

KEITH OLIVER

furniture



Gallery 1.1.1., School of Art, The University of Manitoba, Canada

Furniture has always been an adjunct to my sculpture; it seems I always have some piece in progress about my studio somewhere. While there are obvious correlations between sculpture and furniture, they are far apart in both their esthetic appeal and their function.

While people like Wendell Castle, Michael Graves and Scott Burton have enhanced the idea of furniture as a sculptured form (contributing both to the acceptance of furniture as an art form and a broader general acceptance of a varied use of materials in post-modern furniture), furniture is not sculpture and visa versa.

The trend of eclectic material useage has brought a certain sense of fun back to the making and designing of furniture; it has also brought us the Memphis style. Pretending to be a truly international style of furniture in that anything goes. You cannot sit in it with any dignity and generally it is not very well designed nor very comfortable. (Michael Graves throne-chair is certainly a smashing looking object but that it would seem that nice knife-like edge on the front lip doesn't do much for the inside of your knees.)

There is the traditional balance between line and volume, weight and mass, but in furniture there is also a balance between form and function and material vs. function. While a piece has to look good, it also has to function in the place or situation it was designed for and this, of course, affects the material used.

The end result is that furniture provides me a relatively quick means to explore different ideas and shapes, while keeping my

mind and hands busy whilst mulling over a sculpture. I enjoy the inherent preciseness of the process along with the malleability and tactileness of the materials. Happily for me the making of sculpture and the making of furniture complement each other since one also helps pay for the other.

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School of Art
The University
of Manitoba,
Canada

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Credits

Exhibition curator: Dale Amundson
Assistant curator: Grace Thompson
Installation technician: Zared Mann
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furniture as furniture

by Dale Amundson

Once again, in this exhibition, we are confronted with the need to reassess our position on the age old debate on the distinction between art and craft. This exhibition was chosen because the exhibition committee believed the work to be art, or at least, to fit securely enough into the realm of accepted definitions to be exhibited in an art gallery, without any qualification or disclaimers. The artist, on the other hand, clearly and plainly distinguishes between the furniture he creates and the sculpture he creates, labeling the former 'craft' and the latter 'art.'

Perhaps it can be agreed that a good piece of furniture should be as much of an aesthetically pleasing object as a good piece of sculpture. Divergences appear, however, when we begin to consider the relationship of form to function. Although a sculpture has a function, that function is not normally a part of the everyday activities of those who share space with the object.

The function of a sculpture is to project beyond its direct physical identity and to solidify an otherwise intangible concept. Considered in that light, even a work of such apparent simplicity as Tony Smith's four foot cube sculpture **Die** is not what it appears to be. That is to say it is not just what it appears to be. It is, or at least is intended to be considerably more, even if that more is so indefinable as to cause its very existence to be open to question.

A piece of furniture, by contrast, contains no such 'other reference.' It is what it is and only what it is, despite the fact that its qualities may send shivers of delight or waves of rapture (or whatever) through those who can appreciate them. A desk is, after all, a desk. It is no more and no less than that. It can be judged according to its beauty, its function, its sophistication, its timeliness, its relevance, or its timelessness, but never by the intangible concept that lives within it. It's conceptual existence is its functional existence. Beyond that is nothing. If its functional

existence happens to carry with it the power of ritual, of mystery, of adventure, or whatever, all the better, but those are attributes of the function, not of the object. The function of a religious sculpture for example, directs the concept embodied within but can neither create nor enhance it. If we can resist the temptation to seek out the underlying concepts, the hidden meanings and/or the artists' intent, we can focus on the elements that truly have meaning and can help us gain the most complete understanding possible of the works in question.



In Keith Oliver's furniture, it is within the balance of the concern for function, environment and pure form where resides the power of the object. Although each of these elements may, in itself, be simple to control, the complexity of the interaction of the three makes the task of the designer anything but simple, and it is in the area of this interaction where success or failure may be judged.

