



33. John Cederquist, *Tubular*. 1990.

SITE LINES: THE MULTIDIMENSIONAL ART OF RANDY SHULL

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Space is not simply a setting, it is what makes living possible. It is space that makes encounters possible. It is the site of proximity, where everything crosses over. – Doris Salcedo
The contemporary artwork's form is spreading out from its material form: it is a linking element, a principle of dynamic agglutination. An artwork is a dot on a line. – Nicolas Bourriaud

In a 1970 radio interview, Carl Andre, the minimalist sculptor, supplies us with a very concise history of sculpture.

I want to give you the three phases of art as I know it. There was a time when people were interested in the bronze sheath of the Statue of Liberty, modeled in [Bartholdi's] studio. And then there came a time when artists ... were interested in Eiffel's iron interior structure, supporting the statue. Now, artists are interested in Bedloe's Island [the site of the statue].

An equally brief history of studio furniture can be told, using Andre's test case of the Statue of Liberty as a kit of parts. It goes like this: The makers during the first phase of studio furniture, in the 1950s, were primarily interested in the inner structure of the Statue of Liberty. For instance, the work of such heavyweights as Sam Maloof and George Nakashima is very concerned with the material qualities of wood, functional furniture typologies, and the techniques of furniture construction. Their essentialist approach, similar to modernism in other fields, treats the tree with reverence, and furniture objects are designed and crafted in order to bring out the material's inherent and often breathtakingly beautiful qualities.

Makers of the second phase, beginning in the 1970s and rising to ascendancy in the 1980s, were fascinated with the bronze cladding of Lady Liberty. This movement and many of its prominent figures, notably Judy McKie and John Cederquist, show a preference for expressive surfaces and formal experimentation. For example, in true post-modern



34. Tom Loeser, *Chair Cubed*. 2003.

fashion, Cederquist references traditional Japanese prints and tromp l'oeil sleight of hand through the lens of a southern California "surfer dude," to create simple furniture forms clad in incredibly expressive and painterly surfaces (#33).

With the first phase focusing on the structure and the second phase focusing on the skin, the third phase is left to contend with the site. The self-conscious investigation of studio furniture that began during the second phase has evolved within the third phase, which is still gaining momentum. We see signs of it in the work of many established studio furniture artists, such as Tom Loeser, Wendy Maruyama, and Donald Fortescue, who each create work that examines the site of furniture. Loeser explores the effect that furniture has on a given site in his work, *Chair Cubed*, 2003, in which he creates a set of nine chairs with varying proportions. When rearranged, the set creates different hierarchies and relationships around the dining table and plays a game with the perception of the viewer (#34). Maruyama and Fortescue have both created furniture forms that explore the site of furniture through the integration of video. In Maruyama's *Vanity*, 2006, video creates a narrative of the activities that a furniture object suggests through its physical and historical context (#35). In Fortescue's *Under the Bridge*, 2005, the seemingly twin pieces are a meditation on the mobility of furniture and its ability to contain even the most ephemeral memories (#36).

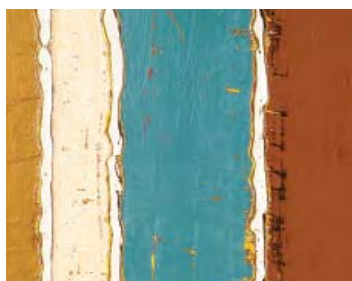
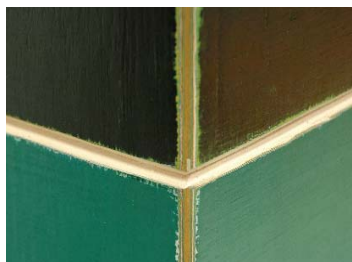
Today, many studio furniture makers are interested in the context that their work fits into in addition to its formal qualities. Like many sculptors today, they consider the social, physical, and cultural context of the piece to be of great importance. Sculpture's encounter with the site happened in the late 1960s, and many artists today are still mining this rich vein. The difficulty for studio furniture to meaningfully engage the site is that most studio furniture works are isolated objects. To engage the site as a form generator, studio furniture makers have three options: to develop work for specific sites; to make work that defines its own environment; or to create work that responds or reacts to changes in the environment.



35. Wendy Maruyama, *Vanity*. 2006.

36. Donald Fortescue, *Under the Bridge*. 2005.





Details from furniture #21, p. 24, painting #25, p. 27, and Glasgow house #42, p. 45.

