

The Playground of Modern Desire

by Hunter Drohojowska

PETER SHIRE'S favorite movie is *Playtime*. In Jacques Tati's mordantly funny critique of late '60s, hyper-modernized Paris, unwitting citizens find themselves consistently victimized by the objects and institutions of their postwar leisuretime life. The props are the true characters of this tale, subversive of the best intentions: A trash can disguised as a marble column and advertised with the slogan "Thro-out Greek style"; ubiquitous, armless office chairs with vinyl cushions that resume their stubbornly square shape as soon as the sitter stands; an urn-shaped lamp that dispenses cigarettes when the shade is pulled upward; restaurant chairs adorned with wicked, crown-shaped ornaments that tear clothing and impale hurried waiters. Ugly and foolish as this furniture appears, it is embraced and admired

by the film's Parisians, who view it as symbolic of their newly industrialized, Americanized success. Paris's traditional monuments—the Eiffel Tower for instance—are only observed when reflected in the thick modern glass of an opening office door.

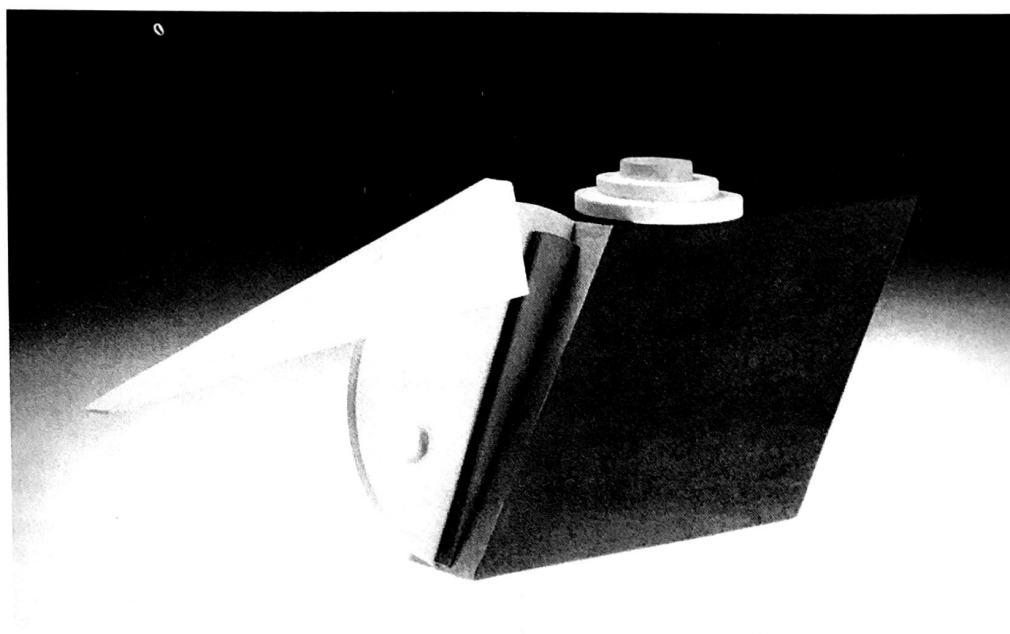
That Shire would admire this not-so-fictional film is easy to see. The subtext of *Playtime* is the subversive power of style. With abundant humor, the collision of modernism's ideals against the desires of the real world are made suddenly clear—obvious themes in Shire's work.

Today, Shire is known for designs for furniture, jewelry, fashion accessories, architecture, stage sets, even a disco for the 1984 Olympics. All recombine the shapes and colors he terms "Cookie Cutter Modern." How-

