the world of fine furniture. They're in this for the long haul.

"Doing something different is a big step," said Niswonger. "We'll see how it works. We've made it. Now we just have to sell it. I feel optimistic."

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