The studio furniture community has consistently been at pains to find its bearings within the worlds of craft, of art, and of design. While many of us write, discuss, and often argue about the subtleties of studio furniture's disciplinary balancing act, there are others who, thankfully, carve out a viable practice for themselves within these domains. It is the occasion of this essay to consider one such individual. Is his work craft, sculpture, or design? In reality, it is all three, and sometimes it is all three all at once. And, for this reason, I believe that an investigation of Randy Shull's work can lead to a better understanding of the possible trajectories for studio furniture artists.

Shull is an example of the upside of the ambiguity of studio furniture. Currently, he has a three-pronged practice. He is at once an established studio furniture maker, a prolific painter, and a productive architectural and landscape designer. An active artist, he has been known to work on a sculpture in the morning, a piece of furniture in the afternoon, and round out the day behind the controls of a Bobcat, landscaping one of his design projects. He doesn't head to the gym in the morning to maintain his trim figure, instead he is the proprietor and perhaps sole customer of "Weight Wigglers," a joke he makes regarding his bottomless pool of energy. Throughout his career, he has wiggled his way through several disciplines, taking what interests him from one and bringing it to another. For many artists, the move from studio furniture to painting may be an insurmountable leap, but for Shull this shift seems to have come with ease. This also appears to be the case with his subsequent move, within the past several years, from painting to environmental design. Shull truly is an artist in motion.

A look at his work as a studio furniture artist is the logical place to begin, as it is his home base and a continuous thread throughout his work. Shull studied at Rochester Institute of Technology in the mid-1980s under Bill Keyser, a major figure of studio furniture's first phase. One of the tenets of the first phase is the nearly sacred nature of the wood used to produce studio furniture works. Technical aspects of a piece, such as finish, joinery, and material selection are also emphasized.

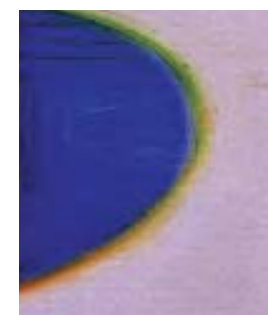
When trained within an established school of thought, the student is faced with the choice between the path of the acolyte or the rebel. Shull, like many of his contemporaries, chooses the latter. In fact, he claims he has "spent the last 20 years trying to unlearn everything they taught [him] in school." This resolution can be traced in his work, and it didn't take him long to forget what they had taught him. With few notable exceptions, his studio furniture work exhibits a total disinterest in the cult of wood and in glorified traditional joinery techniques. Instead, we see a heavily stylized approach to studio furniture consisting of rigorous formal investigations, both in the overall form of the piece as well as in the smaller details, where Shull focuses his efforts to develop an alphabet of symbolic forms that he deploys in his work. Shull may shun the slavish celebration of the inherent beauty of wood, but he still has an obsession with surface, even in his later work. The difference is that the surface treatments serve as expressions of Shull's personal, conceptual, and aesthetic interests instead of the inherent beauty of the material and logic of its construction.

Eventually Shull's interest in surface treatment, which is so important to his studio furniture work, led him to the creation of paintings. According to Shull, he created the first of his paintings by hacking the legs off one of his finished tables and sticking it on the wall. This humorous anecdote is a testament to the comfort he exhibits when he moves into new artistic territory. Significantly, these paintings are not created on canvas. Instead they are executed on plywood, a material that is prevalent in all of Shull's work. His compositions often feature found objects, constructed projections, and reconfigured panels of plywood. Similar to how a woodworker cuts up veneer to create a work of marquetry, Shull often creates a panel through grinding, painting, and sanding, then cuts it up and reorganizes it into a disjointed composition. Sanding is an important part of his painting toolbox. In fact, he tends to move back and forth, repeatedly, between painting and sanding. This is how he creates the aura-like edges in his work, which recall the dynamic edges of objects in the paintings of Wayne Thiebaud (#37).



37. Wayne Thiebaud, *California Cakes*. 1979. Art © Wayne Thiebaud / Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

Details from Thiebaud's *California Cakes* and Shull's *Banjo*.





27. *Black and White Juxtaposition*. 2007. (see page 29)

While painting typically focuses on composition, color, and surface, it does not take long for the functional form to reassert itself in Shull's paintings. The table initially succumbs to his will and becomes a painting – in his recent *Black and White Juxtaposition*, 2007, in which the table resurfaces on the picture plane as a rectangular projection found amidst what appears to be a jumble of floor plans containing gestural grinder marks (#27). The grinder marks within the rigid rectangles remind me of architecture and how much of life happens in a series of little rooms. Out in front we find a table or bench colonizing the space of the gallery, an act that questions the place of art in both the gallery and the home. In *Large Reflection*, 2006, Shull creates a direct vertical connection between the painting and a low table form in front of it (#25). The beautiful wavering striped pattern, reminiscent of tree rings interrupted by knots, pours onto the furniture form in front of the painting. In this way, Shull is experimenting with the viewer's perception of space, as well as the viewer's notions of art's place and its space in our lives.