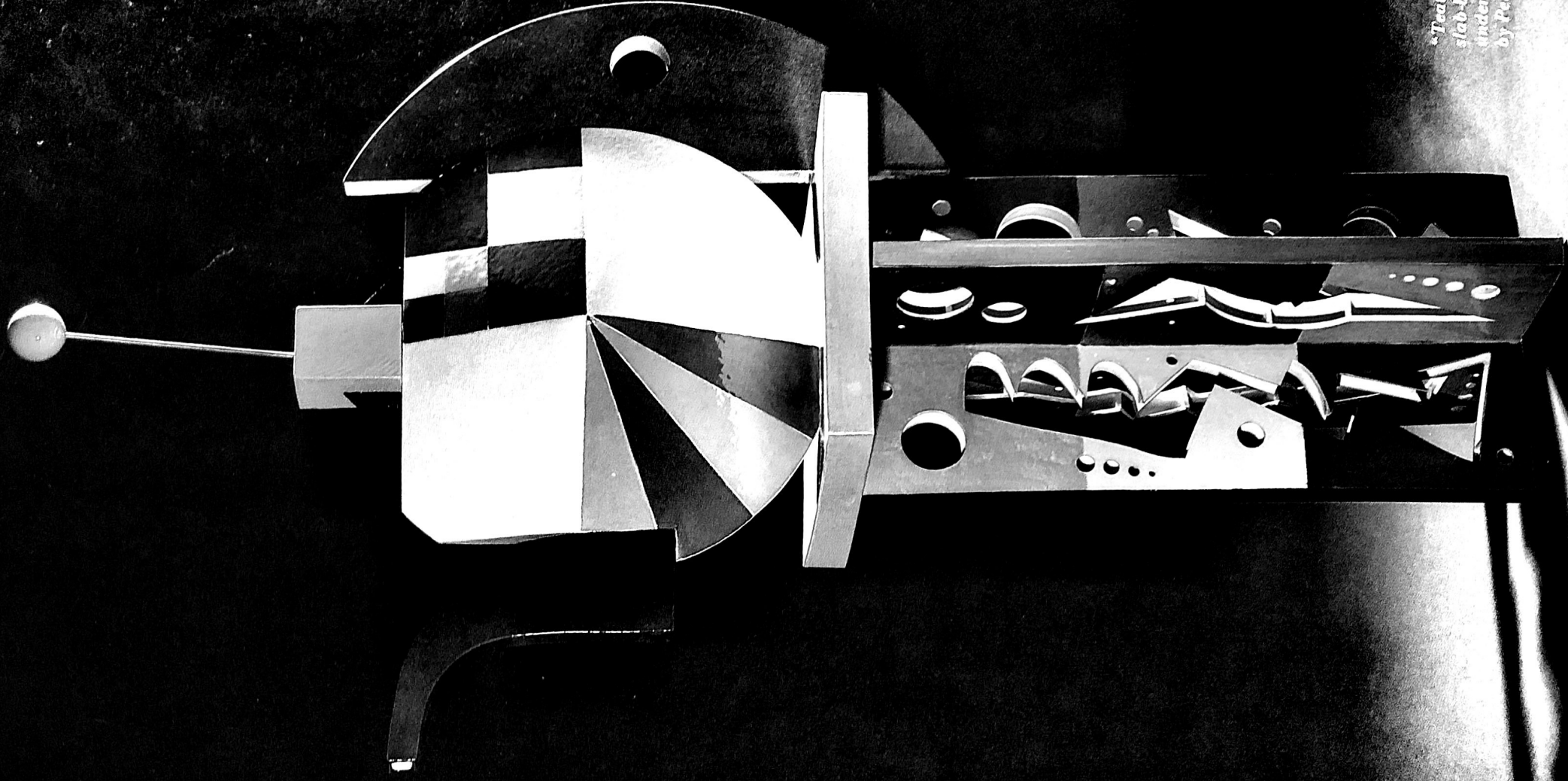
ever, the recent retrospective exhibition at the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery focused on his primary interest: ceramics.

Like many artists of his generation, Shire has been dodging, upsetting or confronting the legacies of modernism since 1974, the date he affixes to his first mature work: "Auffen Gile," a ceramic teapot with a box-shaped white body surrounded by a storm of multihued, constructivist-inspired beams that form the handle, spout and base.

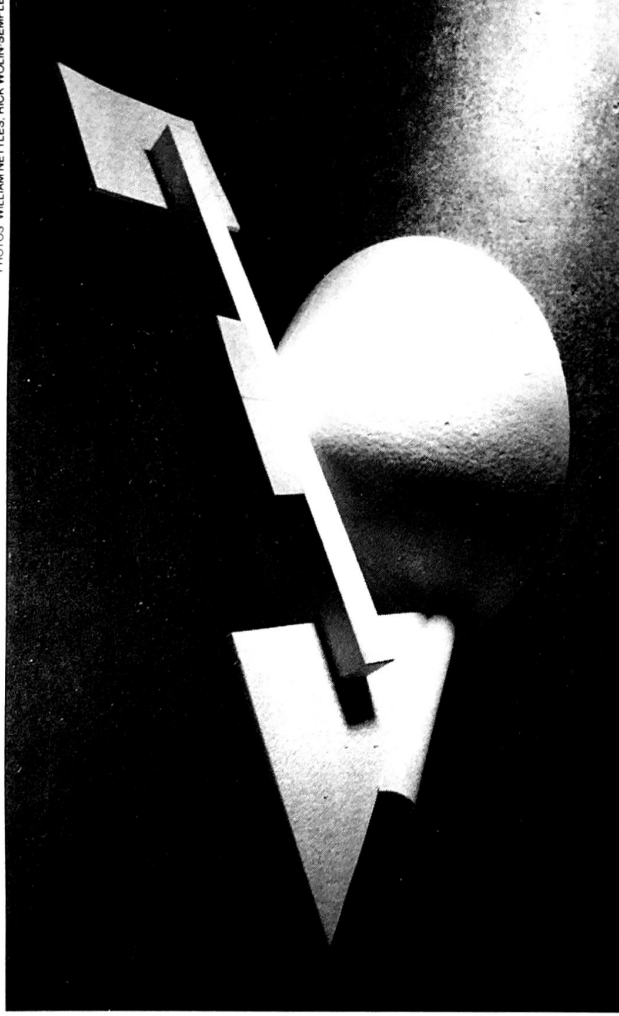
Shire chose ceramics from the pantheon of late 20th-century art media in part because of its problematic status. There was, in the late 1960s, the oft-discussed if futile battle of art versus craft, as well as the more complex philosophical dismantling of the modernist heritage. Shire was the beneficiary of



