

Michael  
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500 WORDS

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## Wendell Castle

11.13.12



View of "Wendell Castle: Wandering Forms, Works from 1959–79," 2012. Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield, Connecticut. (Photo: Alyson Baker)

*Over the past five decades Wendell Castle has created furniture works with organic forms in wood, plastic, and metal. An exhibition of his most celebrated pieces is on view at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Connecticut through February 20, 2013, and another exhibition at the Kentucky Museum of Art and Craft in Louisville runs November 29–February 4, 2013. Two concurrent gallery shows at Barry Friedman Ltd. and Friedman Benda in New York can also be visited until February 9. Here, Castle discusses some of the ideas underpinning his prolific works.*

I HAD SOME SLIGHT INTEREST, but never really considered furniture as a career. My breakthrough came in graduate school. I was using plywood to make a box with drawers, and my sculpture instructor made a derogatory comment about how I was wasting my time making furniture. It prompted me to think: Why isn't furniture art? So in 1959 I made *Stool Sculpture* and never mentioned to my instructor that it could also be a piece of furniture. To test my success—that one couldn't tell the difference between furniture and sculpture—I entered it in a juried show at the Nelson-Atkins Museum in 1960. It was accepted and exhibited as sculpture. Interestingly, I had the highest price of anything in the show.

Sculptors like Brancusi, Arp, Miró, Henry Moore, and architects like Gaudí influenced the vocabulary I began to use. I wanted to get volume into furniture, which typically didn't really have volume. I was fortunate because I didn't have any idea how to make furniture—I kind of invented a new technique that came from the sculpture world where you laminate, by gluing up blocks of wood, and then you carve. I didn't really know how to make dovetail joints, how to veneer, or how to do parquetry. I didn't know how to do any of these furniture things—but I knew how to do sculpture things.

When there were group exhibitions, I'd usually get the attention of the press—I was making something peculiar. We were the top people in the 1960s: Wharton Esherick (the elder statesman), Sam Maloof,

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Castle, Wendell. "500 Words: Wendell Castle." *Artforum*, November 13, 2012.

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George Nakashima, and Art Carpenter. But I was very different. Other furniture makers thought I was wasteful, that I was misusing wood. "You let the wood tell you what to do; you let the character of the wood influence the design." I never felt it should. I thought of wood just like clay—I'd make it do whatever I wanted.

I wanted my work to be considered on an equal basis with fine arts. In the 1960s I thought, if I could just sell a table for \$2000—since you could buy a piece of sculpture for \$2000—then I'd be up there with the rest of the fine artists. I remember the day I sold a coffee table for \$2000, and realized it didn't mean anything. By virtue of its function, it wouldn't ever be considered a work of art. I never thought I'd make nonfunctional furniture: I don't make a chair that's impossible to sit in or a cabinet impossible to get anything in. I believe in function, but it's not the most important part. The form is most important. I like softer forms, some borrowing from nature, but I never wanted to do a literal figure; instead I wanted things to be bit more figurelike.

During the Pop period, color was very important. Initially, in 1968, I tried to paint wooden pieces, but that didn't give me the surface quality I wanted, like automobile forms and surfaces. The only way to get that would be to go to fiberglass, and to keep the vocabulary simple. The first things I made were the *Leotard Table* in 1967 and the *Molar Chair* in 1968. George Beylerian asked me to expand the *Molar* line into an unlimited edition. But plastics are not pleasant to work with. In 1972, I went back to wood.

The works in the *Aldrich* show, which are from 1959–79, are valued highly on the secondary market. Right after, I moved to doing more trompe l'oeil wood pieces but realized that anyone can do that. No one else could do what I'm doing with the organic pieces. For instance, with *Environment for Contemplation* from 1969 or *Library Sculpture* from 1965—where two chairs hang on a tree-like element with a lamp on top and a desk at the back—nobody's made anything remotely like that. I own that vocabulary.

In my work today, there are real volumes. In December, at Friedman Benda, I'm going to have by far the biggest piece I've ever produced: forty-five feet long, and fifteen feet at the tallest part. My vocabulary is certainly organic still, using the same technique from the '60s, bringing together wood and carving it by hand, but we're joining the digital age: 3-D printing, laser cutting, a machining robot.

— As told to *Sondra Fein*

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