

# KENNEDY

BIANNUAL JOURNAL OF CURIOSITIES

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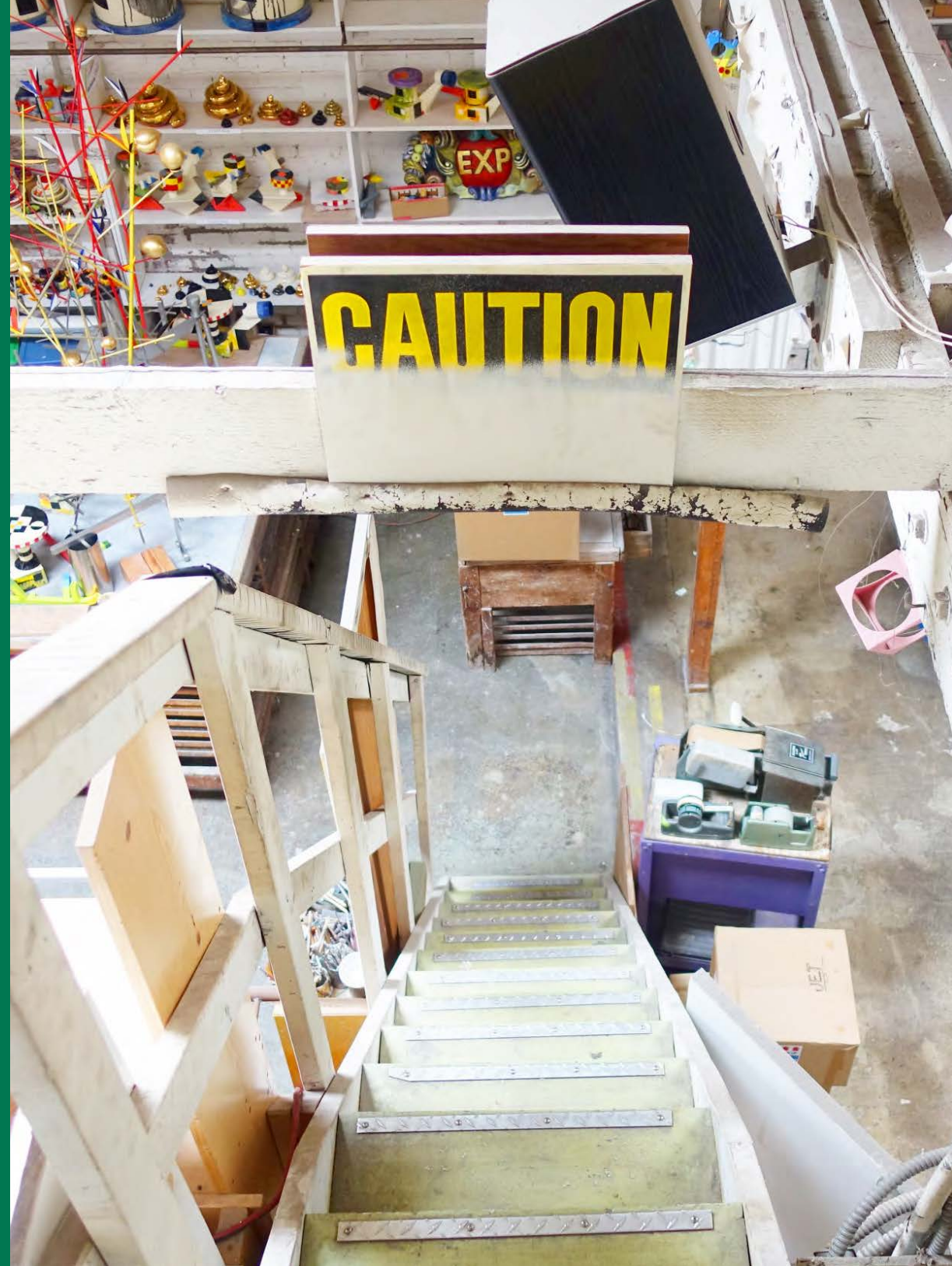
What I want is everybody in cohabitation.  
That's what I want.