"Parallelogram Teapot," 12 inches in length, slab-built sculpture, with polychrome underglazes, fired to Cone 04, by Peter Shire.



*"Peacypex," 36 inches high,
slab-built whiteware, with
underglazes and clear glass,
by Peter Shire.*



"Two-Tone Cone," handbuilt, 14 inches long; shown in "Ceramic Freeways," a retrospective of Peter Shire teapots. In this work, utility is admitted and subverted simultaneously.

two decades of exploration and experimentation, of sculpture in an expanded field, and of the erosion of the historical art posture which has maintained oil painting at the apex of the marketing pyramid.

He contributes to the uniquely Southern California art history where ceramics comprise a reaction to and refutation of the modernist separation of fine and applied arts. With his usual wry humor, Shire explained, "I love art and I love clay. I wasn't going to give up one for the other. It's like, 'My wife is ugly, but I'm bringing her anyway.'"

As a student at the Chouinard Art Institute in the late '60s, Shire was fully cognizant of the work of Peter Voulkos and his students John Mason and Ken Price. In particular, he recognizes Price as one of the greatest influences on his work. With Price's snail-handled cups exhibited at the Riko Mizuno Gallery in 1969, Shire "saw ceramics could be stuff you could love rather than big lumps of clay trying to take the art world on its own terms. That stuff was playing into the business that sculpture has to be heroic and macho. Price wasn't doing any of that."

What Price did was to challenge the prevailing postwar American association of Significance and Scale, especially with regard to the use of ceramics as a major sculptural medium. His work is a deliberate attempt to exclude such terminology from art.

I go on at length about Price because he lent the most, both formally and conceptually, to Shire's ceramics. The Memphis group, with which Shire

is often connected, seems more a result than a cause of his development.

In his teapots, the contradictions of form and surface blend the visual vocabularies of various movements in 20th-century art history. A constructivist teapot's angular forms may be further fractured by a cubist glazing technique so that Cezanne and Malevich meet in the same humble vessel. Or the surfaces of the same sort of constructivist form may be glazed in the optically charged Orphic color combinations of Robert Delaunay, or in the splatter and drip manner of Jackson Pollock, or in the swirling and checkerboard combinations of op art.

Such appropriation is a subversive strategy underscored by the use of ceramics. The high ideals of modernist enterprise—not the least being "form follows function"—are persistently undermined. A teapot may be the central prop in a dialogue between two people, but Shire's teapots contain a dialogue of art history within themselves. Shire likes to challenge preconceptions, but he is not being ironic, he is not questioning the validity of modern art practice.

The "decentered" nature of ceramics gave Shire permission to root around in the modernist lexicon, and borrow whatever his heart and mind desired. He found comfort in this method of making art without joining a club, being able to stay on the fringe of the gallery-museum-critic nexus. "One of my real approaches is that of reaction. I tend to do that. Some of my best pieces make fun of pretensions."

It is difficult to overstate the impact of environment and family on Shire's ceramics. If he chose the medium in part because of its critical position, the vessels also are inherently symbolic of life in the neighborhood of Echo Park where he was born and raised. The colors, marks and shapes of his teapots echo the barrio: gang graffiti, hot metal-flake paint jobs on the local lowriders, the pastel stucco of dumb box architecture, the lusty Third World exoticism of Cuban sandwiches and passion fruit liquados, and evening paseos around Echo Park Lake. That is Echo Park, one of the last pockets of lazy, old L.A., a vestigial reminder of a slow, Mediterranean sort of life that has been largely developed out of existence in the rush to create a "world class city."

His parents, who met as supporters of the labor movement, settled in Echo Park in part because it was a center for left-wing political activity. Shire remembers being one of three white Jewish boys at Belmont High, an adolescence that prepared him for his ongoing sense of being an outsider. He claims this was yet another reason to major in ceramics, to be an outcast from the continuum of fine art practice.

