PLEASE, PLEASE, PLEASE

TOM LOESER

MUSEUM OF CRAFT AND DESIGN
HOUSTON CENTER
FOR CONTEMPORARY CRAFT
The Museum of Craft and Design, San Francisco and Houston Center for Contemporary Craft are thrilled to present this selection of work by Tom Loeser, including both iconic and contemporary pieces as well as new experimentations in cyanotypes and pyrographs. Guest Curator Glenn Adamson has assembled an exhibition that thoughtfully and exuberantly shares the work of one of the most unique voices in American studio furniture working today.

Soft-spoken and graciously witty, Tom Loeser creates furniture that is equally humorous and self-effacing. Loeser’s contributions to the American Studio Furniture movement build on the efforts of his predecessors to consider a piece of bespoke furniture as sculpture, as deserving of contemplation as it is of function. Along with many of his peers, Loeser moved furniture away from a preoccupation with technique and veneration of hardwood to an exploration of concept,
If you’re sitting right now, ask yourself this question: how much do you know about the chair you are in? Maybe you made it with your own hands, or got it from a friendly woodworker you know. More likely you don’t know much about the chair at all. Probably your chair was mass-produced, out of plastic, metal, or wood, upholstered in leather or fabric. Odds are you don’t know who made it, how, where, and under what circumstances. Consider a further question: if the chair you are sitting on is totally different, would your life be altered, even in a small way? What if your chair spun round, or flipped over, or could fold up to hang on a wall? What if it were explicitly designed to connect you to the act of sitting, and make you aware of your own position in the world, literally and figuratively?

These are issues that have motivated Tom Loeser. His investigation of unconventional, invitational furniture forms began in the early 1980s with a series of Folding Chairs, colorful seats that double as wall-hung art. More recently, he has made chests that swivel and slide, rocking chairs for two, rotary-action benches, and many other surprising shapes. Loeser aims to shake up our habits, and encourage us to be more aware of ourselves and our surroundings. He is after nothing less than a rescripting of everyday activity, turning acts normally unconsidered into opportunities for engagement and enjoyment.

Clearly, this is not child’s play. Loeser does have a lightness of touch, a fondness for bright colors and catchy titles. But one should not mistake these accessible aspects of his art for unseriousness. Indeed, his preoccupations have come to seem more relevant than ever in recent years, as public attention has migrated away from the physical realm and into the virtual. It is an open question how disastrous this is. Certainly, it would be hard to argue that our collective wisdom as a populace has increased since the advent of online discourse. But there is no doubt that losing touch with the material world is a bad thing. Each human-made artifact is an accumulation and distillation of prior generational knowledge. When we disregard these things, we are effectively disregarding our cultural inheritance.
It is in this context that one might approach Loeser’s work, beginning with a series of seating forms that feature found tool handles, set into natural-edge wood slabs. Though direct in their conception, and apparently straightforward in their execution (in fact, they are devilishly difficult to construct because of the play of angles), these objects are deeply referential. Within the history of handmade furniture, there is a clear reference to the Windsor chair, with turned spindles set into a plank seat, and to such luminaries as George Nakashima and J. B. Blunk, who used similar slabs in their work.

Loeser notes that he has been surprised by his attraction to the natural edge for this series – his work is usually cleanly finished and painted. Part of this is explained by the tools themselves, which suggest a direct relationship to raw materials. The “woodiness” of these objects also carries a second layer of referentiality to Loeser’s own surroundings. The slabs are all sourced locally in Madison, WI, from businesses that claim fallen trees, then cut, mill and dry the timber so that it does not go to waste. The tool handles, too, are mostly local – Loeser started collecting them when he arrived in the Midwest in 1991, with no clear intention in mind. He recalls seeing “old shovels sticking out of garbage cans every late winter,” a memory that is evoked in the composition of the seats, with the handles fanning upwards.

Another connection implicit in the tool benches recalls Loeser’s past work. Whether creating case furniture or seating formats, he has always been interested in gentle displacements of functionality. A chest might feature drawers that contain further drawers inside them, in a cascade of containment. People might be invited to sit on a form that rotates or tilts across a fulcrum. These pieces create opportunities for interaction – not only between people and objects, but between people and other people. In this spirit, the tool benches are intended to create “micro communities” through the arrangement of sitters’ relative positions. *Scythe by Scythe*, arguably the masterpiece of the group, uses the great sweep of two handles to separate its users into different spaces. This evokes the traditional forms of the love seat and the tête à tête (i.e., “head to head”), which suggest and even engender intimate relationships. Loeser has adopted this idea and applied it across a range of different postures and configurations, a lexicon of implied body language.

A group of outdoor benches employ the business end of the tools – an assortment of garden forks, shovels and antique lawnmower blades. After working with the handles for some time, Loeser had generated a large pile of unused offcuts, and it seemed natural to incorporate these, too, into his designs.
SCYTHE BY SCYTHE

2016, maple, hickory, scythe handles
Museum of Craft and Design

San Francisco’s only museum devoted exclusively to modern and contemporary craft and design, the Museum of Craft and Design (MCD) is dedicated to exploring and building appreciation for the connections among art, craft and design.

Houston Center for Contemporary Craft

Houston Center for Contemporary Craft (HCCC) is dedicated to advancing education about the process, product, and history of craft.
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