Thurston Moore

# PETER

INTERVIEW  
AND PHOTOGRAPHY  
Paige Silveria

# SHIRE





Peter Shire is widely celebrated for his array of multidisciplinary work, and especially for his ceramics. Over the span of his almost half-century long career, he's worked out of a studio space in his home neighborhood of Echo Park in Los Angeles, tending to his welding machines and pottery wheels. From this obscure location he was able to participate in one of the most important movements of those 50 years, the Milan based Memphis Group.

After an unexpected visit to Los Angeles by a few burgeoning Italian artists back in the late '70s, Shire quickly realized his place amongst them. (Unbeknownst to Shire at the time, they had been introduced to his work via an article in L.A. based cult magazine *Wet*.) The Memphis Group, pioneered and corralled by artist Ettore Sottsass, was a revolutionary movement in art and design. After a breakout exhibition in 1981 at Milan's Furniture Fair, the designs which held bright colors and severe shapes as paramount, set the tone for furniture, fabrics and art objects for almost a decade.

On an overcast and chilly day in Los Angeles, one of many we've had this winter season, I stopped by Peter Shire's studio in Echo Park for a visit and a chat. On a weathered outdoor concrete platform overlooking the busy parking lot, I was met by a welcoming table of artisan bread and charcuterie. As the wind picked up, we moved inside and the four-hour tour of the workspace and his varied history began.







***What are you working on now?***

I'm getting ready for a show at the MOCA Design Center in April with the curator Anna Katz. I'm gonna focus on furniture, teapots and drawings. I'm making some new works for that and then including some older stuff. I'm putting ceramics down below in the smaller room and furniture and those things up above. And hopefully I can lead them astray from their native staid taste. I'm always amused and interested to see what people pick. But it doesn't matter which one they pick; it'll be good. It helps me see it in a different way. I'm incorrigible; I do everything I can to encourage other people to stray from the straight and narrow of whatever they impose on themselves.

***How will this show be different?***

It's going to have a lot of color on the walls, which

is already sort of an anathema to the museum/gallery mainstream scene of white walls. We're breaking it up and putting in more than Anna originally wanted. If we're going to do it, we might as well not be shy about it. If people are going to make fun of it or dismiss it, they might as well have a good target. At this stage in my career, it's very interesting. There's so much information in my case, because I'm not interested in developing a piece or a design within an artwork that can be a kind of cash cow – the kind of thing people keep reproducing. Instead, I've made a lot of different things. It's funny, MOCA wants this one piece that used to be in my bathroom so my cat peed on it all the time. That means it's good!

***Is this the main thing you're focusing on?***

In May I'm going to Japan for three weeks,

I hope. We'll see how long my wife will let me out – she knows I like Japanese women. (He laughs.) But I have a show there at Curator's Cube as well in a space that's not quite a gallery and not quite a shop. It's one of those places that's in between so we'll try and make the work a bit more modest. It will be mostly pottery, if not all. It's a two-person show; my friend Shin Okuda is doing furniture.

***How did you and Donna meet?***

A friend of ours introduced us. In school, this one young woman named Judy knew that Donna had split up with her husband. She also knew that I liked women of the Asian persuasion, so she sort of paraded her in front of me. (He laughs.)

***How many people do you have working with you here?***

Two part time, another part time who kind of floats and a neighborhood guy who comes around and we're not really sure what he does.

***What was this space before?***

It was an automobile garage, built in 1924. There's a track with which we presume they moved the motors and a space in the floor for what they used to call a grease pit. They didn't lift the car up back then; they moved down beneath it. It's filled with concrete now though.

***Wood, glass, metal, ceramics, is there any material you don't use?***

Probably. I don't use carbon fiber.

