

ART FURNITURE

Historically, when artists and architects have chosen to design furniture, they've made form the servant of function. Their contemporary counterparts are producing art you just might be able to sit on.





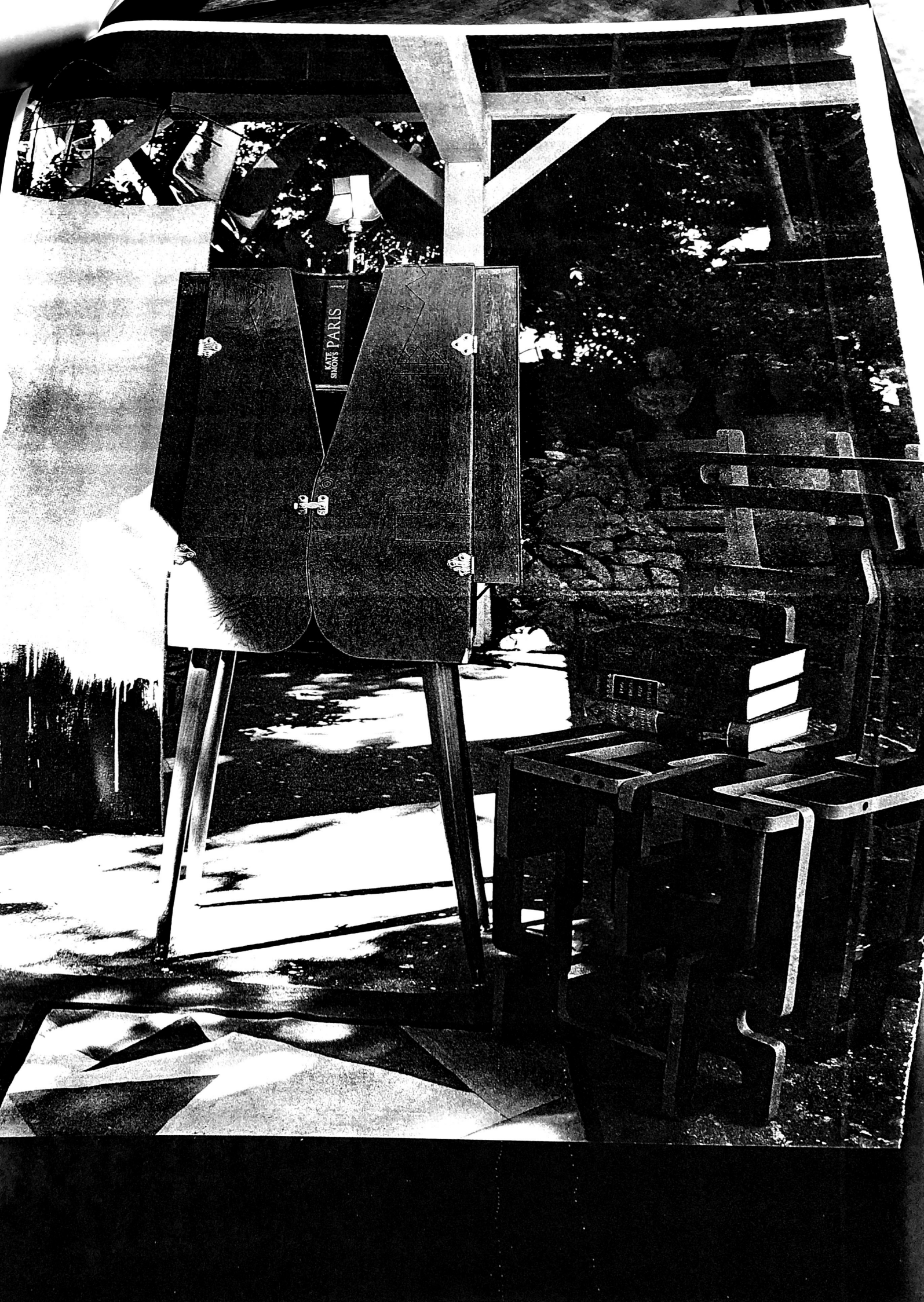
Good old post-modernism—not only has it acted as a great laxative in art and architecture, it is infiltrating all areas of design: fashion, food, film, literature, music, theater and, for purposes of this story, furniture. ☛ Artists and architects are looking to proto-modernist examples from the first decades of this century, before the divorce of art and life, when such artists as Picasso, Brancusi, Dali, Delauney and Rodchenko, and architects and designers like Mies van der Rohe, Rietveld, Breuer and Gropius were happily making what some now call “functional art.” The movements with which they were associated are now inspiration for a pastiche of styles in furniture design; contemporary artists or architects have imbibed the past and are dreaming new inventions. ☛ Peter Shire, one of the best known of the L.A. artists, fuses cubism with constructivism in colors inspired by the Hispanic population of his Echo Park neighborhood. The progressive Italian designers working under the moniker of Memphis found kinship with Shire. His tables of sharp angles and spirals in anodized aluminum hues of magenta and lime are regularly exhibited with theirs. As with the ceramic teapots that first brought Shire attention, the function of his furniture is almost an afterthought. A tabletop may be a six-foot-long purple triangle so narrow it will seat only three. And he never makes chairs to match. First and foremost, Shire considers himself an abstract artist, working in the schism between form and function, the opinions of Louis Sullivan be damned. ☛ Another artist whose furniture is akin to sculpture—albeit more functional than Shire’s—is Robert Wilhite. Working from a background of creating innovative musical instruments and stage sets for performance artists such as the late Guy de Cointet, Wilhite crafts elegant functional artifacts from rare, exotic woods. However, each displays some quirk of strained perspective. They recall the absurd juxtapositions of the surrealists and underline his commitment to the free manipulation of three-dimensional space. ☛ Philip Garner is a mad inventor with a sincere allegiance to the dadaists. He has published two books, *The Better Living Catalogue* and *Utopia or Bust*, which have popularized such creations as his “Haute S’Couture”: a yellow motor scooter transformed into a fringed stool. Lately, he has taken to using aluminum propellers as legs for coffee tables and as lamp bases. A unique night light mounted on a wooden plaque of pseudo-rustic design innocently asks “Sex 2 Nite?”



