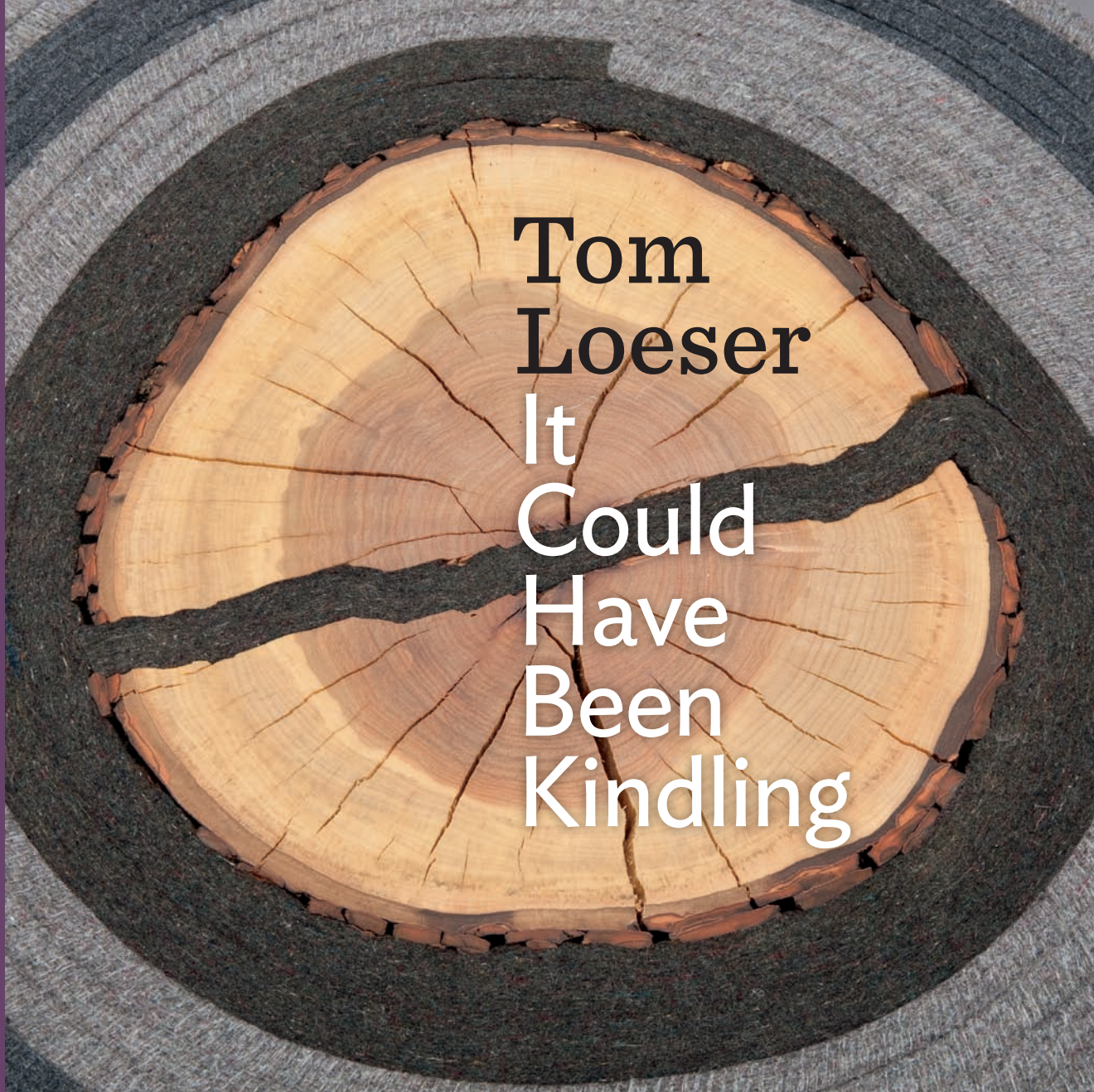

Tom Loeser
It Could Have Been Kindling

Tom Loeser: It Could Have Been Kindling

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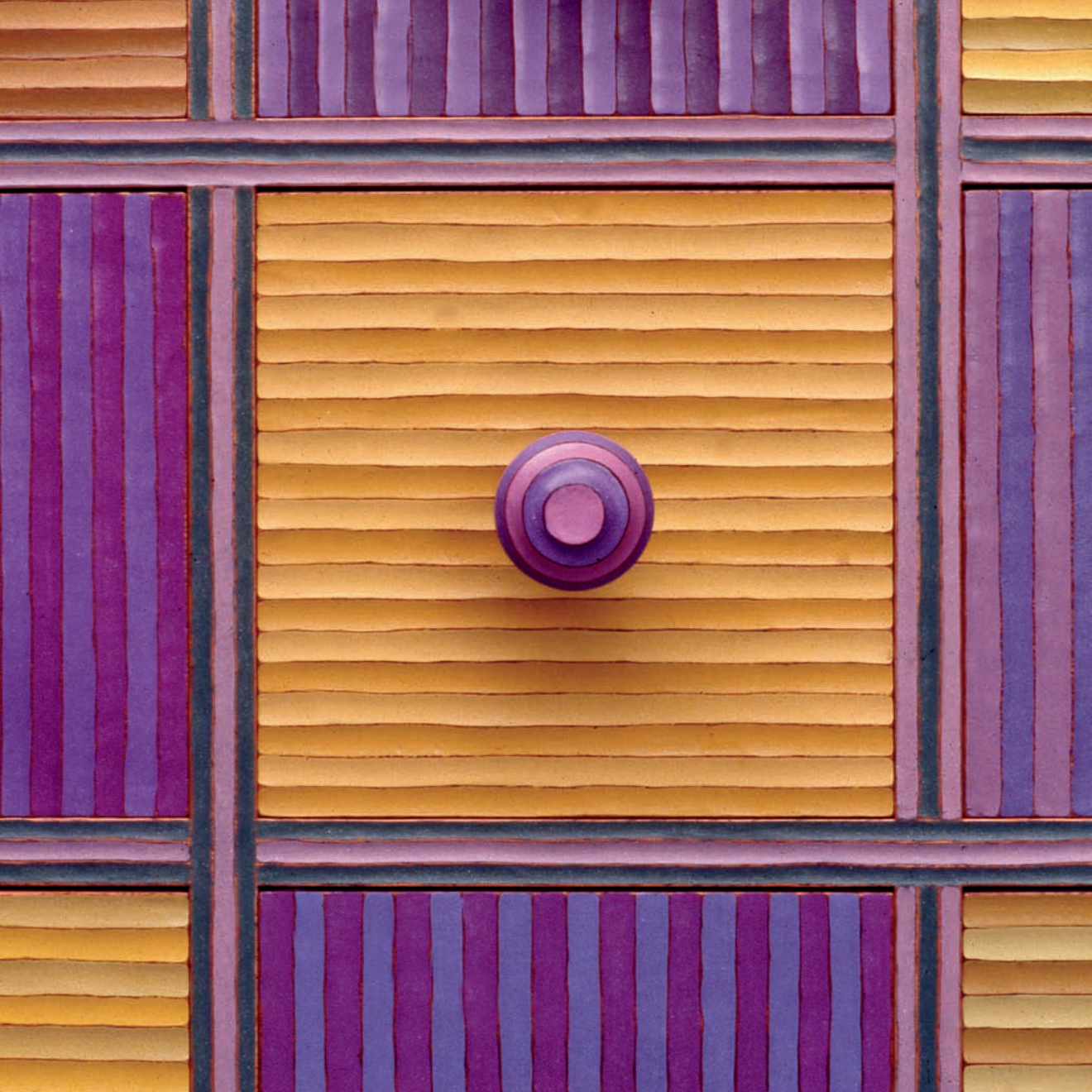


Tom Loeser

It Could Have Been Kindling

CURATORS

Graeme Reid

Jon Prown

Sarah Anne Carter

Claudia Arzeno Mooney

ESSAYS BY

Glenn Adamson

Laurie Beth Clark

Jenni Sorkin

Michelle Grabner

Fo Wilson

Co-published by Museum of Wisconsin Art
and the Chipstone Foundation

FOREWORD

Tom Loeser: It Could Have Been Kindling was developed collaboratively between the Museum of Wisconsin Art (MOWA) and the Chipstone Foundation. Coming together to mount a retrospective of Tom Loeser's work was an obvious choice. The Chipstone Foundation has long been associated with the artist through a variety of teaching initiatives at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, and MOWA is launching a new exhibition series that features exceptional individual artists at the midpoint of their careers. Both institutions deemed the exhibition overdue. The result is not only thought provoking, but also positions Loeser among the leading furniture makers working today.

The catalogue, MOWA is pleased to announce, is the first in a series of museum publications that it will offer as free downloads on the museum's website, a reflection of the institution's expanded commitment to making Wisconsin art accessible around the world. Printed versions are available in softcover for purchase from Blurb.com.

A project of this magnitude would not have been possible without much outside help. Our greatest debt is to Tom Loeser, who submitted enthusiastically to the exhibition. We are also deeply grateful to all the institutions and private collectors that graciously lent their cherished artworks, and to Brent Budsberg, who both designed and largely built the beautifully conceived MOWA installation.

The MOWA and Chipstone curatorial team further owes much to the gifted authors whose ideas helped articulate the vision of the artist. Special thanks to our talented book designer Dan Saal and editor Christina Dittrich, and to the many MOWA staff members whose hard work made it possible for this project to come to fruition.

