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When Furniture Wandered Into Sculpture



Sherry Griffin

ALL LEGS Plastic Two-headed Table (1969).

By SUSAN HODARA

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Sherry Griffin

Benny Floor Lamp (1969), auto body paint on gel-coated, fiberglass-reinforced plastic with a neon spine.

IN the late 1950s, when [Wendell Castle](#) was a graduate student in the sculpture department at the [University of Kansas](#), he decided to build a plywood cabinet to store his art supplies. As he was working on the piece in the sculpture studio, a teacher approached him. “He made some derogatory comment,” Mr. Castle recalled, “something like, “You’re wasting your time making furniture. You should be making art.’ I began to wonder: why can’t furniture be art?”

That question propelled Mr. Castle toward his career of more than five decades as an award-winning sculptural furniture maker. His innovative creations have blurred the boundaries between art and craft and form and function, challenging traditional notions of what furniture should look like and how it should be used.

Now, some of the artist’s most significant early works — serpentine hand-carved tables and desks, bulbous plastic lamps, hybrid living environments — are on view in “Wendell

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Collection of Arlene and Harvey
Caplan

FURNISHINGS Chest of
Drawers (1962), oak, walnut,
bentwood lamination, stacked
joinery.

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Sherry Griffin

Wall Table No. 16 (1969).

Castle: Wandering Forms — Works from 1959-1979” at the [Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum](#). Curated by Evan Snyderman, co-founder of the TriBeCa-based design gallery [R 20th Century](#), and Alyson Baker, the Aldrich’s executive director, the exhibition consists of 31 sculptural pieces as well as drawings and memorabilia, and occupies three galleries, each focusing on a particular body of work.

Even Wendell Castle aficionados are unlikely to have seen the rarely shown fiberglass-reinforced plastics in the museum’s Screening Room gallery. The brightly painted furnishings here represent a four-year period, from 1968 to 1972, when Mr. Castle’s experimentation went beyond woodworking. “Basically he became bored with everything being brown, and he wanted to add color,” Mr. Snyderman said.

The pieces are anthropomorphic forms, with names like “Fat Albert” and “Molar.” The chartreuse “Benny Floor Lamp” stands on two wavy-edged legs that meet to form an arch, its rim outlined in neon; the nearly six-foot-tall “Squiggle Floor Lamp” curls around itself like an elephant’s trunk. The shiny blue “Plastic Two-headed Table” stretches like taffy up from its base and out to the side, where it achieves a seemingly impossible balance.

“You can see him playing with taking the furniture out of the furniture,” Mr. Snyderman said. “They are functional objects, but they’re breaking into sculpture.”

The woodworked furnishings that Mr. Castle was making at this time straddle a similar line. Examples of the most iconic of those pieces are in the Project Gallery, where they are collected like a menagerie. There’s “Serpent Table,” which stretches from a rounded base topped by what could be a set of fins to a flattened tabletop that suggests a wide-beaked head.

Across the room is “Wall Table No. 16,” an S-shaped form made of afromosia wood that squats like a fat worm, with one end on the floor and the other on the wall; the actual table surface is a relatively tiny oval. “Here he’s taken the idea of a table to the extreme,” Mr. Snyderman said.

The horizontal lines visible in several of these pieces are evidence of stack lamination, a process that involves cutting boards into cross sections of the final form, gluing them together, and then finishing the edges. The method allowed Mr. Castle to build his more complex and substantial works.

One of the most famous of these is “Environment for Contemplation,” a nine-foot-long oak structure with a long tail trailing behind a two-eared hump that rises to about four feet. There is a door allowing entry into its womb-like interior, which is lined with flokati carpeting. “You could go inside and close the door, and the light on the top would turn on so people would know someone was in there thinking,” Mr. Snyderman said.

One of the most famous of these is "Environment for Contemplation," a nine-foot-long oak structure with a long tail trailing behind a two-eared hump that rises to about four feet. There is a door allowing entry into its womb-like interior, which is lined with flokati carpeting. "You could go inside and close the door, and the light on the top would turn on so people would know someone was in there thinking," Mr. Snyderman said.

The seeds for explorations like these can be seen in the second-floor Balcony Gallery, which contains the show's earliest furniture. The legs of "Coffee Table," from 1958, meander beneath, up and over the tabletop, as if clutching it from above. "I like to question things," Mr. Castle said, "like, "why do legs have to come out of the bottom?"

To illuminate Mr. Castle's creative process, the curators selected 29 drawings from the thousands in Mr. Castle's archives. "There are lots of sketches that were never realized," Mr. Snyderman said. "You get a sense of how many ideas he was working with at any given moment."

Mr. Castle, now a soft-spoken 80-year-old, equated the act of drawing to the act of thinking. "It's where the ideas come from," he said. "I draw these things many many times, because it helps me understand them."

"Wandering Forms" is part of a wave of recognition for Mr. Castle that includes two overlapping gallery shows in Chelsea, an upcoming exhibition at the [Kentucky Museum of Art and Craft](#) and a presence at [Design Miami](#). Next spring, the [Artist Book Foundation](#) will release a Wendell Castle catalogue raisonné documenting approximately 1,700 works.

In addition, this month Mr. Castle added the [Arts and Cultural Council for Greater Rochester's Lifetime Achievement award](#) to his lengthy list of honors. He has lived in Rochester since 1962, when he began teaching furniture design at [Rochester Institute of Technology](#); he is currently an artist-in-residence there. He is also working on a cast-iron installation commissioned by Rochester's [Memorial Art Gallery](#) for its Centennial Sculpture Park.

"To have all these pieces in one place has never happened before," Mr. Snyderman said of the show. "This is the work that put Wendell Castle on the map, and the work that I think in 100 years people will be talking about as some of the most important work that was made in America at that time."

"Wendell Castle: Wandering Forms — Works from 1959-1979" runs through Feb. 20, 2013, at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, 258 Main Street, Ridgefield, Conn. For more information: [aldrichart.org](#) or (203) 438-4519.

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