

Review by Emily Zilber

On the Edge of Your Seat: Chairs for the 21st Century with a Three-Century Retrospective of Philadelphia Chair Design

Center for Art in Wood. *On the Edge of Your Seat: Chairs for the 21st Century with a Three-Century Retrospective of Philadelphia Chair Design*. Atglen, Pa.: Schiffer, 2016. 286 pp.; 211 color and bw illus., exhibition checklist, artists' biographies, bibliography. \$59.99.

As does any project that purports to take stock of “this moment” or “our time” by looking at a group of works by disparate artists, the punningly titled *On the Edge of Your Seat: Chairs for the 21st Century* grapples with a broad idea: How can a plurality of contemporary voices be corralled and organized to illuminate something true about our present state without the benefit of perspective that historians enjoy? This question is approached head-on by the authors and furniture makers featured in this attractive companion publication to an exhibition of the same name at the Center for Art in Wood in Philadelphia, that was held concurrently with the 2016 annual conference of the Furniture Society. The contents reflect an international call in 2015 seeking “chairs, stools, and benches of all kinds—functional, sculptural and conceptual” made beginning in 2000 and based “in wood either in practice or theory.”^[1] This yielded submissions from 147 artists, thirty-nine of whom were selected for participation in the project. They range from those with decades of practice and long resumes behind them to younger makers just emerging from—or still in—BFA and MFA programs.

The forty-five featured works lack consistency, and proudly so. Selected by four jurors (Nora Atkinson, Lloyd Herman Curator of Craft at the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum; designer and woodworker Jasper Brinton; Benjamin Colman, Associate Curator of American Art at the Detroit Institute

of Arts; and Susie J. Silbert, Curator of Modern and Contemporary Glass at the Corning Museum of Glass), they reflect the diverse scope of artists for whom the chair holds a central place in their work in form or concept. Happily, the selections largely reflect that of artists with a clarity of purpose and a level of skill in their chosen media, allowing each to express this vision successfully, whether as object, image, or installation. As Albert LeCoff, cofounder and executive director of the Center for Art in Wood, notes in his introduction written with Tina C. LeCoff, these chairs aim to be “symbols and sculptures.”

Despite this diffuse selection and a desire to identify something unique about our current circumstances, the most salient idea connecting these works is that—as the truism goes—everything old becomes new again. Almost all the authors position design excellence, personal creativity, and an attention to modernity as time-honored and traditional values. The authors also largely class the reframing and reinterpretation of historical practices by contemporary artists as acts of ingenuity. *On the Edge of Your Seat* is sequentially structured from old to new, beginning with the very old: the prologue greeting the reader is a pithy “melodrama” by artist and University of the Arts professor Roy Superior that traces the origin of furniture and the professional craftsman through the antics of a family of cavemen.

Before arriving at the present, readers are treated to a longer essay by Joshua Lane, the Lois F. and Henry S. McNeil Curator of Furniture at the Winterthur Museum, Garden and Library. The sweeping scope of “Chairs and Chairmaking in Philadelphia: A Selective Pictorial History” traces the history of Philadelphia furniture from the seventeenth to the twentieth century. It is lavishly illustrated with examples of representative works largely drawn from the collection of the Winterthur Museum, with a few select works coming from private collections or the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The organizational trajectory of Lane’s essay begins with thematic overviews anchored by close readings of

design and technique that link individual artists and objects to their larger world. Each chair is sensitively approached with a detail and sense of connoisseurship not always evident in our readings of contemporary artworks. Buzzwords of contemporary making, including “hybridity” and “innovation,” are peppered throughout the text as Lane discusses stylistic and cultural changes from the colonial to the growing industrial landscape of the nineteenth century.

As Lane’s focus moves to the twentieth century, the essay’s structure shifts. Section headings highlight individual and influential furniture makers and design firms including Wharton Esherick, George Nakashima, and Knoll Industries. If larger artistic movements like studio craft or postmodernism and their attendant styles are discussed, that conversation occurs under the umbrella of these recognizable names. Links are made between these artists and the historical artworks or methods of making they appropriated and quoted. Esherick’s steam-bending of tree-wet wood for his iconic Wagon Wheel Chair mirrored the traditional method for creating the curvature of the Windsor chair, while Robert Venturi’s work represents a postmodern flattening of the form and styling of Chippendale designs.

