

# Exhibition shows off furniture that functions as fine art

By Hunter Drohojowska

**T**he Functional Art Store is full of tables and chairs designed by artists, but most are so unusual, or eccentric, it still looks as though there is nowhere to sit. "Nonsense," exclaims the store's proprietor, Joan Simon Menkes. "Everything is functional."

We gaze at an ordinary stuffed chair painted in the style of a primitive cave painting by San Diego artist Kim MacConnel. It sits next to MacConnel's lamp made from an aluminum easel supporting a framed oil painting. The scene is inviting, but we wind up sitting in the back room.

The Functional Art Store is the host of an exhibition of furniture by artists selected from a newly published book, "Artists Design Furniture," by Denise Domergue. (\$29.95). This attractive young art conservator spotted the nascent movement some four years ago, by seeing furniture in artist's studios or pieces commissioned from artists by private collectors. In addition, she noticed artists such as Scott Burton or Richard Artschwager using the formal properties of ordinary furniture to examine how we see our environments. She approached Abrams, the New York publisher of art books, after seeing an exhibition at Otis/Parsons organized by Simon Menkes called "Furnishings by Artists."

Domergue and Simon Menkes talk about the nascent movement of furniture by artists in a tumble of enthusiasm, each supporting the other. Says Domergue, "I got the idea from friends who were making furniture as part of their performance art, like Bob Wilhite and Guy de Cointet. Then I went to New York and found an equal number of artists were making furniture there. As the research progressed, the phenomenon kept growing. In some cases, the furniture came from performance art or installation work; in others the artists just needed furniture and made it for themselves."

Simon Menkes noted it was a question of necessity. "Can you imagine an artist walking into some place like Cannell-Chaffin and coming home with some boring chair?"

Domergue explained, "The artists' presentation of furniture as an art form began to make others think of it as art. Part of the problem is that Western society and most of the art organizations have always been

hierarchical, eliminating furniture, due to its functionality, from the realm of art. That's a very Western and very recent prejudice. The Bauhaus, De Stijl and Constructivist movements (all of which produced furniture) defined modernism as we know it, but we forget that. People are more ready to accept anything that is free-standing or hanging on a wall as art for its non-functionality. I think this work gives the viewer back the prerogative to decide for himself what art is. Which I think is healthy. Too much dictating has been done by the critics."

Simon Menkes continues the thought: "The artists working today are not working with a common look or trying to create a utopia, as past movements like the Bauhaus have done. The work here is an example of a variety of attitudes, that each artist has his own aesthetic, individual and identifiable."

This movement seems to be gaining momentum given a recent spate of exhibitions on the subject, such as "Contextual Furnishings," on view through May 20 at Mandeville Art Gallery, UC San Diego, in La Jolla, and the work of Jim Isermann, whose furniture goes on view at the Richard Kuhlenschmidt Gallery on May 12.

Says Domergue, "I think both artists and collectors have grown tired of conceptual art, where there was no object. People were reaching for something they could relate to directly and live with. Even minimal artists who were making sculpture were making furniture as a relief. A sculptor could take a chance on a piece of furniture where he wouldn't with his art. And talk about it in a way he couldn't talk about art because the dialogue there had become so inbred."

Simon Menkes added, "And the artists considered his furniture as important as any of his sculpture." She recalled the sculptor John Chamberlain, best known for his sculptures of compacted, mashed automobiles, who exhibited a living room sofa made of foam rubber and draped in plastic in a museum.

Domergue wrote a historical introduction to her book, and edited interviews with 68 artists which comprise the text. There are 223 illustrations, 74 in color. She incorporated the work of artists all over America, as famous as Donald Judd or Kim MacConnel, to the lesser-known Miriam Slater or Lori Anderson, but all working from a background in fine art rather than design.

"As I interviewed designers, I realized the artists had a whole different intent. They're not thinking that the chair can be covered in beige or blue. I think the artists may have been dealing with formal or



**Art conservator Denise Domergue** is the author of "Artists Design Furniture." Some of the art works in her book are now on view in the current show at the Functional Art Store.

conceptual concerns, and when they try to make a piece of furniture, those concerns filter through."

Simon Menkes says, "Another element that's different from designers is humor, which is clearly conveyed in the artists' work." She waves at a George Herms clock on the wall made of faded bits of paper and typeset words. In the adjacent room, there is a table by painter Billy Al Bengston fitted together from wooden cutouts of fish in silhouette; a huge gray wicker chair by sculptor David Ireland that dwarfs the sitter; a geometric table in glowing metallflake turquoise, pink and mustard by Peter Shire. All look about as functional as a dribble glass, but they are terrifically interesting. "This has changed the way people buy furniture, too," says Simon. "You don't need eight of the same chair by an artist. Just one will excite the eye and create effect."

Domergue agreed: "People had started to look at their environment with brand-new eyes." Since Domergue has a successful business in painting conservation, one wonders why she might take on the arduous task of this book. "I wanted to give a

<b>What</b>	Exhibition of Furniture Designed by Artists
<b>Where</b>	The Functional Art Store 9286 Alden Drive, Beverly Hills
<b>When</b>	Through June 2 Book signing by Denise Domergue of "Artists Design Furniture" 5 to 7 p.m., May 17
<b>How much</b>	Free
<b>Info</b>	858-8200

portrait of each artist through their own words, to dissect the creative mind. For I found that the artists talked easily about their furniture where they might not about their art, though they are talking about the same concepts." She tossed her long dark hair and added, "I wanted to write a sort of art-history book that comes from the horse's mouth. When I first started, this movement hadn't become what it has and I wanted to get the artists off guard."

Simon Menkes concluded with an appropriate quote by Marcel Duchamp: "He said, 'The most interesting thing about artists is the way they live.'"