

# Interview with Marc Kirschenbaum

By Jan Polish

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*Marc Kirschenbaum was an OBC participant for many years. Now 30, he has recently published his first book. He lives in New York, works as a computer industry headhunter, and plays and composes music for the guitar.*

*Jan Polish: When did you first start folding?*

Marc Kirschenbaum: I was folding paper when I was three. It was never that sophisticated, not pure origami--paper constructions, almost paper sculpture. I had exposure to two lousy origami books, with lots of cutting and pasting, and I thought that this was all there was to origami. I took a class in origami when I was in the first grade--someone who guest taught, and to this day I'm dying to know who it was. When the model was taught I was one of the few people who couldn't do it. I even remember the model--it was the traditional jumping frog, but it was taught with a "magic fold" that wasn't explained very well.

When I was about eight, someone gave me a flapping bird and I tried to reverse engineer it. I was successful, but it was very confusing to me. I was very impressed. It was the only thing I'd seen to that point that seemed challenging and interesting. There seemed to be very little, and when I think about it there *were* very few people and models at that time ... you couldn't find many books in bookstores. My parents bought me books, and my father helped with the first model, but soon I was better than he was. It was very exciting to be better than him in a week. That's a very exciting thing about origami... it's something you can do better than your parents very quickly.

I was very playful with the origami. I didn't like a lot of the designs in the books so I changed them. If it only looked good from one side, then I made it look good from both sides. I took the traditional boat and turned it into a speedboat. I was already doing real design work on models that were later published. I worked on lots of different designs at that time, but I never consciously thought, "I'm being creative." I never met anyone else doing original origami--just traditional stuff--and I thought there's got to be someone else, but I didn't know where.

*JP: How did you find out that there was a more organized world of origami?*

MK: They had just started The Friends, in 1980, and I was living in New Jersey and in New York on the weekends. I saw the Japan Airlines tree on Fifth Avenue, and there was an Origami By Children exhibit on the other side. On the tree, origami was a decoration, but with OBC, it was on exhibit. This was the first time I saw origami being treated as an art; I'd never seen that before, and I was overwhelmed. They gave out a package with real origami paper, which was the first I'd ever had. Within a week I got in touch with The Friends. I left a message, and **Michael Shall** called me, and I was so impressed. At that time The Friends was so small that Michael knew everyone, and called everyone ... there were perhaps 100 members. He asked me if I knew **Lillian Oppenheimer** and **Alice Gray** ... I had no idea who those people were. He was excited that a young person was joining, new blood, and he always seemed to be keeping tabs on me.

My first convention in 1981 was when I met Michael Shall in person. It was amazing. It was held in the Children's Lunchrooms at the Museum, and there were under 100 people. On the form I had offered to teach three models--a chair, a football player, and a sled. What's really funny is that these are all intermediate complex models with sinks. I didn't realize that spread squashes were hard. He asked me how many steps each had, and I had no concept of what a step was. It was a fiasco, but it worked out well in the end. Everyone applauded, and was impressed that I had created them. Here's this 10½ year old just walking up and teaching three models!

At the open house at Lillian's apartment I went shopping [the supply center used to be there]. It was all incredibly overwhelming. The types of models I created the day before and the day after were night and day. I got **Neal Elias'** book, and his work really influenced me, his box pleating. Even today in terms of composition, his color changes are really impressive. Also the way he handles multi-subject models. You have to know how to handle the give and take between the models--it's not the same as doing two separate models.

I got **John Montroll's** first book, and that was a big influence on me, too, although Elias' work made more sense. At that time, John's work seemed to be coming from left field. I didn't do things like that until years later.

By 1984 or '85 I was creating three models a day ... not that they were so great, but I was just churning them out. I wasn't thinking of it as something to diagram and give out to others to fold, not like today. I just memorized my favorites. I was living in New York then, and started to diagram. The first diagrams I submitted they said, "you can't draw that way." Instead of just mailing in my diagrams, I would bring them over. They were putting the book together, and I sort of helped out. Before I knew it I was an Editor, and then on the Board of Directors!

*JP: Did being in OBC influence you?*

MK: I never thought of it as an institution, but more as an outlet. When I saw it, I thought ... wow, origami on a pedestal. Something that could be art, and I could be an artist. Having my work shown was not a pervading, driving thing but rather a reason to keep it up, to have something to enter.