After metaphorically peeling the paint off his furniture forms, as if stripping the bronze cladding from the Statue of Liberty, Shull turns to the design and construction of interior and exterior environments. When I learned that Shull was creating complete environments, my thoughts were not entirely positive. I worried the environments would be as expressive and stylized as his studio furniture forms. I imagined the Art Nouveau spaces of the *Style 1900*, where every space is labored over; imbuing each and every detail with the subjectivity of its creator. While I appreciate these designers for their aesthetic ambitions and their stance against the mechanization of the domestic environment, they leave little room for their inhabitants to express themselves. Fortunately for all of us, Shull proves to be a very sensitive designer who strikes a balance between his expressive will and that of his clients.

With a relatively reserved material and formal palette Shull creates interior spaces that provide for the specific needs of his clients while still expressing his artistic interests. He works with existing

25. *Large Reflection*. 2006. (See page 27)



mid-20th century houses and makes them even more open than they already are. The common areas in his home are one large volume of space that is only partially separated, and the ceilings have been raised as much as possible, adding to the openness. A group of guests can easily move from the kitchen island to the dining table to the living area as the evening unfolds. Like Frank Lloyd Wright, Shull understands the symbolic power of the hearth – and, in fact, he creates inviting and beautifully detailed fireplaces. The fireplace in his home is surrounded by horizontal slats of wood, attached to the wall with metal studs, creating a large volume around the hearth. A large wooden shelf runs the length, providing a resting place for firewood, precious objects, and people (#38). Seeing this, Wright might suggest that Shull created a cabinet for the heart of the home.

Additionally, there are many echoes of the work of Luis Barragán in Shull's spaces. Barragán practiced what I refer to as *minimalism with a heart*. His brand of minimalism incorporated a broad color palette, frequent use of natural materials, and sophisticated connections between architecture and landscape. While many modernists shy away from the use of color, Barragán used it to near sublime effect. What strikes me within Shull's spaces is not his use of color (which is very effective) but the presence of so much wood. What is interesting about the wood is the frankness with which it is used. Sometimes it is painted, like on the fronts of the kitchen cabinets, but more often it is clear-coated. Like Barragán and like the second phase studio furniture makers, Shull understands the warmth of wood and its appeal in the domestic environment. Yet he creatively and skillfully utilizes wood where it normally isn't thought to belong – plywood cabinets invade shower stalls, slabs of wood are stacked together to form sinks, and plywood coated with polyester resin is employed to make a large bathtub (#39).

Shull's sophisticated use of fenestration, a trait he also shares with Barragán, is another way he expresses himself in his architecture. Both designers are exceptional at using windows for day lighting and to frame particular views of the landscape outside. The Glasgow house



38. *Shull House*, wooden fireplace surround. Detail above.

39. *Shull House*, wooden bathtub.





40. Glasgow House, window above the stairs to 2nd level.

provides two notable instances. First, there is a window above the stairs to the second level of the house (#40). Filling half of the frame is the brick pattern of the chimney; the other half contains distant trees. At the bottom is a thin ground plane, the top of the roof. This image reads as a formalist composition and a reminder of the stability of the house despite the changing environment. Second, there is the small window found in the lower left of one wall in the master bedroom. Because the house follows the grade of the site and the window is placed so low, the view is of the ground (#41 and #42). Shull's intention with this window is to help the occupants of the building orient themselves within the site, reminding them how close they still are to the earth.

Shull is capable of considering every scale of detail within an environment, from the placement of a drawer pull to the design of multi-use interior spaces. Like a skilled craftsman, he considers the finest details, while also treating with equal sophistication the grander space in which all occupants and

objects will interrelate. His furniture forms create tiny worlds, full of symbolic meaning. And his paintings move into the space around them, playing a game with our perceptions and preconceptions like the works of Carl Andre or Donald Judd. And, through his architecture, he creates minimal spaces capable of moving our hearts and comforting us, while constantly reminding us where we are. In these ways, his work calls for an amendment to Andre's brief history of sculpture: Shull has moved beyond a fascination with the object to a great interest not only in Bedloe's Island, but also in the visitors who travel there to experience the Statue of Liberty. ■

41. Glasgow House, window in master bedroom (left).

42. Master bedroom window facing southwest, seen from the exterior (right).

