

Aldrich to feature Wendell Castle, artisans

Deb Keiser
Published 11:14 p.m., Wednesday, October 17, 2012



Wendell Castle is often called the father of the "art furniture" movement.

If the term "art furniture" could use an explanation, you will find the answer at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield, where an exhibit of the artist's work from the years 1959 to 1979 opens Saturday.

"Wandering Forms" will be on view when Castle turns 80, and he will be at the museum Saturday to participate in a panel discussion and to sign copies of a new publication.

Tours and art-based family activities will keep the day moving.

Castle's sculptural furniture -- crafted from hardwoods and fiberglass -- pops against a white '60s-style backdrop that puts the bold and often organic pieces in the forefront.

This is the first major exhibition of his work in more than 20 years, and his presence at the opening makes the event extraordinary.

Evan Snyderman, co-curator of the show, will moderate a discussion between Castle and Alastair Gordon, an essayist and award-winning critic.

New York City gallery owner Snyderman, 42, has known Castle since childhood and first organized a show of the artist's work in 2004.

"My objective with this exhibition was to bring together for the first time seminal works from the early period of Mr. Castle's career," he said.

"The work from this period changed the way we look at contemporary furniture in America. He is the last of the pioneers of the studio furniture movement, and the most prolific and dynamic."

Many of the pieces to be shown have not been seen publicly for decades. They were borrowed from major institutions, including the Museum of Art and Design and the Smithsonian American Art Museum, and private collections.

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The panel talk will focus on the early period of Castle's work, how he started, what sets him apart and some surprising twists.

Simultaneously popping up during the weekend will be the museum's first Makers Market, with craft work by 40 individually selected artisans under a tent. The artisans will be there as well, to meet and greet visitors.

The one-of-a-kind pieces for sale at the market will run the gamut from lustrous Damascus knives and sculptural beeswax candles that resemble spindles to exotic chandeliers, elegant jewelry and furniture, some of it made from reclaimed cork.

Alyson Baker, Aldrich executive director and exhibition co-curator, is behind Makers Market, having originally brought it together at Socrates Sculpture Park in Long Island City.

"This is a boutique fair," said Baker. "We have invited only top-notch artisans making high-quality products.

"We tried to keep it on a human scale to create an environment that is conducive to the dialogue between the makers and everyone who appreciates contemporary design and the innovative application of traditional craft practices."

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