***You started with ceramics and then moved into everything else. Did you teach yourself?***

More or less. I encountered people along the way that helped me, and I watched them. I was very involved in riding motorcycles and met people that welded this way. A friend of a friend introduced me to these guys that had a group of tools.

But the things I wanted them to help me with got really complicated for them. I'd go by and they'd say, "Oh, we didn't get to it yet, but if you want to go work on it, you go work on it." So I ended up figuring it out myself. At that point, what was the use of traveling if I'm the one making the work? But I was lucky; people came to help me.

***What kind of motorcycle did you have?***

I had four Lambrettas, three Vespas, a Triumph, three Nortons and a BSA – but not all at once.

***You have a lot of bicycles here now.***

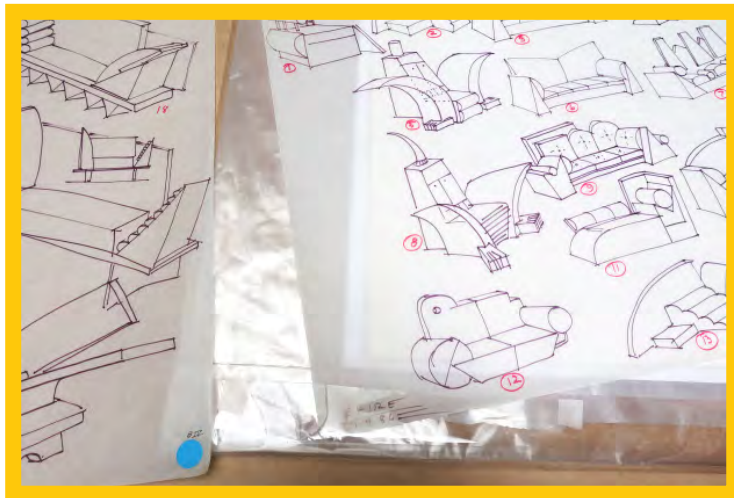
Yeah, I don't ride them enough. When I do, I pick them depending on my mood. I don't know what influences it; it's kind of the way they ride. I like to ride on the beach path in Marina Del Rey. So depending on how sandy it is, I don't want to take the more precious one.

***How often do you make ceramics?***

I only throw maybe twice a year. I'll spend a week and a half. With assistants! I need all the help I can get. I may have two people backing me up, preparing the clay. Otherwise forget it. We had a potter working with us for 20 years. He's 92 now. Benny. Now he's too old to do these things, but he did them up until a couple of years ago. He's sad because he's worked since he was seven in Mexico. And there, it was the Old World. So now we have things from him that we keep. We don't want to sell any of them. It breaks my heart, because that was our time together.

***There must be a lot of stories with the people you've worked with over the years.***

I had another person, Miguel over about a seven-year period and he left about three years ago. He wanted to go back home to Mexico. And now it's too much for him to come back. That's not just because of the T man, Trump, but he says he can't go across the desert again. He was funny; he had



a certain kind of drama. And a friend of mine's son was working with us. He was a very conscientious person. Miguel would like to jazz him a bit. So when the UPS man would come, he'd say, "Oh uniform; I better hide." And so for months he had him afraid of immigration. So finally I'd had enough and I said, "That's the UPS man!"

***Your aesthetic is very particular, is it ever difficult to communicate what you want to those working with you?***

I had this good guy working for me where I'd just make drawings and he would make things for me. We had a language. That's the thing. When you play baseball, you practice for months so that when a ball comes your way, you don't have to say, "Okay you move here; you do that." Everybody knows how to handle these things. And they know how to handle them because there's a language. It's a communication.

***Do you know when everything you store here was made?***

Sometimes I don't know; I probably should have dated them. With certain things I just know by who I worked on them with.

***You also did portraits?***

I did about 700 over the years. My studio was right on the street beforehand and so everyone would come in, even more so than now. The economic stratus has since changed. Now people come in and ask, "Oh, what do you do here?" But back then, all the local gals and guys would distinctly come to visit me. While they were here, I would draw them. And sometimes I had specific sittings with people because I had to have their picture. Now I have boxes of them and shelves of them! Hopefully like all things, they'll have some kind of cohesive importance.

