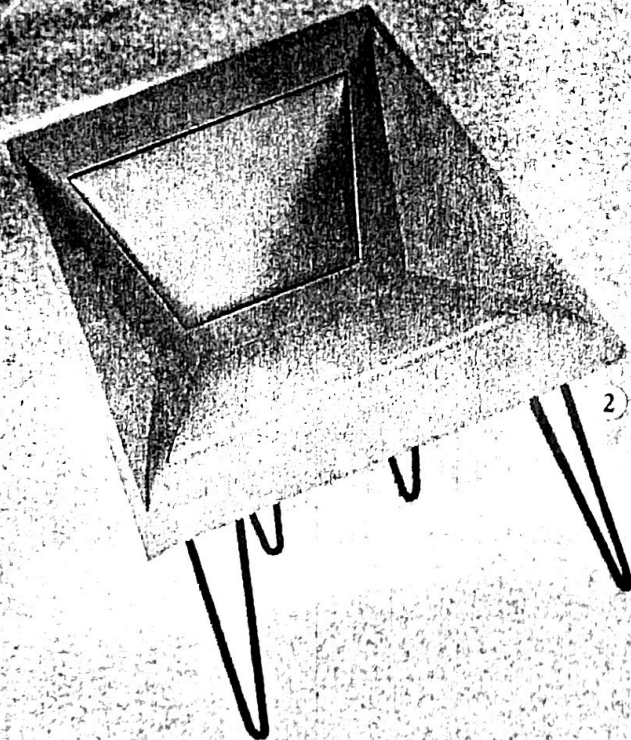
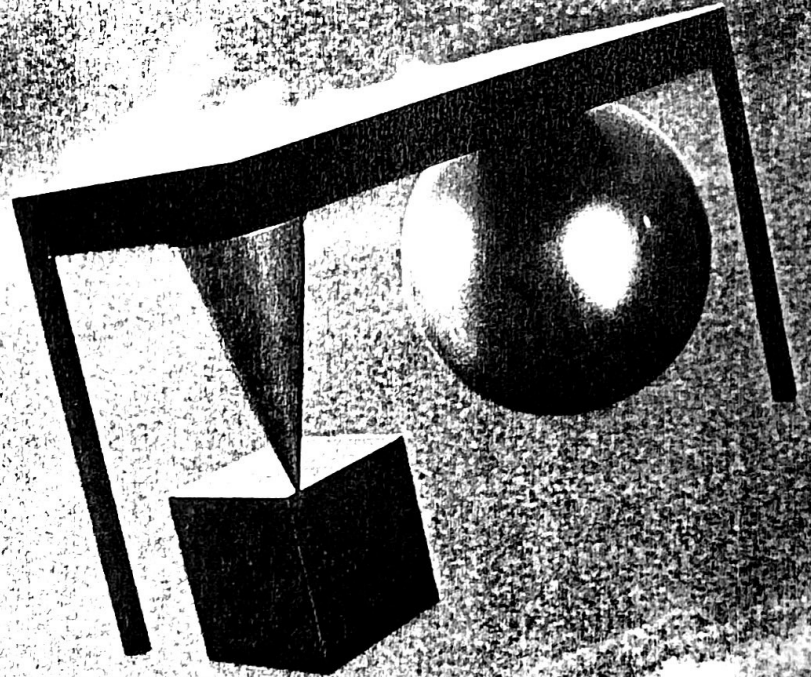
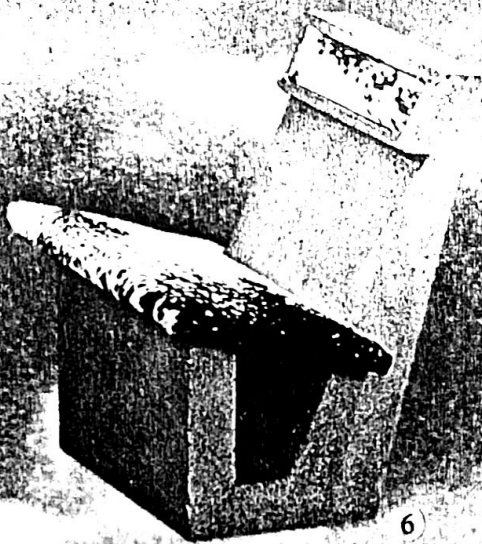


