Part 05. CLAY

(Peter Shire & Izabella Scott)

Peter Shire's splash mugs, scorpion teapots, and Big Sur sofas are at the intersection of craft and industrial design. Their palette is sun-bleached – peachy, pink and lime – an aesthetic drawn equally from Art Deco, Bauhaus and his native Echo Park, LA. He trained as a ceramicist at the Chouinard Institute and then opened his own studio in 1972. It was five years later that Ettore Sottsass, founder of the Memphis Group of Design, sought Shire out and invited him to Milan. In the following years, Shire's Brazil table (1981) and Bel Air chair (1982) were to become iconic Memphis pieces, an aesthetic splice of Space Age architecture, Milanese craftsmanship, and the purest LA kitsch. Shire's work has been described as post-pottery, postmodern, hypermodern in excess. Memphis was critiqued in its day as the worst kind of garish, and for toying with aesthetic taboos – the very opposite of form follows function. Today, by contrast, it's become a symbol of high taste, and Shire is sought by collectors around the world.

I reach Shire at his studio in Echo Park on one of those typically exquisite morning in LA, glimpsed out the corner of his screen. He wears a Breton T-shirt and a silk bowler hat, rubbing his eyes – like something from the commedia dell'arte: a postmodern Pierrot. He seems to jerk himself awake, and when I'm able steer him from ill-judged innuendos, we talk expansively about levitation and horsemanship, Milan of the 70s, mimetic magic and, of course, joy.

IZABELLA When I look at your work, I think: joy. Perhaps we can think about joy as something that can't be commodified (unlike happiness, say). Joy comes from within; joy is soul. Is there joy in your making process?

PETER Yes, there's some private spot of joy that I reach for. I joke around that a child of the postwar baby boom, I was part of a generation that had a different kind of childhood. In America, this was the era of Dr Spock, an influential American paediatrician, who wrote books about understanding children's needs. Happiness was the primary issue. I think this ran deep.

IZABELLA How do children respond to your work? I'd imagine they go nuts for it.

PETER I make these little angels and figurines, and I've actually seen kids purchase them – their first major purchase. It's happened at our open studio, which we have once a year. These objects are priced around $75, they're affordable, in a way. You know, back in 1991, I was commissioned to design a playground in Arizona, a place called Encanto Park. I thought it was a great project, but we came up against all these liability issues, and in the end I just did an entry colonnade, all these colourful sculptural pieces leading to the park. Personally, I think children are just fine with a cardboard box. Then they can fill it with their imagination.

IZABELLA Do you live with your furniture – the Bel Air chair, say, or the Brazil table? Or are you sick of them?

PETER I own a Bel Air chair, but it goes out to shows, and so I have to keep in good condition. It's now 35 years old, and so it's not really something you sit in. That's the thing with the chair. Almost the minute it was made, it became iconic – just by its scale and wackiness. And the people that buy the chair don't tend to use it in a typical living-room mode. The chair becomes a centre piece, an object for the rest of the room to revolve around. And of course, one of the great misdirections that people had about Memphis was the sentiment: 'I couldn't live with a room full of this stuff.' That was never idea. Unless you were Karl Lagerfeld, who bought everything.

Peter Shire at his studio in Echo Park, L.A, documented by Esther Theaker (May, 2018)

IZABELLA Or Bowie?

PETER David Bowie was a collector of everything – art, object, Memphis, you name it. I really have no idea how these objects fit into his life. I think he had immense storage, and the expendable money to buy things. And if we're taking about happiness, joy – buying things is a great pleasure. It can't be denied.

IZABELLA Looking at your lamp, or your kinky chessboard, or your scorpion teapot – they are such bombastic objects. They need room to breathe. Like you said: you only need one Memphis piece to set off everything else.

PETER I liken it to salt. You put salt on your food to bring out the taste. But you wouldn't want to eat a cake of salt. The Memphis guys and gals were Italian, or at least living in Italy, and the domestic landscape was very different there: big old Milanese apartments with grand old rooms. There's no built-in furniture, no closets – you have to buy an armoire. And so you tend to have eclectic interiors, things built up over time, objects from different eras with different meanings. The American context is quite different – architectural digest homes, where it's all blue and white, chosen by some decorator. Adding Memphis enlivens a room, stirs it up, gives everything else energy.

IZABELLA You met Ettore Sottsass in 1977, and he invited you to join the group. That must have been a pretty joyous moment.