Painted chipboard screen with steel projections, by artist Annie Kelly.

Peter Shire's anodized aluminum and glass table, flanked by Robert Wilhite's wood and aluminum chairs. The giant matchbook is by Lisa Lombardi. Titled "Cache Box," it has a hidden drawer.







Playing off America's love affair with consumption, Garner puts a spin on Duchamp's wry statement made with the Readymades of the 1920s. 🍷 Annie Kelly is a painter who uses free-standing screens as canvases. They create inherently theatrical situations by the very nature of standing on the floor, rather than hanging on the wall. Four years ago, she began the screens in order to paint large for apartments or homes short of wall space. One of her most recent works, a demolition scene, is painted on construction materials like ragged chunks of particle board with projections of rebar (steel bars used in construction for reinforcing concrete walls). 🍷 Jim Isermann is most directly influenced not by early-20th-century Europe, but by the America of the 1950s and early 1960s. By re-creating furniture of that time, often arranged in environments complete with lamps, clocks, coffee tables and sofas, Isermann reminds us of a naively optimistic era of our history that has become laughably foreign. He constructs kidney-shaped coffee tables, chairs with seats of multicolored plastic webbing of phosphorescent fake fur—not borrowing the “good design” but stealing from the kitsch, the tacky forms that were unique to their hopeful time and place. 🍷 David Perry creates furniture out of the vernacular of its own forms. A handsome black lacquer dining table features a wedge of brilliant yellow as severe as a modern painting by Ellsworth Kelly; that flap folds up to reveal a secret scarlet spot. The uptilting of the wing for no reason lends an appealing edge to the otherwise conventional design. 🍷 Craig Cree Stone employs a similar subtlety with his *trompe l'oeil* tables, which hang on walls with their bases and legs rendered in two dimensions. A drop leaf folds up and out from the wall to function as the actual tabletop. Cree Stone, who is also a painter, has recently been employing the motifs of his Native American heritage. An obelisk covered in Indian designs actually holds neckties. 🍷 In the past five years, the number of artists making furniture in Los Angeles seems to have grown exponentially. The artists insist on equal measures of fun and practicality, as did their ancestors in the art movements at the beginning of this century. 🍷 In Los Angeles: Furniture by Shire is found at the Jan Turner Gallery (formerly Janus); the work of Garner, Kelly and Stone can be seen at the Functional Art gallery; Isermann is represented by the Richard Kuhlenschmidt Gallery; Wilhite and Perry pieces are at the Angles Gallery in Santa Monica. □



Craig Cree Stone's painted trompe l'oeil wood table hangs from the wall.

Wooden bookcase designed by Phil Garner, and painted wooden chair by Lisa Lombardi. The screen to the left is the reverse side of the Annie Kelly screen pictured on page 30.