

# HOME FRONT ART

BY PETER FRANK



## FORM FOILS FUNCTION

*Design as art? Artists as designers? You be the judge*

These days, it seems pretty much any artist worth his or her auction price makes furniture, does interior design, and is ready to tackle all those art-for-living kinds of things. Where, after all, does “fine” art stop and “applied” art begin? For most of human existence the line was never too firmly drawn; it was only when the academies took over in the 17th century that painters were segregated from sculptors, sculptors from silversmiths and chairmakers, and so on. But with the academies now teaching everything from illustration to car design, artists doing everything from architecture to video art, and museums and galleries showing everything from graffiti to anime collectibles, nobody bats an eye when an assemblagist or installation artist comes up with something you sit on or eat off of or cover the walls with or wear. We take it in stride—or break stride, in order to sit down and eat.

No surprise, furthermore, that nobody makes furnish-art with greater gusto than artists in Southern California. Out here on the edge we’ve never been terribly academic in our thinking; compartmentalization is for bureaucrats, not artists. Besides, our artists have always tended to be rather handy, whether fashioning stools and dressers for people’s custom-made houses or concocting finish/fetish-light and space objects, some of which look downright utilitarian (until you reach for them and they kinda disappear). In the 1970s artfolks such as Robert Wilhite and the late Ali Acerol were making handmade furniture as performance-art props—and then showing the props as artworks themselves.

Now, however, furniture-as-art—or, if you will, art-as-furniture—is *de rigueur*, at once an established idiom and a hip modality. Many different artists wielding various skills and attitudes exercise their creative juices on the old problems of What to sit on, What to sleep on, What to eat on, What to eat with, What does (or can) a table or a sofa look like, and How useful is useful?

Liz Craft’s “furniture” isn’t useful at all. Craft produces sculptures that often resemble furnishings and home décor, but these objects—a cast-bronze love seat, a chandelier made of bones, a white-painted aluminum structure with frames and windows and even a fireplace-like recession—suggest the familiar domesticity only as part of a larger, stranger vision. The crafty Craft is no craftswoman, but a prestidigitatrix conjuring a Grand Guignol surrealism filled with contemporary nightmare scenarios. That bronze love seat not only refuses to yield to the body, but bristles with baroque elaborations that are creepy at best, painful to sit on at worst. Given that Craft’s best-known

**DOMESTIC ARTS:** Cheryl Ekstrom’s mid-century riffs. Andrea Zittel’s A-Z Homestead Unit from A-Z West (2001-04).





CONTEXT IS ANYTHING: Jorge Pardo's installation of LACMA's pre-Columbian collection. Left: Artist Jane Tsong's public displays of accessorization.

sculptures feature skeletons riding motorcycles and the like, we can understand her work as *anti*-domestic.

When his sculpture takes the form of furniture, Robert Therrien also makes sure he leaves reality far behind. You could put your butt down harmlessly on a Therrien chair, but as the chair stands about 10 feet high, its seat at the level of your nose, you'll be hard pressed to get your butt up there in the first place. Therrien's *pièces de résistance* in the furnish-art idiom are looming table-and-chair sets—a kitchen set, a folding set—built along these Brobdingnagian proportions, oversize apparitions that plunge you into an Alice-in-Wonderland world of complete scalar distortion.

On the other hand, you can fit quite snugly into Cheryl Ekstrom's seats. Indeed, Ekstrom's sculptures mimic various classic mid-century chair designs—the Eames chair with ottoman, the George Nelson “marshmallow couch,” the beanbag chair—to the letter (with the blessing of the designers' offices). However, even while lovingly replicating the beanbag folds and the cracks in the Eames chair's aged leather, Ekstrom fashions her cozy re-fashionings out of stainless steel. They are, finally, as rigid and unforgiving as Craft's. You can settle into Ekstrom's ghostly Bizarro chairs without much discomfort (if the steel isn't too cold); just don't expect to sit long.

And don't expect to cook up much of a meal in Liza Lou's kitchen. It's a real kitchen Lou's assembled—or re-assembled—for presentation. But, as she has with pretty much everything she touches, from presidential portraits to prison cells to other swaths of domesticity (such as a whole backyard), Lou has rendered her otherwise unremarkable kitchen a strange parody of itself by covering every inch of it—every bit of sink, counter, wallpaper, towel, and box of cereal or detergent—in glass beads. Singlehandedly keeping Swarovski in business, Lou marries Ekstrom's lifesize hyperrealist cloning to Craft's acid-trip peculiarity.

Like Craft, Jane Tsong is not preoccupied with furniture per se; but like Ekstrom, when she does produce something to sit on, Tsong wants to make it durable—because she wants to put it in public spaces. Tsong is one of a growing army of younger Los Angeles artists who gently intervene in the natural and social landscape, in order to stabilize local natural phenomena and improve social conditions, or at least point out the lack

of such intervention. However noble or futile these efforts, Tsong goes the extra mile to do things like plant flowers in once-barren median strips or construct rudimentary (but comfortable) places for anyone and everyone to sit, artfully updating the traditional park bench in a town woefully short on parks. Tsong, working with partner Robert Powers and Shannon Hoff, practices a kind of guerrilla urbanism, working on a small scale to make various corners of her and other hoods that much more livable and sustainable.

Andrea Zittel's social thinking is more ambitious, and more stylish. Known internationally for her compact, emphatically sculptural live-work units, inspired reconceptualizations of the old Airstream trailer, Zittel also creates her own food containers and clothes—not just couture, but the cloth for it—and, ultimately, proposes an entirely new mindset that marries contemporary DIY thinking to the forms and ideals of post-revolutionary Russian art and design. Desert-dweller Zittel has developed this hippie constructivism—which she practices under the rubric “A-Z: An Institute of Investigative Living”—almost as a matter of necessity, but its self-sustaining hardiness readily adapts to urban realities. (She previously lived in a Brooklyn storefront.)

Zittel's art is barely a step removed from quotidian application; it's a wonder Target isn't already marketing her designs. But for complete integration of art and function, no one beats Jorge Pardo. Lauded for his lamps, tables, and other objects based on the genial excesses of mid-century modernism, Pardo has always presented his objects as useful artworks rather than artful furnishings. Steeped in retro mannerisms, Pardo seeks less a distinct style than a distinct concept. But his designs have themselves become more and more flamboyant and unpredictable, even as they retain the workability of his decade-old house. Cuban-born Pardo designed the recently opened reinstallation of LACMA's pre-Columbian collection, setting off the earthen figurines and elaborate adornments in a quirky, multimaterial sequence of displays at once streamlined and eccentric. Some visitors find Pardo's design a bit too eccentric, nearly overwhelming both the indigenous objects and the curatorial concept. But it goes overboard not out of ego but out of almost worshipful admiration. If Pardo gilds the lily, it's clearly out of love. ■