

Bay Area Furniture Art 2003

This show has brought together 23 talented artists working in a realm of art + design that thrives on defying formal definition. "Furniture art" simultaneously embraces and rejects sculpture, object, experience, and utility. The works are subtle, radical, and live in the interpretation of that line. The diversity of the artists represented in Bay Area Furniture Art 2003 provides us with an opportunity to examine this complex genre.

Even in a genre where physical utility is irrelevant and tradition is continually challenged, a strong emphasis on craft is assumed. With bold and nearly obsessive flair, craft comes front and center with "Atlantic Ridge" by Florian Roeper. Charred fir and polished cedar are locked in a sumptuous life or death grasp.

Potential is unleashed through the works of some of the newer artists, as evidenced by the expert craft and conceptual precision of Maiko Sugano's "Tree", "Ripples", and "Sky Building". By comparison, Maggie Birmingham's "Love's Labor" begins with a much more familiar form, evoking a relaxed, storybook scene. Yet, homespun details literally woven into the wood completely transform our expectations—making it equally inviting of wonder as Sugano's budding modernist, more abstract works.

Minimalist shapes and industrial materials are what Miranda Leonard employs in the service of design and art. Her piece, "Stereo Stand" is literal in use, yet unusual in its simple form, and informal material. Through it, she has transformed our relationship with the object's place in the pecking order of furniture.

Transformation, both physical and utilitarian, is explored by many other artists in this show. Canan Tolon plays with it, through a presentation of brutally simple materials. A surprise being that her piece "Seatable" is quite comfortable, and the proportions and functionality are expressly human. Chris Werner's "Light Table" transforms our experience of the coffee table—swerving from intimacy to operating theatre with its illuminated spine to

Comfort, or the illusion of it, features in the slightly iconic, bassinet-like form of Dave Chapman's "Egg 2". His beautiful willow pieces invite us to be held as gracefully as the volumes and spaces they create. Jef de Buyzer/Eileen Kennedy's piece "Day Dream/Big Sky" begs to be caressed, and obviously offers a suggestion of a much more intimate discourse.

Humor is applied in the seemingly mundane works of the tabletop piece. Michael Goldman skewers and nearly whets our appetite for tabletop statements. The reference of binoculars for an object so close in proximity to our food, brightly mocks the endeavor to elevate hors d'oeuvres.

Simplicity and graphic boldness find unique expression in furniture art. Chris Luomanen's "Stool", for example, leaves only subtle clues to its simple form's utility – derived primarily from context or title. Left alone, it is a neatly striking shape. Where Luomanen flaunts tradition, Ben Buettner's "Chair #1" flirts with it. The lines of Buettner's piece are no less bold, yet the utility of the piece is instantly recognizable.

It is the sheer delight of this art form that uplifts, and opens up our experience of the ordinary through creations of the extraordinary. The true utility of furniture art is not in the space they occupy in our dwellings, but in the deftly crafted place they hold in our minds.

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