POST-HOLLYWOOD

IN LOS ANGELES, AT LEAST,



BY HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA



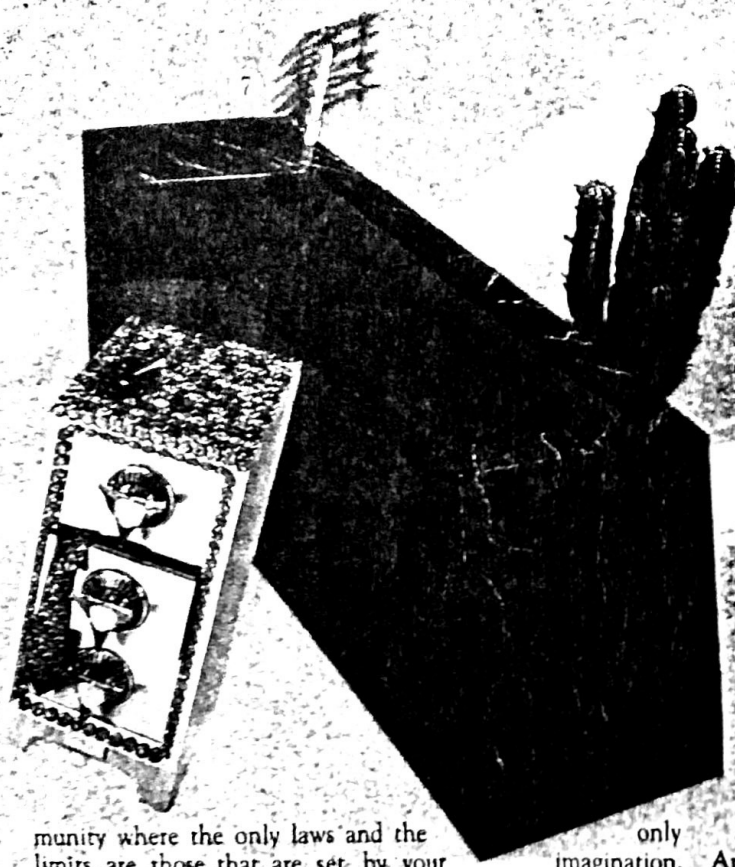
In the recent film *Ruthless People*, the nouveau riche couple played by Bette Midler and Danny DeVito live in a caricature of a Beverly Hills mansion. It's enormous and garish and has too much of everything, especially the southern California postmodern furniture, with its wacky geometry and Day-Glo upholstery in overbright rooms.

The film was a reminder that Los Angeles is the home of loony furniture designed by artists and architects. The West Coast's

easygoing acceptance of the new and the different encourages its artists to ignore the traditional distinctions between art and craft, function and dysfunction, high and low culture. These days, of course, these distinctions are being questioned everywhere around the country, a sign of our rampant postmodernism. But the questions were asked first in southern California before the term postmodernism existed, and, as the pictures on these pages show, the answers continue to be various. Indeed, it now may be said that Los Angeles's distance from history and tradition, so long perceived as a liability, seems to have finally created a com-

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INTERMINABLE FURNITURE



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munity where the only laws and the limits are those that are set by your imagination,

Here are the basic approaches, at least, of seven of Los Angeles's freest spirits.

1. Peter Shire: His Picasso-like energy and inventiveness have established him as the leader of the pack. Shire is one of the few Americans to exhibit with the Memphis group, in Milan. Yet, he is inspired less by the Italian designer Ettore Sottsass than by the Chicano low riders and brightly painted houses in his Hispanic neighborhood of Echo Park, in East Los Angeles.

Shire, who is thirty-nine, is a graduate of L.A.'s Chouinard Art Institute, where he first won attention as a ceramist. His unconventional, cubistic teapots functioned more as art than as pottery. Attacking conventional expectations generated by modernism, i.e., that sculpture is sculpture, furniture is furniture, and ne'er the twain shall meet, Shire began making furniture that could be mistaken for sculpture. He delights in such contradictory materials as fiberglass and bronze, rubber and steel, and gleefully uses tropical hues like fuchsia, chartreuse, and tangerine. His work melded art-historical styles of the past with his own

design and paved the way for scores of followers.

2. Jim Isermann: He is one of what seems to be an entire school of artists who have assigned a function to sculpture or created furniture that appears to deny its own utility. Jim Isermann, who lives in the seedy neighborhood of Hollywood, is inspired by furniture designs from the 1950s and 1960s. He was born thirty-one years ago and grew up in Wisconsin but admired the optimistic and forward-looking attitude of the atomic age, of Disneyland and "The Jetsons." In L.A., he found this aesthetic to be everywhere, in coffee shops, bowling alleys, and thrift shops.

