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REBIRTH OF THE SPOOL

Forrest Myers, a founder of the legendary Park Place Gallery, at his Brooklyn studio.

high wire act

A pioneer of New York's 1960s art scene tears down the wall between art and design. By Kevin Conley

Watch **Forrest "Frosty" Myers** at work in his Brooklyn studio—a onetime meatpacking facility he converted into his workplace and family home—and you don't automatically think "light touch." First of all, he's a dead ringer for Joseph Stalin. Second, he spends much of his life whacking at snarls of metal rods with a homemade cricket bat. But for the past 40-some years, while many of his drinking buddies from the sixties New York art scene quietly settled into one recognizable niche or another, Myers has been bashing together witty and largely uncategorizable sculptures, like *Pineapple*, a roll of cyclone fencing topped with a plastic house plant (it looks improbably like the title fruit), or *Sperm Lamp*, a delicately balanced working light fixture/fertility fetish made of three elements: a base of heavy iron steam fittings he found on a SoHo street and a slim fifteen-foot steel arc that leads to a round halogen lamp that bobs, lightly and somewhat obscenely, with the slightest vibration in the room.

Many of these sculptures are, in fact, furniture—like *Sail Away*, a seventeen-foot-long chaise longue from 1992 that

seems equally indebted to Calder's airy mobiles and David Smith's burnished stainless steel. It was offered for \$175,000 at Design Miami/Basel two years ago. Though it was later withdrawn (Myers can sometimes find it hard to part with his one-of-a-kind pieces), the clamor showed how heated the interest can become when one of his signature works hits the market.

"People look good in these chairs," Myers said, inviting his visitor to sit on *Sail Away*, which swayed like a yacht on a calm sea. "I take something abstract—I abstract a chair—and then when a person sits in it, it becomes figurative. People are essential to make the piece work." Other chairs looked more like Giacometti's scribbles, except that Myers achieved this hasty effect by tirelessly working tremendous lengths of half-inch metal rods into various shapes—club chairs, ottomans, slouchy settees. He likened the process to "wrestling snakes."

Myers, a vigorous 67, was born in Long Beach, California, and can still sound like the Gidget-era

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WHAT GOES AROUND

Myers's SoHo landmark, *The Wall* (1973), right, was rebuilt in 2007; he created his *Uno Cycle*, far right, in 1974.



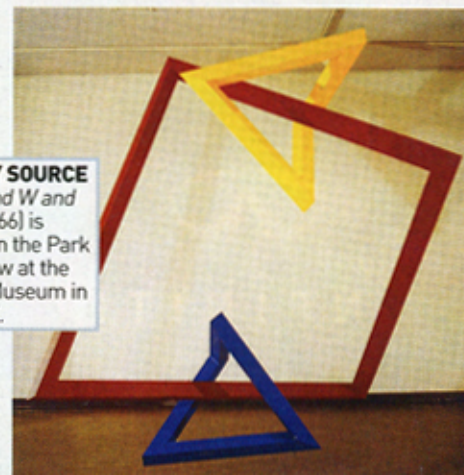
ART

surfer he once was. (He uses "bitchin'" as a superlative.) He came to the art scene out of California car culture: His first aesthetic experiences involved going to the local drive-in on Friday nights and critiquing the pinstriping and bodywork of the fifties-era hot rods (think Ed "Big Daddy" Roth). Ever since Myers moved to New York in the early sixties, his career has been distinguished by an almost Waldo-like omnipresence. In 1965, he helped found what was arguably the first SoHo gallery—the Park Place, which is now the subject of a retrospective at the Blanton Museum of Art in Austin, Texas. (The show runs from September 28 through January 18, 2009.) He unveiled his most famous installation, *The Wall*, a seven-story grid of aqua-colored I-beams on a blue wall at Broadway and Houston Streets, in 1973; it has long been regarded as the unofficial gateway to the downtown art world. After nearly a decade of real estate maneuvers and litigation (resulting in the *The Wall* being disassembled and stashed away in a basement), it was finally restored and reinstalled last year.

In the late sixties, Myers became a member of E.A.T. (Experiments in Art and Technology), a collaboration between artists and engineers that culminated in the Pepsi Pavilion at Expo '70 in Osaka. Here, despite counting Donald Judd and Dan Flavin as close friends, Myers riled the Minimalists by exhibiting a perfectly functional chair made of a single piece of folded steel. The work adhered to Minimalism's major themes, except for one: It had a real use; you could sit in it. "When he started," Marc Benda, Myers's dealer at the New York design gallery Friedman Benda, says, "you either made a chair that's comfortable or you made a chair that's cheap. But

PRIMARY SOURCE

Zigurat and W and WWW (1966) is included in the Park Place show at the Blanton Museum in Austin, TX.



At Expo '70, Myers riled the Minimalists by exhibiting a perfectly functional chair made of folded steel.

you never made a chair that's a statement or a piece of sculpture."

One of his most famous light sculptures began when he met a laser salesman at Max's Kansas City, the Manhattan bar where Andy Warhol and his Factory superstars would congregate. "We got this guy drunk and got him a date," Myers said. "And he just turned to me and handed me his only laser"—one of the first available. "The next day, he probably lost his job. But I took that laser and put it on my window, diagonally across the street from Max's. It drew a line from my studio to the front window of the bar, where it hit a mirror that was affixed to a speaker that was plugged into the jukebox. So when the speaker vibrated, the line would swirl and bounce all the way into the back room, where Warhol hung out with the freaks."

Myers's tales can make you feel nostalgic for a lost heyday when, he says, you could find filmmakers, writers, poets, and musicians in the same room drinking together. "Sure, we had our cliques," he admits. "The Minimalists would be in one part of the bar and Abstract Expressionists in another. Sometimes there'd be fights." And who'd win? "Oh, an Abstract Expressionist would kick a Minimalist's ass any day!"

Myers moved to the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn in the mid-eighties, again becoming a pioneer in a thriving artists' neighborhood. But the focus of his work shifted. Now he's more likely to exercise his metallurgical sleight of hand (and cricket bat) on a more domestic level, creating the battered chairs shown at Friedman Benda, home to such design giants as Ron Arad, Marcel Wanders, and the late Ettore Sottsass.

"My work comes on as art," Myers admits, although once you see him surrounded by the lively and quizzical objects in his home and studio, the distinctions between art and design, pure wit and everyday function, fall away. "But the most successful ones—you don't know what they are." □ critics > 64