Lane’s essay is balanced by short pieces by each of the exhibition jurors. Of the four, Atkinson’s strays the farthest from the works of the exhibition and becomes a polemic in its own right. From her pointed and accurate opening assertion that “your chair is killing you” to the conclusion that iconic chairs were often created by ideologue designers who knew “progress means never getting too comfortable,” Atkinson’s understanding of the chair as a perpetual physical and formal challenge never to be completely solved is perhaps the most useful idea framing the works that follow, even as her essay references none of them. Brinton helpfully introduces the term “atemporal” as used by MoMA curator of contemporary art Laura Hoptman in her 2014 exhibition “The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World.” Brinton ably

applies to this set of furniture makers the idea that artists participating in a stylistic free-for-all where all eras coexist make work that is both essentially contemporary and incapable of representing the larger time from which it comes.

As with any juried project, there are clear highlights with regard to creativity and skill among the featured contemporary furniture. It would have benefited the artists to have their biographies interspersed throughout the object entries instead of corralled at the end in order to contextualize disparities of quality among the artworks and the attendant statements. At times, I found myself evaluating the professionalism of the images and words selected by each artist in tandem with my engagement with their work itself. Even so, the vast majority are well presented, with detailed images of joinery and construction featured liberally and satisfying those who value close looking. For example, Jennifer Anderson's *Cadwalader Chair* (2016), which re-creates the finest parlor furnishings of pre-Revolutionary Philadelphia in mud, is illustrated by seductive images that highlight cracks and fissures in her earthy representation of highly valuable carved wood and upholstery.

The works that rise to the top illustrate a range of conceptual concerns and techniques. Adrian Ferrazzutti's *Baleen Chair* and Stoel Burrowes's *'A' Back Windsor* both provide riffs on the classic form that live somewhere between homage and reappraisal. Misha Volf's *4 x 4 Bench* is intended for a globalized society without a firm understanding of place or home. Made from freighting ratchet straps, construction-grade lumber, and mass-market casters, it is not only easy to move from place to place but also malleable enough that it can serve multiple purposes within a single residence. A series of selections where design is impacted by new methods of production or shipping conventions also explores this turn away from the local in favor of objects that can easily and efficiently cross boundaries, such as Christy Oates's folding *Facet Chair* with laser-cut marquetry, which moves

seamlessly between flat wall ornament and functional seating. Highlight pieces also deal explicitly with material investigation. For example, *The 9th Chair: Beyond Burnt*, a collaborative piece by Doug Jones and Carrie Compton, was produced through sequential experimentation with wood burning and its impact on color, texture, grain, technical properties, and the artists' ability to work or control the material. The end result was ultimately both technical and intuitive, "a collaboration between wood and fire." The artists suggest that "creatively approaching common woods and materials" is the quality that is quintessentially of our time.

Perhaps the most referenced piece throughout the juror essays is one that comes from outside the furniture world. Lauren Kalman trained as a metalsmith and makes work that is invested in themes connected to jewelry and craft, including adornment, the body, value, and consumer culture. Her contribution comes in the form of a provocative photograph titled *But if the Crime Is Beautiful . . . Composition with Ornament and Object*. The title is drawn from Austrian architect Adolf Loos's famous 1908 lecture "Ornament and Crime," where "primitive" and "regressive" decoration is pitted against the sleek simplicity of modernity. In Kalman's image, a woman's back, which has been heavily gilded, appears atop a dark laminated wooden chair. Her highly adorned female body represents all things degenerate in Loos's imaginings, while the chair becomes an icon for the control and restraint that are supposed to govern the design of a civilized society.

While *On the Edge of Your Seat* opened to the public in May 2016, only a little more than a year from the time of the writing of this review, the months that have followed have perhaps been some of the most trying and uncertain in our nation's history. The events that have made this relatively short time seem interminably long and unmoored seem a shock to our collective system even as pundits link them to all manner of historical precedent. We are unquestionably in a different "now" than the

one this publication took stock of just a short time ago. Atkinson's quoting of designer Alessandro Mendini's 2015 statement—"Now there is no more ideology. All the world is very confused, all the world is very violent"—seems prescient. I imagine that were the call that enabled this selection of artists and objects held again today, the works received might have a more political or activist bent. I can equally imagine finding more works like those by Alicia Dietz, a former U.S. Army officer, pilot, and commander who created an armchair and flooring installation that references the soldier's challenging reintegration into civilian life, or by Dean Pulver, whose solemn *Memorial Bench* provides an elegant, calm, and necessary space for reflection in troubling times.

On the Edge of Your Seat and similarly structured projects that strive to cobble together coherent themes from disparate voices often settle on celebrating a surfeit of approaches. We may find this organizational form increasingly relevant in our current political moment, where it is necessary to argue afresh that diversity makes us stronger than homogeneity. The question that begins this publication—"What are the needs of the 21st century?"—is a moving and important target.

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The Furniture Society, "Exhibition Prospectus and International Call to Artists," accessed September 27, 2017, <http://furnsoc.org/call-for-chairs/>.