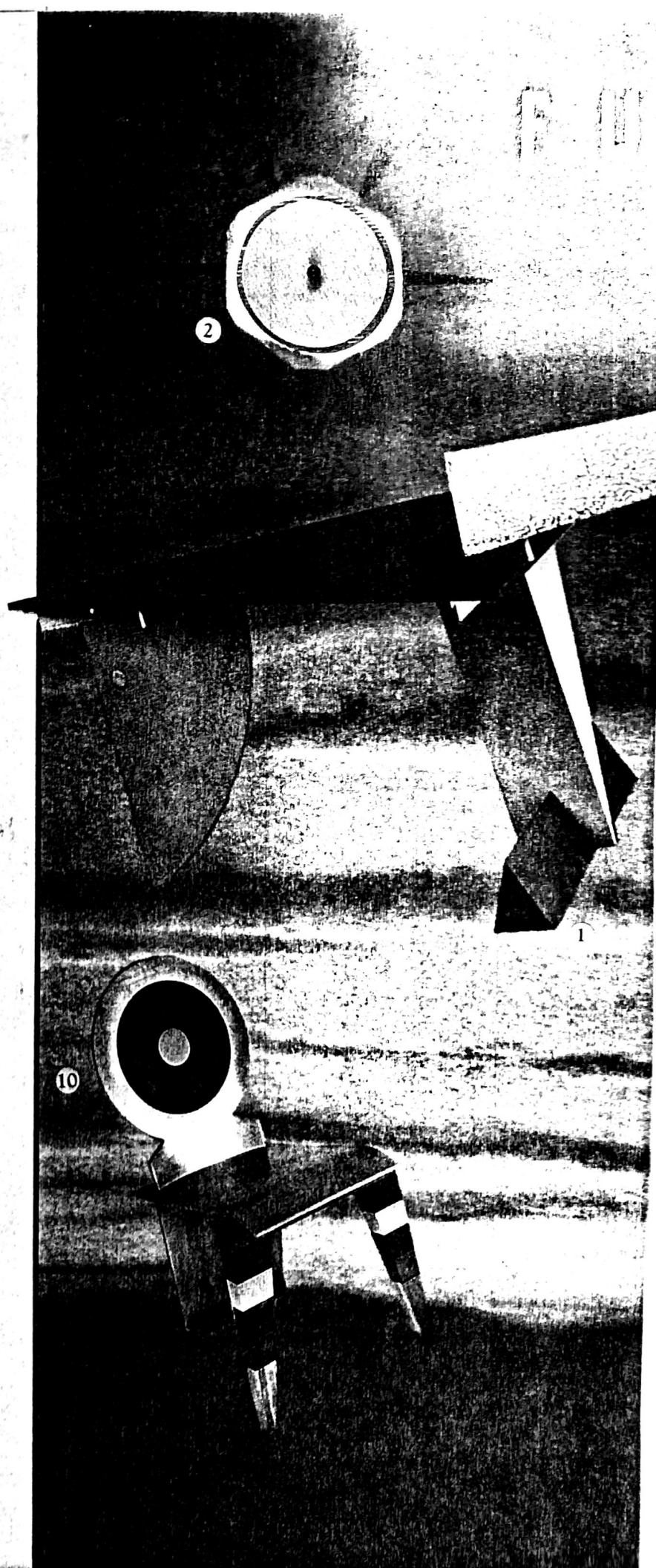
As a student at the radical art school the California Institute of the Arts, in Valencia, Isermann was creating installations of furniture based on designs from the rich years after the Second World War. His phosphorescent hanging lamps, amoeboid coffee tables, and voluptuous TV cabinets allude to America's most hopeful, if naive, era. Isermann hopes to jog our collective memory and rekindle our appreciation for such styles. (Since 1979, when he began making furniture, interest in the period has swelled considerably.) He wants his furniture to be used yet, like Shire, considers it art. Since it was the surrealist paintings of Jean Arp and Yves Tanguy that partly inspired the biomorphic furniture of the fifties and sixties, Isermann closes the cycle by returning his furniture to the realm of art.

3. Jon Bok: Hundreds of hubcaps, flattened beer cans, are attached to the front of his bungalow in the Silver Lake area. Bok, twenty-seven years old, sees himself as a folk artist and has collaged his home with such stuff, reminiscent of the work of the folk artist Sanford Darling. He modestly collects Mexican and Appalachian folk art. Hence, Bok is proud of the fact that his only art training was at high school in his native Connecticut and that he didn't attend college.

He began making furniture as a form of therapy, after his sight suddenly started to fail last year. During those months, Bok made small crosses and sculptures, hoping to develop dexterity and coordination with his hands. When he regained his sight, after seeing a "psychic healer," he adopted furniture making as an occupation. Chairs, chests, lamps, and tool chests are cobbled together from cast-off chunks of wood, leftover paint, and found elements like tin cans, bottle caps, padlocks, and hubcaps. The results are ingratiatingly homely, as if they had been lifted from some barrio cantina.