***Can you tell me about one of those whose portrait you needed to have?***

I painted a portrait of my friend David. We were known as Red Diaper Babies. That doesn't mean we bled in our diapers, it meant that our parents were Communists. So although the Catholics would claim us before birth, this was a political philosophy. It indicated that you had a background, but you're not born a Communist. You're born a Catholic, in case you didn't know! So we grew up together and went to Belmont High down the street, which was an inner-city school. It was a political decision, to go to that school at the time. A lot of people that we knew that were middle class in this area lied about their address to go to the school in Silverlake.

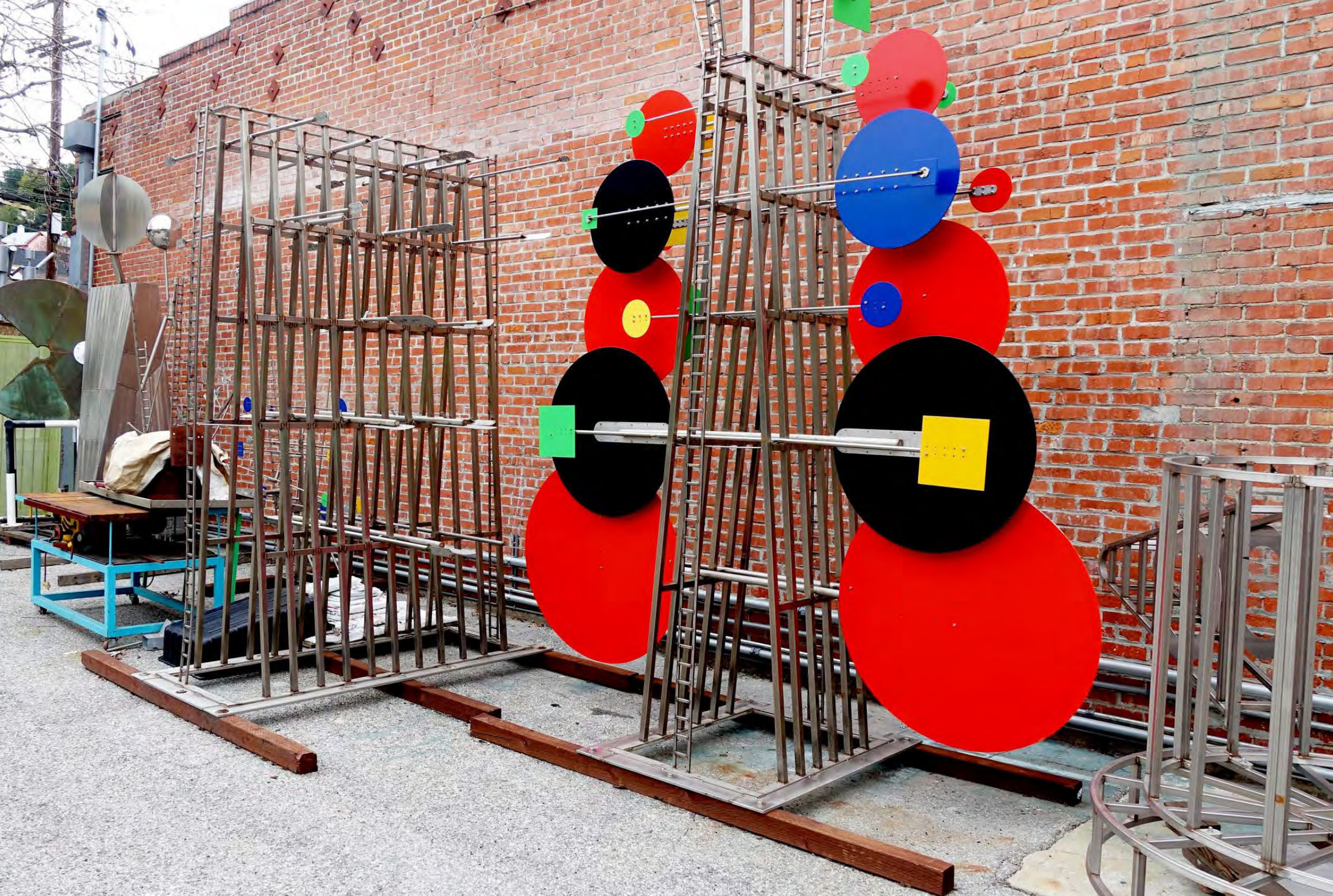
***Your parents sound pretty rebellious.***

