

EVERYTHING IS A TEAPOT

Echo Park sculpture legend Peter Shire on sex, socks and ceramics.

FAMOUSLY ASSOCIATED WITH THE MEMPHIS GROUP, the influential design collective founded in Milan, and currently working out of his Echo Park Pottery studio in Los Angeles, Peter Shire has been around the block a few times. Unique “post-pottery” pieces, drawings and public sculptures have been among his highly coveted objects of innovative design since the early '70s. The artist recently told me his dirtiest joke and generously answered my questions for what was likely his millionth interview.

Kristin Farr: You've lived in Echo Park your whole life. What has kept you there?

Peter Shire: Echo Park always presented an aspect of privacy, yet was like Cairo after WWII. If you stood on the same corner, sooner or later, everyone in the world would pass by. After all, these are the roads and paths where my memories reside.

In your mind, what's the difference between art and design?

This is one of those commentaries that the minute you say one thing, you think of something else that's just the opposite. Perhaps art addresses feelings through objects of transient worth. And design approaches objects of necessity to give them aesthetic and even ephemeral worth.

That's a perfect definition. What motivates your practice and keeps you disciplined?

Notions that it's really a romance.

Did any particular ceramicists influence you early on?

Absolutely. In high school, Marguerite Wildenhaim, the Natzlers, and all that Austrian, Euro, pre-war elegance that people now think of as the '50s. In art school, of course, it was Mason and Voulkous, Frimkess and Price. But about mid-way through, *Domus* magazine gave me vertigo. And

a book called *Objects U.S.A.* came out, and there was this guy Ron Nagle and his cup. His presentations were not only beautiful, they had the gestalt of everything we cared about at that time. The portrait of Ron Nagle in the upper corner was some mystery, some giddy malaprop of an out-of-focus guy with no teeth. It was so funny and fantastic. After art school, my Aunts Peggy and Jane started The Body Shop in Berkeley, and my brother Billy and I went up to help them expand it. Richard Shaw and Robert Hudson had a show at the San Francisco Art Museum that simply phenomenolized me. That was it! That was the vision, combined with the shapes and absurd relationships that Ron Nagle developed to function.

What is your relationship to cars?

Super intense.

Which eras or cultures inspire you?

Perhaps the ones that *don't* will be a much shorter list. Of course, Japanese, Italian and French. In these nations, the aspects of movies, futurism, Mingei, food and food attitude, good looking women, and homely men are things that have captured my imagination, as well as ideas of romance and adventure of what a life could be. And of things that stir atavistic memories.

Why do you think humor is important in life and art?

Boy, that's a good one.

Ok, what's your favorite joke?

Sometimes a joke will be funny for months. It could be told and told, and all of a sudden, I tell someone, and it's not funny. It's like it has a lifespan, an arc. There's one joke that's so wonderfully stupid that I can depend on it, one that my father used. And it even got me more than once. Here it is—"Do you want to hear a really dirty joke? It's the dirtiest



joke I know." So now you've got the listener's attention. The punch line, upon demand, "A white horse fell in the mud!"

Oh yeah, that's a good one. Tell me about The Memphis Group. Were you the only American member?

Memphis started in 1980, and Michael Graves was there. Another American who dropped in briefly was James Evanson. From 1980 to 1987, I was the only American who did work every year, although as an artist, not an architect. All those *Domus* magazines had seeped into my skin, and somehow there was a very extreme connection to the things I needed to see, and the things we were all doing.

What can you say about your days at the Chouinard Art Institute (now the California Institute of the Arts)?

Chouinard connects to the socio-economics of the pre-war and the immediate post-war Southern California scene. That scene was one of a very humanistic, non-commercial infatuation with very high ideals of the "art way." To be there at that time and catch those values was a realm apart of what we know today.

Why do think you're attracted to sharp angles?

Because I'm also attracted to round and sensuous shapes, especially boobs. What would black be without white? Heads without tails? Mutt without Jeff?