Shire's father was trained as an artist, but the Depression forced him to work as a carpenter for the film studios. As a boy, Peter helped his father build cabinets and furniture, skills he would later adapt to ceramic work and ultimately use for making furniture and sculpture. His teapots are not thrown or coiled; instead, squarish slabs are joined at the seams like so many pieces

of plywood, a technique that contributes to their architectural appearance.

But why has Shire concentrated on the teapot format, only occasionally in conjunction with cups and never, to my knowledge, with saucers? First of all, there is the issue of function. Shire calls the teapot "the Holy Grail of pottery," meaning it is one of the most difficult exercises in clay. The joining of dissimilar elements, the issue of balance relative to the placement of the handle and spout, the fact that the teapot actually must pour tea without spilling or dripping, combine to make it a technical challenge. While Shire attaches outlandish appendages, a whirl of beams and tubes that surround the body, still most will pour.

If it did not function, it would be a less radical statement, a defeat by those who would wedge ceramics into the realm of sculpture. "That battle had been won by Mason and Arneson. After them, half of what you would see as ceramic sculpture would be little mountain effigies," explained Shire. "The material is so dominant, it's almost pointless to do it."

Instead of underscoring the plasticity of clay, Shire dedicates considerable effort to disguising it, even though it might contain a hot brew of Earl Grey. So utility is admitted and subverted simultaneously. The teapots are often so complicated it is daunting to imagine picking them up. "I eliminate references to the hand, to the small, discreet and comfortable object. I began by making them confrontational so you'd have a hard time grabbing

them," he confessed. "They had to be more than groovy little constructions."

There it is again. The dialogue within the teapot, this time between



"Cookie Cutter Modern" artist Peter Shire in his Los Angeles studio.

form and function. And then there is the sexual metaphor. According to Chinese symbology, the opening covered by the lid may represent the female, while the phallic spout clearly indicates the male principle. Both are inherent in any teapot—a continuation of the

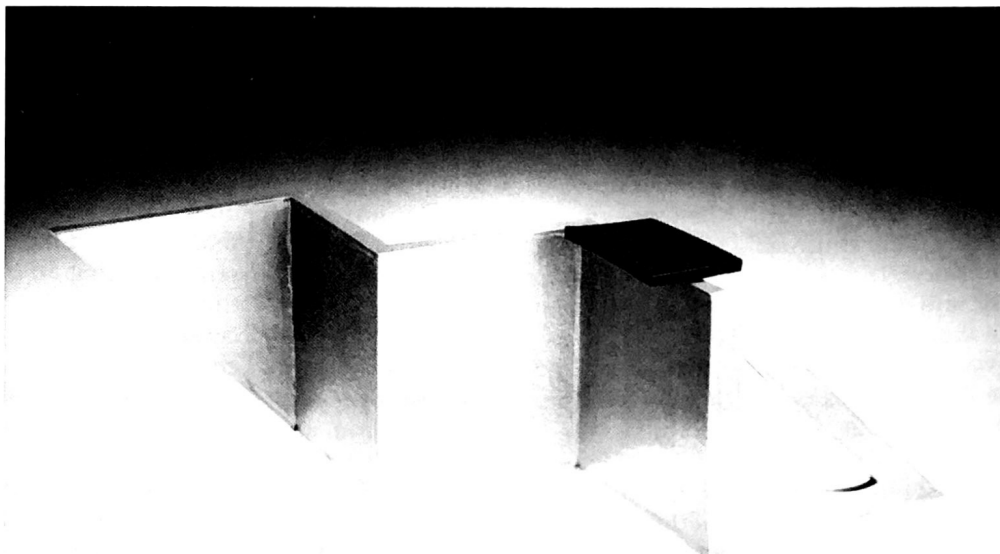
dialogue—and many of Shire's teapots are subtle metaphors of intercourse and sensual involvement. Juxtapositions of vertical cones or pillars with voluptuous spheres and dishes, the nestled, suggestive fit of recurring shapes, the juicy surfaces and colors, propel the compositions from his earliest work.

Finally, the ritual of tea—with its implications of high society and formalized behavior—is something Shire wanted to upset with a very Lewis Carroll-like humor. "It was a way to handle problems I have with ideas of elegance and perfection, things that I love and hate at the same time. It was like my choice of pastel colors. I was so revolted by them, I had to use them. It's part of the artist's urge to make it your own, to reshape the world," said Shire. "And objects can make you happy. I think Robert Henri said they are the signposts on the road that lead you back into yourself."

Shire admits it comes back to family, too, to the working-class sympathies inherited from his parents. The functional aspect of the teapots relieves some of the elitism inevitably associated with the arena of fine art.

"I never drink tea," he said. "But I think it's a good omen if I work on something that I don't actually do. There is an aspect to my work that depends on a life that I longed for, not one that I had."

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"Around the Corner," 16 inches in length, low-fire teapot sculpture, symbolic of life in the Echo Park barrio of Los Angeles.