David's father and mine were involved in Union organizing and at one point the Mafia was very involved in all of that – you know, any place that there's money. And at one point David's father had been threatened and my dad and their friends all took turns sitting up at his house guarding him with a shotgun. But nobody came. There are a lot of stories like that. There's this one story where they were delivering a load of bricks in a Model A Ford and these guys started chasing them, and they ended up throwing the whole load of bricks at these guys!

***You also have done some other types of painting as well. Can you tell me about those?***

There's this one, you know Tati's movie *Playtime*? It broke the bank. It was a disaster, because it wasn't pop. *Playtime* went right into the mess of modernity. It's very funny because it all takes place in this office building. And it's these American tourists that come and every time they'd open one of these doors, there's a reflection of a different Parisian monument. Anyway, he built the







set; he built this city all on rollers. It's rows of nondescript high-rise apartments and these I painted! It's a long story. Give me another coffee and I'll make it longer! On another painting, I created my idea of Botticelli. What I realized is that most of the painting I do is in the summer. And it's all about women.

***How did you meet everyone in the Memphis Group?***

It was early 1979 and I was looking for my direction at the time. These guys, Matteo (Thun) and Aldo (Cibic) from Italy showed up in Los Angeles – and people had always said that I had to meet them. They had seen my work in *Wet Magazine*, which I didn't know at the time – a lot of this came out later. All I knew was that I took one look at them and I said, "Oh man, look at these guys! They have the shoes I always wanted!" Aldo was a good-natured rustic; he was the lucky one. He just was. Matteo was very dramatic. He says to me, "You must come to Italy. This is your moment." And I thought, "Wow!" You know? "Should I just lay down and let the golden balloons fall on me?" And I was chewing on whether or not to go. A lot of my friends were getting these invitations and tickets to go places. And I thought that if I must go, well maybe they'll send me a ticket. And then I thought, "Who am I? These guys are going to be there. I can meet them. I've got to go and buy a ticket." I did it right away because I knew that if I said I'd buy right before I went, I'd have some reason to put it off. There'll be a kiln to fire or something.

***So you went then?***

Well, in the interim Ettore Sottsass himself showed up in L.A. – we went to lunch – he loved Chinese food and we had a great Chinese restaurant then. The whole time I kept working up my courage to say, "When can I come to Italy?" And then he said, "When will you be in Italy?" And I

said, "How about August?" He said, "No everyone will be gone; September is better." I asked him if I should I try to learn Italian and he said that I shouldn't bother because everybody worth talking to would know English. So I went and I stayed a month.

***Tell me about the trip.***

My brother and I went around Milan and Florence. The real shock was coming into town on the airport bus, going past all of these junkyards. And stacked up was every car I ever wanted in high school. And I thought, "God, am I too late?" And in a way, yes. But better late than never. We're collating this book now with some of the snapshots I took on that trip. And it may not have been that other fantasy, but there's nothing like what was there then, now. In fact, I've walked back and forth trying to find places. And with the economic boom, you kind of got what you wanted, but lost what you had.

***Yeah, what is progress exactly? So where did you stay?***

I stayed with everybody when I was there, and when we were in Florence we stayed in the most unbelievable place called the *Pensione Bencista*. And my brother and I were youngish guys and they had no problem putting us up there. They had a lapse where each room was vacant for one night so we never stayed in the same room, which was just the best. Of course they couldn't do that to anyone else. So we stayed in the best room and the worst room and every one in between.