An example of Oliver's successful balancing of these elements is in his **Low Bed Table** of 1985. The lightness and simplicity of the form show respect for the quietness of the environment, and the use of arborite to allow for the placement of water glasses or other

items with the potential of causing damage to wood reflects an understanding of and concern for the creation of a piece which is totally in tune with its function and environment. The use of a slate top in his **Storage Cabinet** of 1984 shows the same concern, in allowing placements of plants on the surface of a piece intended for use in a family room or living area. This piece also is an example of Oliver's willingness to push his work to the boundaries of the functional/environmental limitations, since the weight of the slate top severely limits the mobility of the piece, making it unsuited to many living areas. The severity of the offset drawer pulls further tests the limits of the function/craftsmanship/form trilogy, as do the delicately tapered legs, strong enough to support, both visually and physically, the weight above, yet delicate enough to set up a certain amount of tension in their interaction with the weight of the body and top of the piece.

The tension produced in this way is an important attribute of many of Oliver's furniture pieces; one that helps transport them out of the realm of the everyday, the 'department store furniture' category. Another such attribute is the quality of craftsmanship itself. Inseparable through it is from questions of form and function discussed above, consistently impeccable craftsmanship is necessary for the works to convey the qualities which can unify them with their function and with their environment. Without it, the significance of formal relationships and their interaction with function would be but an empty shell: a styrofoam mockup in a real world. However, with the control of craftsmanship at his command, Oliver is able to supply the final ingredient necessary to the total integrity of his designs.

He is able to produce, in his most successful works, a kind of magic seldom found in furniture today. It is a quality which follows from his fine tuning of the form in its relation to function, but requires the added ingredient

of control of scale. A piece such as **Storage Cabinet** mentioned above rests comfortably in the human environment, taking its place in the daily drama around it without forcing itself into the user's space or being overwhelmed by the human scale around it. A piece such as **Jewellery Box** of 1984, however, shifts the scale dramatically, and in so doing shrinks the viewer into the fantasy world so appropriate to the nature of the container created.

Oliver's **Jewellery Box** of 1983 even more directly addresses the issue of intimacy in the containers of our lives. It has the form of containment, the solidity of closure, yet possesses the ever present willingness to be opened. It **waits** to be opened, and the effect of opening, real or imagined, is to open up the dimension of "intimate immensity" that Bachelard speaks of in his chapter "drawers, chests and wardrobes" in the **Poetics of Space**.

"...from the moment the casket is opened, dialectics no longer exist. The outside is effaced with one stroke, an atmosphere of novelty and surprise reigns. The outside has no more meaning. And quite paradoxically, even cubic dimensions have no meaning, for the reason that a new dimension—the dimension of intimacy—has just opened up."¹

Scale is, of course, the essential ingredient in the definition of environmental space, and it is the subtle nuances of spatial shift created by the objects which surround us that bring pleasure to our everyday living.

Bachelard, speaks on this subject as well when he discusses the 'corners':

"...every corner in a house, every angle in a room, every inch of secluded space in which we like to hide, or withdraw into ourselves, is a symbol of solitude for the imagination;..."²

If we may return for a last look at the issue of furniture/sculpture versus furniture/craft perhaps we may come a bit closer to resolving the issue. Furniture, as Bachelard (not to mention O. V. de Milosz, Arthur Rimbaud, Andre

Breton and countless other poets and philosophers) understood, is not without its own power, even without the lofty distinction of being considered art. Andre Breton's words say it with an eloquence I could not hope to approach.

The wardrobe is filled with linen
There are even moonbeams which I
can unfold.³

What does it matter if the object is fitted into one metaphorical drawer or another so long as it has the power to stir the imagination and to raise the consciousness of the soul. Furniture, with its unique place in the daily drama of our lives, has the potential for such power. Keith Oliver's furniture taps this potential to transport us from the mundane to the magical.

