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PACHUCO

PETER SHIRE STUDIO VISIT

OF
ECHO
PARK

TEXT JAJA HARGREAVES
PHOTOGRAPHY EDDIE CHACON





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Peter Shire's work is difficult to define. It has an ironic self-awareness, a style that sometimes includes historical references, a decorative and florid ornamental quality, a permissive and liberated association of fine arts and industrial design. His vocabulary rejects constraints set by specific art disciplines. He appropriates and mixes elements of architecture, a bright palette, Bauhaus aesthetics, hot rods, the sun-bleached West Coast lifestyle, kitsch, and wit to create buoyant, almost New Wave like artworks. In 1977, Ettore Sottsass came across Peter Shire's ceramic pieces in the short-lived but now iconic *Wet Magazine* and invited him to Milan to collaborate on various projects for the Memphis group. During his Italian weeks, he designed furniture, ceramics, metal and glass pieces all imbued with a characteristic playful approach, blurring the demarcations between the functional, popular culture and the decorative. The Memphis phenomenon faded out around 1988 but Shire had by then spearheaded a new form of language which he has continued to explore over the last three decades in his Echo Park studio.

When did you realize you wanted to make a career out of art and more specifically pottery?

In the summer of 1968, working for the county of LA as a clerk (heavy lifting), a guy named Richard made a terrific comment to me. He was looking at a young woman across the hall and talking about her attractive qualities. He suddenly stopped short and said: "If I keep talking about it I won't do anything" and he walked right over there. Consequently, when it came to making a career in pottery and/or art one didn't talk about it, a direct line was the only possibility.

Chairs, teapots and cups. These domestic objects never cease to inspire you and I'm curious to know why you continue to reinvent them. Why do they continue to titillate your artistic vision?

When we were in art school in the 60s all the aspects that the 60s are famous for were happening. We thought about injustice and protesting the war in Vietnam, different drugs, yet sex was the most

pervasive imagery and subject. It seems funny that you use the word titillate.

Are you saying that domestic objects are sexy? Or that domesticity is thrilling?

They can be and I'm doing my best. George Bernard Shaw had an epigram which was: "Marriage is the most licentious institution of all. It provides the maximum amount of temptation with the maximum amount of availability", which shows that he was never married. Really, it's the stage in which desires are played out and enhanced or not, if the objects and surroundings enhance love and romance. After all, one of the designers and artists call to arms is that a culture and environment can lift you up.

Could you share some memorable moments of your time spent in Italy? Anecdotes about Ettore Sottsass and Barbara Radice?

What wasn't fabulous or eye opening about being in Italy?

We all doted on every word Ettore said including when he said about one of my pieces that had columns: "Don't get fucked on columns." Call them like you see them.

Your steel, wood and glass modernist house in LA was designed by architect Joseph Van Der Kar in 1949 and is now a historical cultural monument. It is a quintessential example of mid-century modernist architecture in the style of Richard Neutra houses. It has a kind of orderliness and arrangement which collides with the essence of your work and even your own sense of being. Do you revel and thrive in this discordance?

One of the critical parts of the cultural historical monument status is that it includes the house that my brother now lives in which was the last house my father worked on before he died and of course the Van Der Karr house was the first house our dad built. As we were doing it realizing the modern in a direct line to the postmodern was a major part of the situation.

“Pottery is the love of my life. I like the way it smells”. You’ve experimented with architecture, furniture, metalwork, glasswork etc but always return to clay. Why?

This is the reason one doesn’t like to make statements, because they come to haunt you. I said it was the love of my life because I always thought it was such a strange concept, except maybe to the Brontë sisters. Truman Capote in *The Grass Harp* said: “Love is like a chain. Each time you love makes it so you can love again.” Maybe that’s why I keep returning to pottery.

I’ve seen incredible images of the temporary outdoor discotheques at USC and UCLA for the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics (later reinstalled at the Museum of Contemporary Art – MOCA). I’m a little bit obsessed with the idea of a Peter Shire Olympic disco swinging to the entrancing sounds of Giorgio Moroder, The Cars, Prince, Depeche Mode and Hall & Oates. Can you talk to us about this particular time of your life? Was it as magical as I imagine it to be?

The discotheques had a whole itinerary of live entertainment and I got to see Martha and the Vendellas there. She offered me the key to her motel room but I was married with a two-year old child, so I gave it back.

Can you tell us about your relationship with Echo Park? You were born in the neighbourhood and still live there. Do you think you have found your Shangri-la? And do you think your work is infused with an “Echo Park” sensibility?

In Echo Park, everyone wants to be El Pachuco. I guess in the 30s everyone wanted to be Jimmy Cagney or Jack Legs Diamond. Well, in Echo Park the tough guys were Pachucos/ Cholos and I was just a nice Jewish kid with left-wing parents and working class sympathies. And I’m still trying to be El Pachuco, so how can I leave? Sometimes one has to face the facts and that I’m not cut out to be a tough guy. Instead, I’m addicted to striped shirts and being sort of a bon-vivant on the French Riviera in 1925 or maybe 1948 or maybe 1952–3. Boy am I in trouble. Back into major fantasy zone.

Do you think your work reflects the heart of Echo Park?

Yes. As with all of these questions, I continually think about them and one of my epiphanies about Echo Park is that Echo Park was a place that was somehow right in the middle of everything but not on the map. A place where no-one was watching and we were running around on the hills with open space and making decisions for ourselves.

Did you every consider living anywhere else in the world for a long period of time?

Constantly, especially with the way that things are going in LA, it’s getting so dense that that kind of freedom seems to be evaporating. Although, where? Well, I’m not going to put it in a magazine. The thought constantly is with me that if I were to leave Echo Park it would be a disaster for my work, I would sort of lose my center.

You haven’t entirely succumbed to the lure of the art world and you haven’t played by its rules. Why is that and what do you think of that universe?

What are its rules? I certainly would play if I could figure out what they are. Can I still dress like El Pachuco?

What are your dreams for the future?

That Donald Trump looks at his navel so hard that he falls in.

Are there any contemporary ceramicists you admire?

So many. Adrian Saxe who taught me how to see and judge shape and also think about things and impossible being possible, this kind of discussion can’t escape without a mention of Ken Price, and Ron Nagel, the guys who turned objects into art. Richard Shaw and Robert Hudson in San Francisco who astounded me, John Mason and Peter Voulkos who provided the turning point for everybody and the young guys like Zack Leener who is doing a kind of screwed up funky deskilled stuff that everybody is doing only with skill and in a way that is showing everybody how it should be done.



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“I’m addicted to striped shirts
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