***What other notable things stand out from that trip?***

When I was in Florence with my brother, we saw this book in the window. It was a facsimile of a book by Fortunato Depero. The thing is, if someone asks me who influenced me, if I say Calder, everybody is as happy as a bug. If I say Depero,











they go, “Who?” Because he’s not famous. This guy was my kind of guy. He did a lot of work for Campari. He was an early cross-over artist. He was considered a futurist.

*So you stayed in Milan as well?*

Yeah and this one day I went to the office and they warned me that this guy Clayto was there and he’s going to ask me to do something. And there he is with his trench coat and he’s looking at my exhibition, which was on the file cabinet. I was all set to go to the Olivetti Cafeteria, which I don’t think I ever got to. It was supposed to be fabulous. And so Clayto grabs me and off we go. Clayto’s wife was very funny. He had this big BMW and his wife is in the back and she goes, “Oh! I’m so tired.” And we went to lunch with Madam Scarpa, Carlos Scarpa’s widow. He’s billed as the Frank Lloyd Wright of Italy, which isn’t fair. He was their breakout architect of the ’40s and ’70s. He did all of the best stuff. He had died falling

down some steps in Tokyo or something like that. Traveling is something you start to think about when you get older.

So his widow looks at me and she had these big ol’ rose-tinted glasses and these big black onyx rings. And she says something and Valentina translates: “Ever since Carlos died, she doesn’t want to eat. She doesn’t want to live. All she wants is to die. She only smokes and drinks coffee.” And then of course she proceeded to polish off this lunch. These are kind of the things that I did in that month while I was there. It was an immense experience. I was the only one taking any snapshots back then. I don’t think anybody has any photos.

*Then afterwards did you go back often?*

My principal bit was for me to go there and I’d round up what we were doing. Otherwise, I’d just send them tons of drawings.







*At the peak, how many employees did the firm have?*

From my understanding, it was 82 or 83 and they did a gross business of six million dollars.

*What was Ettore like?*

We all adored him. He could turn on charm like a dam. He was amazing, but a lot of times he was irritable. We were really with him. It was definitely a very interesting experience in that it was as close. Ettore was a very interesting guy because he was very much a society to himself. He of course knew everybody. He was definitely very patriarchal, a very traditional Italian papa. He always used the word mafia, which means family – not necessarily criminal. But there's a little bit of irony there. So either you were a part of his family or you'd gone off.

*What happened to Memphis?*

I don't know real facts. I only know what I've pieced together. You know the old joke about the four blind men and the elephant? One guy is feeling his feet and it's like a tree trunk; the next one is says, "No, no. It's like a hose"; the third one says, "It's a palm leaf"; the fourth says, "No, it's a rope." Right? I only know these things the way they were explained to me. For someone that's really interested one day, they can take it apart if need be. But there were really three things that contributed to it. One, it was never meant to go for more than a year or two. I don't know if it was a fail-safe mechanism, but Ettore would say, "You know, it's like a fashion; it's here for a year." It was part of a time and a moment. So, second was that Ettore wanted to distance himself at that point. And third was the way it was managed. This guy (Ernesto) Gismondi owned over 50 percent of the commercial end of it. He's an interesting case because he's a real asshole. He's the kind of guy that if you say you own two motorcycles, he'll say he has three, even if he never had any. And so

when things started to decline financially with Memphis, everybody said, "You gotta change the management." So there were two factions that formed within the group: one was the group of designers with the spirit and momentum, and the other was the business end, which was the warehouse, manufacturer and sales. So there was a big strike. Then I got the call that everyone was quitting. And they asked if I'd quit also, and I said, "Of course!" Then Gismondi had the nerve to call me and say that he was doing something new called Meta and asked if I'd make a piece. Now, if I had done that, I would have gone against the Mafia. So I declined I kept going the way I was going.





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