1. Bachelard, Gaston, **the Poetics of Space**, Boston: Beacon Press, 1969, p. 85
2. Ibid., p. 136
3. Ibid, p. 80

furniture as art

by Grace E. Thomson

Keith Oliver is known to us as a sculptor so that when he makes furniture the question is raised as to whether the furniture, aside from being a functional object, is also not a sculpture. The artist says no, "while there are some correlations between the two, furniture is hardly sculpture and vice versa." He goes further to say the furniture he makes is craft, not art. Do viewers agree with his statements? I don't.

Art and craft have traditionally required the exercise of different critical standards. Furniture is usually relegated to the latter category and classified as one of the 'minor arts' due to its functional factor. (Interestingly, however, architecture, which also fulfills utilitarian needs, is classified as fine art). Craftsmen's concern is almost exclusively with the skillful manipulation of material to produce an object for utilitarian purpose. The formula of "form follows function" is often quoted which define the mechanical process of furniture making, albeit in a simplistic manner. The artist's concern, however, must go beyond the mere mastery of process and technical display for his work to qualify as an art experience. In making an object, the artist is not restricted as is the craftsman or as is an industrial designer who must always conform to the prescription set by the requirements of the specific audience. The artist can select the problem he or she wishes to address, and the resolution can be made with chosen constraints so that the resultant work is a personal expression which meets the artist's own standards and, as well, hopefully, communicates to the viewer an emotional experience.

Keith Oliver's work avoids distinction between making furniture and creating art. The forms evoke an emotional presence without awareness of the technical process. Each piece is thoughtfully created by the artist to best fulfill its functional intent but, accepting the functional aspect as a given, in its viewing, it is firstly an aesthetically satisfying experi-

ence. The furniture he makes possesses attributes that go beyond mere technical display to qualify as an art form, involving creative action.

Oliver is an artist with an artist's sensibilities and this fact is evident in his work, whether it is called sculpture or furniture. He chooses the form to be made—table, dresser, container—which suits his mode of expression and experience. The function of each is clearly defined and he designs each piece to efficiently carry out his intent while at the same time responding to his own expressive needs in making the object. Sometimes the aesthetic concern overrides the functional need and fails as a functional object and so must be put aside; for instance, the placement of drawer handles which may be pleasing aesthetically but makes for awkward handling. The fact that this has happened to Oliver shows the artist's foremost desire to make something more than a mere functional object.

The **Storage Cabinet**, 1984, responds to functional concerns in that it has proper drawers for storage and also a top which can be wiped, accommodating operational needs. But Oliver selects material, form, color and overall design as an artist. He uses slate, a difficult medium to work with, but slate has texture, density and color which contrasts with the smoothness and lightness of the wood. Also the dark weightiness at the top gives tension to the framework which narrows from top to bottom. The projecting solid drawer handles relieve the curving smoothness of the facade. Each square handle is placed to couple with the handle on the next drawer so that the composite handle becomes rectangular and juts out rhythmically overlapping the alternate horizontal lines of the drawers. They are also unusually placed, offcentre, to the right, disturbing the symmetry.

The **Low Table**, 1983, is made of prefabricated steel painted black, with relief patterns on the surface, reminiscent of a street cover-

ing for underground works. Sprouting out of the table top, close to one corner are two vertical maple wood pieces, cut and placed carefully, much like the stalks of a flower arrangement. Opposite to these on the table top is a square glass with a low glass dish on top, the side of the glass moving slightly outside of the table edge. The whole is an ordered arrangement, a unified composition of elements which takes into consideration such sculptural concerns as positive and negative spaces, line and plane, material and texture. The fact that the form is a table, a functional object, is incidental to the aesthetic experience.

Oliver's concern with the functional purpose of each piece is clearly important in that care is taken with respect to size (invariably it has to do with human comfort in use) and to choice of material (for instance, arborite or slate is used on table tops to avoid markings in use). However, as in the case of a sculptor given a commission to produce a work of art for a specific space and location, once the functional requirements are met in design, the work that is finally produced by Oliver has to do with creative activity and is a significant art form which gives the viewer an aesthetically satisfying emotional experience quite separate from awareness of technique.



