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Artists sharpen knives to bring beauty to a skill of the past



Patrick Cull, left, and Barbara Hobot sharpen knives as a form of performance art at the Downtown Windsor Farmer's Market, Saturday, Oct. 4, 2014. (DAX MELMER/The Windsor Star)

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Carolyn Thompson

Oct 04, 2014 - 11:12 AM EDT

Last Updated: Oct 04, 2014 - 2:16 PM EDT

Patrick Cull slices a shiny chef's knife through a folded newspaper flyer. It cuts through with ease, leaving deep, clean lines in the paper.

Beside him, Barbara Hobot rubs a pocket knife against a red man-made abrasive stone, splashing water and running her fingers along the blade to check for grooves.

“For us, knife sharpening is something that can be beautiful, skillful, something that will stop you and ask you to take another look,” Hobot says. “These are the sorts of things that we think about when we think about art. Something that gets you to stop and look a little bit closer.”

The two artists were at the Downtown Windsor Farmers' Market on Saturday sharpening knives in public as a performance referring back to when sharpening trucks were ubiquitous and people owned perhaps two good knives that they used until they were worn.

The project, Spinning Our Wheels: A Mobile Sharpening Service in Honour of St. Catherine, uses custom-made bicycles to transport their mobile sharpening station. As they ride they ring a little bell to drum up business.

At the market, they set up a wooden bench and sat on either side, sharpening knives for free using a range of blocks each with a different grit.

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Patrick Cull and Barbara Hobot (not pictured) sharpen knives as a form of performance art at the Downtown Windsor Farmer's Market, Saturday, Oct. 4, 2014. (DAX MELMER/The Windsor Star)



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Hobot said she starts on one side with a harsh grit, working away the bumps and grooves and sharpens until she can feel a burr on the other side. Then she starts in on the flip side of the blade. Eventually she'll switch from the abrasive grit to a smoother one, creating a glass-like finish.

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A knife in bad shape can take about a half hour to sharpen. Both Hobot and Cull have lots of practice.

“It comes out of carving and working as a sculptor and always needing to have sharp chisels and knives to work with,” Cull said. “I developed these skills and of course they translate very well in the kitchen and with scissors and other applications. It’s something I’ve done for a long time. It developed into an artistic practice as well.”

After the market, the two artists will take one of the sharpening stones to the Art Gallery of Windsor, where it will be put on display as a symbol of the performance.

Sue Alpas brought her knives down to the market on Saturday and watched as Cull scraped her chef’s knife against a grey stone. She was among many market-goers who stopped to watch the rhythmic movement of blades against blocks. Some referenced their childhood, watching a man sharpen a knife against a spinning wheel. Others applauded the two for their skill.

“All of these old arts are dying and if we don’t step up, one day our children will never be able to see this,” Alpas said.

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