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Arts & Culture

Peter Shire: Teapots, Public Art, and a Life in Design

By Mimi Zeiger

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On the day I arrive at Peter Shire's Echo Park studio, a pile of fall fruit perches on a countertop. Bright orange persimmons and crimson pomegranates compete with the full spectrum of riotous color in the artist's workshop. Racks are filled with multi-hued ceramics, and metal sculptures powder-coated in vivid green, blue, and violet hang from the ceiling. And then there's Shire himself. He's dressed in a tangerine t-shirt, a red apron, gray shorts, and lime and purple striped socks.

Shire celebrates the clash. Indeed, he collages colors and geometries. More importantly, his work is positioned at the historical clash between industrial design and craft, a border territory so central to Modern design and architecture. What's remarkable about his outfit and what's remarkable about Shire's work, isn't the unflinching combination of shades and stripes, but the natural ease and wit underpinning his designs.

After introductions, Shire sets about making coffee on a magnificent Italian espresso machine. He turns the chrome beauty's knobs and releases steam like a pro. After a minute or two serves up a cappuccino in one of the drippy-glazed Echo Park Pottery mugs he produces. I set my brown and pink cup on the marble counter with the persimmons and pomegranates, adding more colors to the tableau; this isn't an average still life.



Peter Shire in his studio

More than four decades into his career, he's still a rogue. His work poaches cheekily from Bauhaus and German Werkbund even as it undermines the dictates of those foundational movements. "We were subjected to a stylized and didactic form of modernism," he recalls of his training at Chouinard Art School in the late 1960s. With Shire, form no longer follows function. He revels in the absurdity of the non-functional and the playful. "Design is a working class manipulation of elegance," he says.

Shire, his wife Donna, and several assistants are ready for "**Peter Shire, Public Work: Lines of Desire**" a survey at A + D Museum of his architectural works across three decades. Several architectural models perch atop a workbench getting touch-up glue and paint before shipping over to the museum for installation. There's a miniature of an unicyclist riding a tightrope between two fanciful follies, Shire's 2001 concept model for a monument at the US Border Station in Brownsville, Texas -- a precarious metaphor for immigration. It sits next to a maquette from 1993 of his first public sculpture entitled "Citizens to Save Elysian Park, Glass-Simons Memorial at Angel's Point."



"Peter Shire, Public Work: Lines of Desire" | Photo: Donna Shire



"Peter Shire, Public Work: Lines of Desire" | Photo: Donna Shire

Exhibition curator Jo Lauria admires Shire's aesthetic fearlessness and willingness to take risks. "These are not your grandfather's statues of bronzed heroes striding stiffly, or sitting astride a horse," she explains. "Peter's energetic and color-saturated sculptural installations are relevant to the chaotic, cacophonous, and Kodachrome culture in which we live today."

Shire is more than an Angeleno, he's a serious local. He grew up in Echo Park in a modernist home that he still lives in. This is his turf. He saw the neighborhood's waves of displacement, development, and changing demographics first hand. The Glass-Simons Memorial at Angel's Point captures the reality of time acting upon a place. The artwork acts as a point of contrast. In a January 1993 interview with the Los Angeles Times asked Shire to describe the steel structure and its tomato red gazebo, peaked forms, and black arcs perched high above Downtown Los Angeles. "I've got oil wells, small-scale bungalows of Chavez Ravine... against the major city skyline. It's what we see every day, but we block out. It's reminding us to look," he said.

"Public Work: Lines of Desire" reminds us to look at Shire's oeuvre. He's been here working while the city's arts and design scenes have turned over several times. Shire was designed artwork and interiors for MTA stations and was part of the design team for the 1984 Olympics with environmental Deborah Sussman, a pair of steel and anodized aluminum Olympic Torchieres, modeled after Olympic Lamps created for on-site installation during the games, are on view in the A+D's back gallery. Yet it was smaller-scale domestic items that brought early recognition: teapots.



"Peter Shire, Public Work: Lines of Desire" | Photo: Donna Shire

Touring me around the studio, Donna points out a series of branch-like sculptures sitting on a long table. These are a new series of teapots. Look closely and you'll find the pot body with a lid and a spout. Function is not the first thing you think about. Luscious-looking gold peaches perch on top of red metal rods decorated in black and white leaves. Donna tells me a story from early in their courtship. He took her to get a crate of peaches. She asked him what he was going to do with so much fruit and he replied that he'd wanted to have them in the studio to give to friends who stopped by. To judge by harvest piled up near the front door, not much has changed.

Italian architect and designer Ettore Sottsass spied a photograph of one of Shire's ceramic teapots on the cover of the legendary L.A. magazine **WET: The Magazine of Gourmet Bathing** founded by Leonard Koren. Struck by the freshness of the design -- slab clay formed into a wild Constructivist composition of geometric shapes painted in Southern California smoggy sunset hues -- Sottsass asked Shire to become part of Memphis Group.

It's difficult to understate the impact of Memphis on the design world, but also on popular culture. Based out of Milan, the design collective brought together from around the globe the most radical minds of the time, such as Alessandro Mendini, Andrea Branzi, Hans Hollein, Arata Isozaki, and Michael Graves. In the period from founding in 1981 to disbanding in 1988, the collective produced objects, buildings, fashions, and furniture that epitomized the Postmodern style for culture at large. The group's penchant for bold stripes, squiggly lines, and pop, asymmetrical shapes influenced everything from Karl Lagerfeld's own apartment to early MTV graphics to Beetlejuice's off kilter sets.

In the forward to the 1991 book "Tempest in a Teapot, The Ceramic Art of Peter Shire," Sottsass describes Shire's designs as a kind of "unstable collage" of geometric forms and topped with memories.

"Most of the time the memories were of pale Californian colors and landscapes, maybe of beaches, or of sundaes, or maybe of Sundays, with candy-girls skating all around," wrote the Italian designer. "But Peter was not only using California broken memories; he was putting together every piece of cultural information he could collect from everywhere, and every smallest leftover of memories, from the East or from the West, that may have landed on the California shore."

To sit own and talk with Shire over cappuccinos is to surf those waves of memories. The conversation swings from custom cars to Isaac Singer and the economics of industrial design, all with a doo-wop soundtrack. We keep circling back to the lesson he learned from collaborating with Sottsass, that design is part of how you live, not an expression of taste or class. "In Europe, Life is a proper noun," says Shire. "Objects have power and religion. We tend to think that art equals feeling, but design comes from a tradition of craft and then industrialization. Industrial design is about your own relationship to the machine."

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