4. Robert Wilhite: When he graduated from the University of California at Irvine, in 1970, he began making musical instruments, props, and furniture for the performance art of the late Guy de Cointet. Fascinated by their sculptural appearance, he concentrated his efforts on furniture crafted of such fine woods as maple, ebony, rosewood, and the purplish, exotic bubinga. Despite their luxurious surfaces, Wilhite is intent upon twisting the tradition of furniture design, extracting eccentric and confrontational shapes. An elegant rosewood table is perched on large red acrylic ball feet; the seat of a sophisticated chair tilts at an odd angle. They are improbably comfortable.

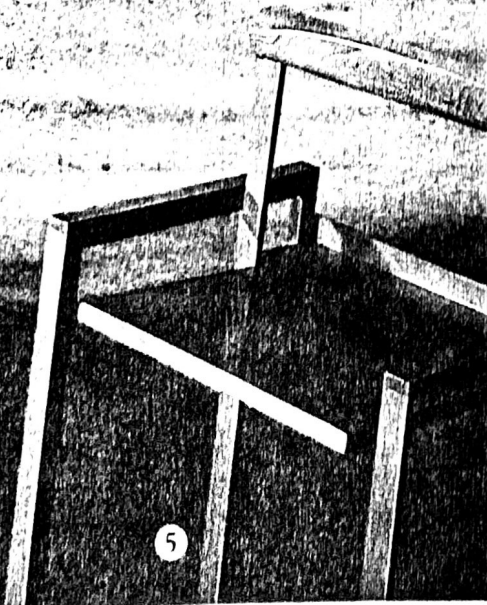
Wilhite, now forty years old, combines the linear qualities of constructivist sculpture with the heritage of the southern California arts-and-crafts movement. If that sounds like a strange combination, it's because Wilhite is another of those who are primarily intrigued with stretching the confines of a definition.



ITS SAVING GRACE
IS THAT IT DOES NOT
TAKE ITSELF TOO SERIOUSLY



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5. Michael Tolleson: He is an "architectural designer" straining against the corset stays of modernism. As he sees it, his furniture satisfies the need to fill an interior space in such a way as to integrate it with his architecture. A graduate of the University of California at Berkeley, he is now thirty-two and lives in the MacArthur Park area of Los Angeles. He says his inspiration derives not from art theory but from minimalist fiction by the French novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet, "abstract stories which are telling but not in any specific way." His furniture is streamlined but quirky and humorous, sometimes harboring the merest hints of human shapes and setting up an ambiguity between the abstract and the anthropomorphic.

A geometric maple chair is outfitted with an aluminum curved back; a sandblasted glass table on a gray stained maple base supports mauve lacquer triangular leaves that drop down to extend the dining space. Tolleson imbues such reductive design with a bit of trompe l'oeil wit and in the process raises questions about the relationship of furniture and architecture.

6. David Hertz: Only twenty-six years old, he is an architect who graduated from the Southern California Institute of Architecture with a combined degree in art and architecture. He alludes frequently to a strong kinship, both aesthetically and philosophically, with the minimalist sculptors Donald Judd and Richard Serra. Composed from thick slabs of cast concrete, his furniture

clearly shows signs of such influences. Hertz uses the material, he says, "because of its primal associations as man's oldest building material," developed during the Roman period. The lightweight product he devised comes in sundry shades, from peach to charcoal. This raw, blocky, natural material is confrontational and surprising when used for Hertz's own, streamlined designs. Although the concrete obviously refers to rough-hewn, unfinished construction, to freeways and commercial structures, his furniture, when placed in an interior, becomes powerfully sculptural.

7. Brian Murphy: An iconoclast who abandoned study in both art and architecture, he now uses common, everyday objects in his designs to bridge both disciplines. He eschews the preciousness of high culture and revels in what he calls his "white trash" aesthetic solutions. In the spirit of his role as the bad boy of L.A. design, Murphy carpets houses in Astroturf and builds wet bars and room dividers from vinyl sandbags. His version of a coffee table is a cord of logs placed stumps up and wrapped with wire.

Murphy, who is thirty-eight, lives in Santa Monica Canyon in a house of his own design that looks like a cross between an ocean liner and an art museum. His relationship to the found object is rooted in Dada and Pop art and lends his architectural projects an insouciance that defies anyone's preconceptions about architecture or art. Among his most popular pieces of furniture are chandeliers made from police flashlights suspended above a disc of shattered auto glass, and his wall sconces made of clear-plastic drafting triangles.

The list could be extended. Other obvious West Coast talents include **8. Ken Erwin**, **9. Larry Whiteley**, and **10. Philip Agee**, each of whom has his own ideas. But by now, you have understood the point: furniture is art—if you want it to be. □

Hunter Drohojowska is an art critic and journalist who lives in L.A.