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Roy McMakin: His Art is Another's Furniture
by Rima Suqi

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The 58-year-old artist Roy McMakin insists that he is not a furniture designer. He calls his latest introductions — a chair, a sofa, two tables, a cabinet and a chest of drawers, all on display at the Lora Reynolds Gallery in Austin, Tex. — a “grouping,” not a collection. Mr. McMakin developed a cult following for his functional art after opening Domestic Furniture, a Los Angeles showroom, in 1987. He shut its doors in 1994, moved to Seattle and, three years later, founded Big Leaf Manufacturing, a workshop that produces Domestic Furniture designs. He now lives in San Diego while maintaining architecture and design studios in Seattle. (This interview has been edited and condensed.)

Q. This is the first, um, grouping you’ve done in quite some time.

A. Yeah, since the 1980s.

Q. The pieces will be multiples?

A. Yeah. I have no idea how many people want to buy these things, but the idea is to do a chair a year and sell a few of them. I’m not that interested, although I suppose I could be, in doing a chair that gets mass-produced.

Q. So you’re in it for love, not money.

A. The truth be told, architecture has been my most steady paycheck in life. The furniture thing has always been a bit hand-to-mouth. I do key pieces as part of house projects. I also continue to do studio artwork and show it.

Q. And all this without specialized training?

A. I had art training and got an M.F.A. I haven’t taken a single architecture or design course in my life.

Q. None of your furniture is what it seems; some explanation seems necessary for each piece.

A. I have always seen furniture as incredibly loaded, meaningful objects. Kids, I think, are love-seeking beings. Since that wasn’t coming from my father, I imprinted on furniture. We never went to museums or did anything cultural, so I was going around my house trying to categorize the more meaningful piece of furniture versus the less meaningful piece of furniture. I was doing this as a really young person, I think by the time I was 10.

Q. How is this thinking reflected in your work?

A. Whenever I create a piece of furniture, I’m trying to get people to see it as if they were staring at their hand and seeing it for the first time. I pretty early on found if I altered an eighth of an inch here or there at certain key elements, it made people see it differently and not know why. A designer is problem-solving. I’m all about the meaning and the perception of the object and the emotional hit you get from the object. It’s what artists do. That is why my stuff feels different.

lora reynolds gallery



Q. Let's talk about some of those pieces.

A. I think the one called the "One Door Two Door Cabinet" is the closest to pure furniture design, and the idea of humor and visual puns within design. It looks like one door, but opens into two doors. I categorize that as furniture humor, for whatever it's worth.

Q. The "11 AM Chair" was inspired by an Edward Hopper painting.

A. Other people looking at Hopper paintings are looking at the stoic, empty-looking people, and I'm looking at the furniture. That's the way it's always been. The chair is not the center of the painting "Eleven A.M."; it's half covered up by the woman sitting on it. It was really fun to try to figure out what the form of the chair would be, and what the fabric would be, based upon what you could see of it.

Q. "The Chest of Drawers Behind James Jamesson and Jimmy Fanz in Raging Stallion Studios' 'Timberwolves'" may be the longest name ever given to a piece of furniture.

A. My art titles are long. Sometimes there's content important to a piece, and I find the best way it sticks with a piece is to make it the title.

Q. So you were watching porn ...

A. Porn has never been that much of a thing for me. I found a few different blogs to follow on Tumblr, and one had that dresser. Dressers are iconic things for me, so I had to figure out where it came from, and it's from this movie. So I buy the movie. And at key moments two of the actors are right in front of the dresser. Blocking it, showing it. And I'm staring at this scene going, "Would you guys just move?" I am trying to do my drawing and get the colors right, and it's really not working. So I have to bring the movie in to show Barbara, who has worked with me, developing color for 20 years. We're staring at it, trying to figure out the browns. Then three guys from the shop needed to see it for other details. This is the stuff memories are made of.