*JP: Where do you get your ideas?*

MK: When I was a kid starting out, I would do anything. I was open to any idea, anything.... Now that my models are epics, I'd better really like the model, since I have to diagram it. I'm getting more and more selective. If someone requests a model, I'll try to create it, but only if it interests me. Ten years ago I was diagramming six models a year, and now it seems to be less. Part of it is time, but part of it is that I need more motivation now.

*JP: Many of your early models were extremely complex, and then you seemed to move to more simple models. Was that a conscious shift, or just something that happened?*

MK: I never really thought of my models as being complex or simple. I never design a model as complex, but if someone asks me to make it simple, I will. It's just the way the model comes out. The early pureland [valley and mountain folds only] models I created were done when Paul Jackson challenged me in his column in the BOS magazine: can you fold such-and-such model in x steps? I designed eight models in one evening.

*JP: Which is harder to design, complex or simple models?*

MK: They're sort of the same, but simple is easier because you don't need the stamina ... just one burst of creativity. They're both fun challenges, but at a different pace.

*JP: Can creativity be taught?*

MK: You can teach different avenues, and you can give the student even more avenues to take, so yes, creativity can be taught. I'm not implying that every student can be a creator, but if there is interest and talent, yes. Aptitude equals openness. Some people think, OK, I'm not creative, but once you take that first step, and accept it. ...

If there is one problem with origami, it's that it has the highest learning curve of any art form. Everyone looks for instant gratification, but if you can't deal with the learning curve, don't do it! When I was starting, I had no expectations. Now kids get upset because they can't design something like John Montroll right away. But if you start young enough your brain gets tuned to it, like with music and being able to recognize tones. It's basically a language.

*JP: Does computer assistance take creativity out of the process?*

MK: No. Creativity is a mixture of craft and art. You need to have certain tools either in your head or in your computer, but artistry comes from within. Most artists have some kind of tools. Can an architect work without his ruler? They're not tools of creativity, but of design. What I put into it determines the final object. That's where the artistry comes in. By having the computer that doesn't see the way we see, we expand creativity. We see things we wouldn't have seen.

*JP: Where do you think origami is going?*

MK: Techniques keep improving. It's hard to look objectively at the present, but I think we're still in the middle of an origami renaissance, absorbing new techniques, having tools like TreeMaker [Robert Lang's computer program] to get over hurdles. It's hard to compare to other arts. We're at a period when most people are going for realism, in representational things, and seeing better ways to get there. Eventually things will simmer down, and people will go more into other directions--more with textures, pleating patterns, etc. Past the flat plane. Now pleats are being used. (Some sort of precreasing machine or press could really aid there!) Like Chris Palmer exploring different layers. All ideas being put together. Paul Jackson says he's trying to stay away from techniques, but I think his stuff is full of techniques. Obviously there's a lot of feeling in his work, but to do something drastically new, you need to get over technical hurdles.

*JP: Where's your work going?*

MK: I never really know. Right now I'm not really in the mood for epic models, because I've been busy with my book and other things. The next book I want to do is vehicles. I've started on a few, not intending them to be complex but I see no way around it. It's incredible fun, challenging both technically and artistically. You can make vehicles as charming as animals. People see them as cold, but you can have a lot of fun in how you interpret them.

And I'm in a constant progress of trying different papers and different techniques. For practical reasons I wouldn't make my own paper, but I've been doing wetfolding and backcoating, especially in the last few years.

*JP: How do you judge a new model?*

MK: I judge it for the folding sequence and also the finished product. As far as the sequence is concerned, I look for something I haven't seen - a strong sense of style in sequence as well as in the final model. The sequence doesn't need a climactic ending; you can have little climaxes here and there. It doesn't have to be a huge roller coaster. As for the finished product ... I look for something new, something that mixes the perspective of the creator and the perspective

of the viewer. Without an obvious name like Sad Face, the viewer doesn't automatically know what mood the artist is trying to present.

*JP: Would your life be very different without origami?*

MK: At one point I put it aside, but the circle of people makes it exciting. It's great to have that whole bunch of people to feed off of. I have other hobbies, like the guitar. Sometimes I enjoy that a lot more than origami because of the constant creativity. I enjoy drawing, too ... if you want to add another appendage you don't have to re-design the entire model!