

Turner, Christopher, "Against the Grain," *Modern Painters*, July/August 2008: 42-44.

MODERNPAINTERS



WORKING PRACTICE

Against the Grain

Alison Elizabeth Taylor documents the creation of her virtuosic wood inlays exclusively for *Modern Painters*
by Christopher Turner

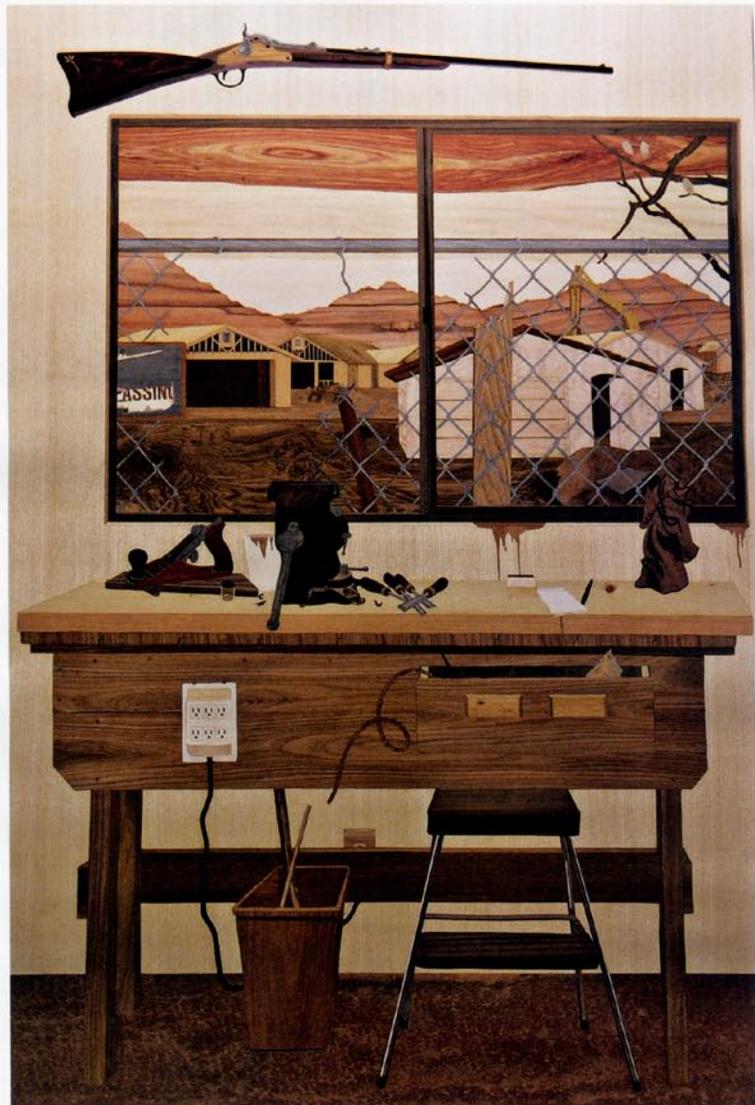
In 2001, the comic-book artist Alison Elizabeth Taylor bought a range of wood-grain contact papers from a 99-cent store in Las Vegas and collaged them together to create a small portrait of a friend. Two years later—when she came to New York to study for an MFA at Columbia University—she saw the Duke of Urbino's *studiolo* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and learned that her experiment had a venerable history.

In the *studiolo*, or study, the accoutrements of the duke's power are meticulously rendered in trompe l'oeil marquetry. The Renaissance room was designed, Taylor observed, to impress—it was, in her description, “a tool of intimidation, a form of glorified autobiography.”

Inspired by the *studiolo* to work with real veneers, Taylor began to use the unusual technique of intarsia, in which the artist inlays sections of wood to form an image, to depict a series of pictorially complex and unsettling scenes: two boys shoot at a stag from an SUV parked on a suburban street; a miniskirted woman scrambles over the roof of a car to escape her abuser, as a young girl takes up position between them; a cocktail-wielding virago lounges by a pool, her sagging breasts and leathery musculature skillfully sculpted in wood grain. The contrast between the aristocratic marquetry-like method and these tacky worlds appealed to Taylor. “The people that are portrayed in the inlays aren't the kind of people that were historically portrayed by this fancy medium,” she explains.

The artist just completed her own humble version of the Met's exhibit; it was recently on view at the James Cohan Gallery in New York. It is her most ambitious work to date, for which she jigsawed together thousands of slivers of exotic woods—her studio in Brooklyn is strewn with paper-thin sheets of tulipwood, afromosia, kevazinga, and sapele—to create an 8-by-10-foot room full of scattered clues to an imaginary occupant: an ex-military man who has fled out West, “trading comfort for privacy and freedom.”

A ramshackle cabin holds a gun cabinet and a Vietnam helmet decorated with an ace of spades. A hand grenade has been turned into a lamp. And a carpenter's workbench is covered with the tools of the inhabitant's trade. (As Renaissance craftsmen did, Taylor depicts the tools of her own profession within the work.) One window looks out onto a veneered vista of virgin desert; another reveals the threat of encroaching development. Tags with dollar signs dangle from the man's possessions: in this new world, everything has a price. ♦



LEFT AND ABOVE: Details of *Room* (work in progress). 2007–08. Wood veneer. 120 x 96 in. All photographs courtesy the artist.



LEFT AND BELOW: Details of *Room* (work in progress), 2007-08.
ABOVE AND BOTTOM LEFT: Samples of the thin sheets of wood veneer
that Taylor jigsaws together.