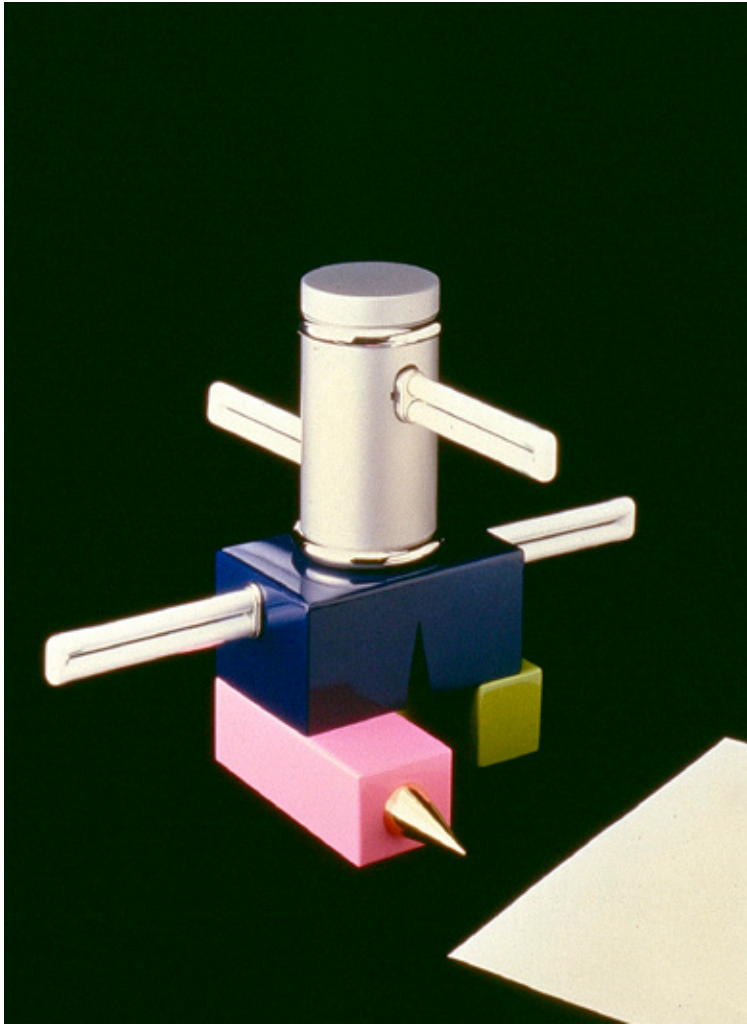
Coffee without mugs? What's the last piece you worked on in your studio?

Gargantuan replicas of our Echo Park Pottery mugs. They are really silly. They could probably hold a half gallon of coffee. This is one of those things we do, where the wonder of a good joke can't be resisted.

What has inspired your cup and teapot innovations? What significance do you attribute to those forms?

You can only imagine how many times I've been asked this question. Let's see if there's some ancillary vein that hasn't been tapped... it's funny, a teapot being a sculpture. Or a sculpture being a teapot. It appealed to my sense of absurdity. Really, it probably has to do with being a baby boomer and having working class sympathies.

>>



Here's another one you've probably heard: what's been an epic career moment that made you want to pinch yourself?

Pinch myself? Before or after? It's always nice to have someone doing the pinching for you. Maybe it's like the difference between masturbation and actual sex.

Whoa! Can you tell me about your "teapot house" instead?

Well, everything is a teapot.

Word. What's your relationship to color and why do you like working with it and being surrounded by it?

Something so flabbergasting and mysterious, it defies description or dissection. It's simply an emotion.

What does your sock drawer look like?

Sock-it-to-me. Just like the jokes... it goes in various arcs. Sometimes they are rolled up, and sometimes they are stretched out. There are four drawers, and sometimes they are ordered by striped and solid. And sometimes by soft and firm. And sometimes by purpose or origin. Italian socks are really beautiful, yet they lose their elastic quickly, so you have to wear them at times when you don't mind if they fall down. Never discount the importance of how they interact

with whatever the T-shirt of the day is. Pants are the neutral, or the modifier between the two. Hence, depending on the season, certain socks are more operative.

Why do you like about messing with the line between art and function?

Now, let's get down to it. Fun. We're Californians, we're baby boomers, we're in for fun, absurdity, exhilaration and intoxication, which doesn't negate a quest for meaning in life and a questioning of what is real and what makes things real.

JUX

Public Work, Lines of Desire: Peter Shire is on view at the Architecture and Design Museum in Los Angeles through January 31, 2015, and he'll be showing his Italian influences at the Italian Cultural Center in March 2015.

For more information about Peter Shire, visit echoparkpottery.com

JUXTAPOZ.COM / PETER - SHIRE