PETER Meeting Ettore... You know, I wish I could meet him all over again. He came to my studio in LA. He'd sent over a couple of young guys from Milan to do an article, and then he came to meet me. You know, Ettore was a great raconteur. He was able to speak about Memphis in this compelling way, to put everything in terms that were very romantic. By the time I got to Italy, he had been telling people about my work, so they all made big eyes at me. I got to know this particular side of Milan – dinners at peoples' houses, visiting workshops. It was always grey, and I hardly ever knew where I was. We didn't go to museums, or do any of tourist activities. You know, to this day, I haven't seen *The Last Supper* at the Santa Maria.

IZABELLA The design world of the 1970s was critical of the Memphis aesthetic – it must have been invigorating to meet like-minded people?

PETER It was a very special thing. There was an interchange, a mutual respect, a synergy between us. But I never really minded the criticism. I knew I was on the right track. The Memphis Group, we were looking for an edge – not an edge, but *the* edge, where beyond it, we'd fall into infinity.

IZABELLA These days, Memphis has its own kind of monopoly. Christian Dior based a couture collection on Memphis a few years ago, and then BMW produced a range of Memphis-style cars, with asymmetrical paintwork and knitted seats. What do you make of this wholesale corporate adoption of the aesthetic? Does it make you want to change what you do?

PETER Companies like BMW – they're always late to the party. My dad explained it to me in this way: When there's a counterculture, it has a certain power – and people at the centre want to coopt that power, they want to possess its authentic energy. BMW's cars are just horizontal refrigerators. They do the job, but they don't have any zip. And a Memphis makeover isn't going to change that.

IZABELLA Your work has been described as 'post-pottery', 'postmodern' – do you like those terms, eternally begin 'post' something?

PETER The postmodern has always been a catchy term, and it's misused. It refers to an architectural style from the 1960s that was loosely based on neo-classicism and led by people like Charles Moore and Tigerman. Their basic deal was riffing on different eras, that there's nothing new left to do, and that the task is to rearrange. Memphis went at it in a different way. Ettore believed in the new. He famously used to say, 'Spring always comes again.'

IZABELLA Do you still believe in the new?

PETER Oh yeah. I came out of pottery, so I'm interested in forms, and the conglomeration of shapes that often happens in clay – things being jammed together. There's an aspect of buoyancy in my work, or levitation, or transcendence, or vertigo – a sense of things almost flying around.

IZABELLA When I look at your furniture, it is as if it's popping, like it's going to move – poking into a room, or shifting it somehow. That's its particular vitality. Do you want to bend the rules? Bend gravity?

PETER I want to question all the rules. And it leads to a kind of magic – or at least the question of a mimetic magic where, between the hard reality and the illusion, there's a moment. Something happens. I think art is about communication, that's what we're trying to get at. When I'm making a chair, whatever I'm thinking about will go into it – my daydreams, my desires. I think a chair can covey feelings and memory and so forth.

IZABELLA Are you talking about a kind of transference from the artist to the object?

PETER Yes, and a transference to the viewer too. I've been interested in that for a long time: the idea of infusing will. It's like horsemanship, the way you have to communicate non-verbally with this gargantuan, giant animal, all through your hands. It falls into those old ideas about 'laying on hands', or healing power – or craft.

IZABELLA Do you consider yourself a craftsman?

PETER My background is craftsmanship and in the making of objects. Once, the world was full of them: harness makers and boot makers, cabinetmakers, silversmiths. But I don't identify with the rural or rustic model – I was never interested in making broomsticks or butter churns. My chairs are still very much hand-produced, but they're not nostalgic. I was with Alberto Albrici recently, who runs Post Design [the company that continues to produce Memphis pieces] and he's been making the Memphis chair for around 35 years. He brought up a graph on his computer, and he told me I've sold 110 chairs in 35 years. It's pretty good for an $11,000 dollar chair, but it's also on a very human scale.

IZABELLA Nowadays, you could choose to manufacture a different way. The tools have changed; there are fewer limitations.

PETER But there's a lot to be said for those moments when you don't have everything. It's a paradox, but working with constraints can be constructive.

IZABELLA You've had two recent big shows, one at MoCA in LA last summer, and now at Kayne Griffin Corcoran. Have you been experimenting, making new works?

PETER For both shows, I did interpretations of the Bel Air chair, named after other cities in Egypt. There were also ceramics and drawings... They were great shows. I'm also doing something with Post Design in Milan, at a gallery that Albrici runs – more iterations of the chair. One colour scheme is based on the four seasons – you know, spring, summer, fall, winter – which I thought was funny, since it's very Italian and all. I'm using lot of colours that are weird for me, I've got beiges, and cold colours, whites and nudes.

IZABELLA Its all sound so *tasteful*...

PETER Yes. Some of them are so tasteful, I'm disowning them already.