Storage Cabinet, 1984
Slate, maple, red birch plywood, 33" x 18" x 18"



Low Table, 1984
Spalted ash, black enamel, 14" x 30" x 30"



Low Table, 1983
Steel, glass, local maple, 14" x 30" x 30"



Storage Cabinet, 1984
Slate, maple, red birch plywood, 33" x 18" x 18"



Jewellery Box, 1984
Cherry, maple, plywood, black arborite, 9" x 7" x 7"



Low Bed Table, 1985
Cherry, inca plywood, black arborite, 15" x 31" x 33"



Jewellery Box, 1983 (not in exhibition)
4" x 10" x 6"



Bureau, 1982
Maple, walnut, birch plywood, 33" x 18" x 18"

Selected Biography

Keith Oliver

Born: Bulawayo, Zimbabwe 1952
Canadian citizen

Education

- 1976-78 Master of Fine Arts, Rhode Island School of Design; major in sculpture
1970-74 Diploma in Art, University of Manitoba, School of Art majors in printmaking and sculpture

Professional Experience

- 1979-86 Assistant Professor in Sculpture, University of Manitoba
1982 Set design and construction, Winnipeg's Contemporary Dancers
1977-78 Teaching and Technical Assistant in Sculpture, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island
1976-77 Teaching Assistant in Sculpture, Rhode Island School of Design
1975-76 Instructor in Sculpture, University of Manitoba

Shows

- 1986 Collaboration Evening, Winnipeg's Contemporary Dancers
1985 "Universities Week" University of Winnipeg
1985 Gallery 1.1.1. University of Manitoba
1984 Harbour Front Art Gallery—Toronto, Ontario
1983 "Canadian Contemporary Art," Edmonton Art Gallery
1982 "Under Construction" Group Show, Winnipeg Art Gallery
1982 Group Show, Brian Melnychenko Gallery
1981 Group Show, Eaton Place
1979 Installation, Poplar Point, Manitoba
1978 M.F.A. Show, Rhode Island School of Design Museum

- 1978 Tillinghast Estate, Barrington, Rhode Island
1977 Woods-Gerry Mansion, Providence, Rhode Island
1976 "Midwestern Juried Show: Winnipeg Art Gallery
1976 "School of Art—25 Years," Winnipeg Art Gallery

Grants-Awards

- 1985 Canada Council "B" Grant
1983 Major Grant, Manitoba Arts Council
1983 "Leon A. Brown" award, Winnipeg Art Gallery
1979 Project Cost Grant, Manitoba Arts Council
1978 "XI Commonwealth Games Sculpture Symposium," Edmonton, Alberta

Show Catalogue

Low Table, 1984

Black enamel, ash, maple, 14" x 28" x 28"

Low Table, 1985

Cherry, inca plywood, black arborite, 15" x 31" x 33"

Low Bed Table, 1983

Cherry, slate, maple, 18" x 19" x 15"

Women's Bureau, 1985

Maple, birch plywood, 51" x 26" x 20"

Bureau, 1983

Maple, walnut, birch plywood, 36" x 38" x 24"

Storage Cabinet, 1984

Slate, maple, red birch plywood, 33" x 18" x 18"

Wall Hung Cabinet, 1985

Maple, birch plywood, glass, 24" x 38" x 16"

Bow-legged Table, 1985

Cherry, walnut, 24" x 20" x 20"

Apartment Table, 1985

Maple, 29" x 48" x 36"

Desk, 1985

Cherry, cherry plywood, 29" x 48" x 36"

Mirror Shelf, 1985

Cherry, black arborite, mirror, 25" x 48" x 18"

Side Table, 1985

Spalted ash, blue vitrolite, 26" x 21" x 21"

Salver, 1985

Maple, 1" x 21" x 11"

Salver, 1985

Maple, 1" x 17" x 14"

Salver, 1985

Oak & walnut, 2" x 17" x 11"

Salver, 1985

Stained oak, 2" x 17" x 11"

Jewellery Box, 1984

Cherry, maple, plywood, black arborite, 9" x 7" x 7"