LAURIE WINTERS
Executive Director | CEO, Museum of Wisconsin Art

JON PROWN
Executive Director, Chipstone Foundation

Tom Loeser in his studio, 2008

Playtime

GLENN ADAMSON
Nanette L. Laitman Director of the Museum of Arts and Design (MAD) in New York City

"Think left and think right and think low and think high. Oh, the thinks you can think up if only you try!"

— Theodor Seuss Geisel

Once upon a time, if you are anything like me, you had plenty of opportunities to get tossed around. It is a progression that accompanies growing up. You started life being gently joggled up and down by your parents, and rocked side to side in a cradle. At around the time you learned to walk, you were allowed to get on the swing set and the merry-go-round. You thereby had your first thrilling sense of bodily risk—how it feels to lose your bearings and hurtle through space. Eventually, once your head topped the cruelly age-indifferent height line at the amusement park, you graduated to bumper cars. And finally, the province of the teenager: actual roller coasters. For most adults (astronauts, competitive ballroom dancers, and Formula One drivers aside), it's all downhill from there. Movement stops being a form of entertainment, and becomes a matter of obligation. All we have left is our daily commute and the occasional overlong plane flight—at least until we retire to our rocking chair.

The last time I wrote about Tom Loeser, in 2001, I observed how "his work always asks to be seen as if for the first time—to be viewed through the eyes of a wondering child." At the time, I worried that this comment seemed a little dismissive, as if Loeser's furniture were itself infantile. He didn't seem to mind, though; and in years since, as he has grown older, his work has, if anything, felt younger and younger. Loeser seems blissfully

Fig. 1: *Double Rocker Back to Back* (pl. 33)

Fig. 2: *Eddy* (pl. 36)

unconcerned with the gravitas that most artists seem to seek. He often photographs new work with his own children smiling away on the seats, as if the pieces were intended as props for a family album (fig. 1).

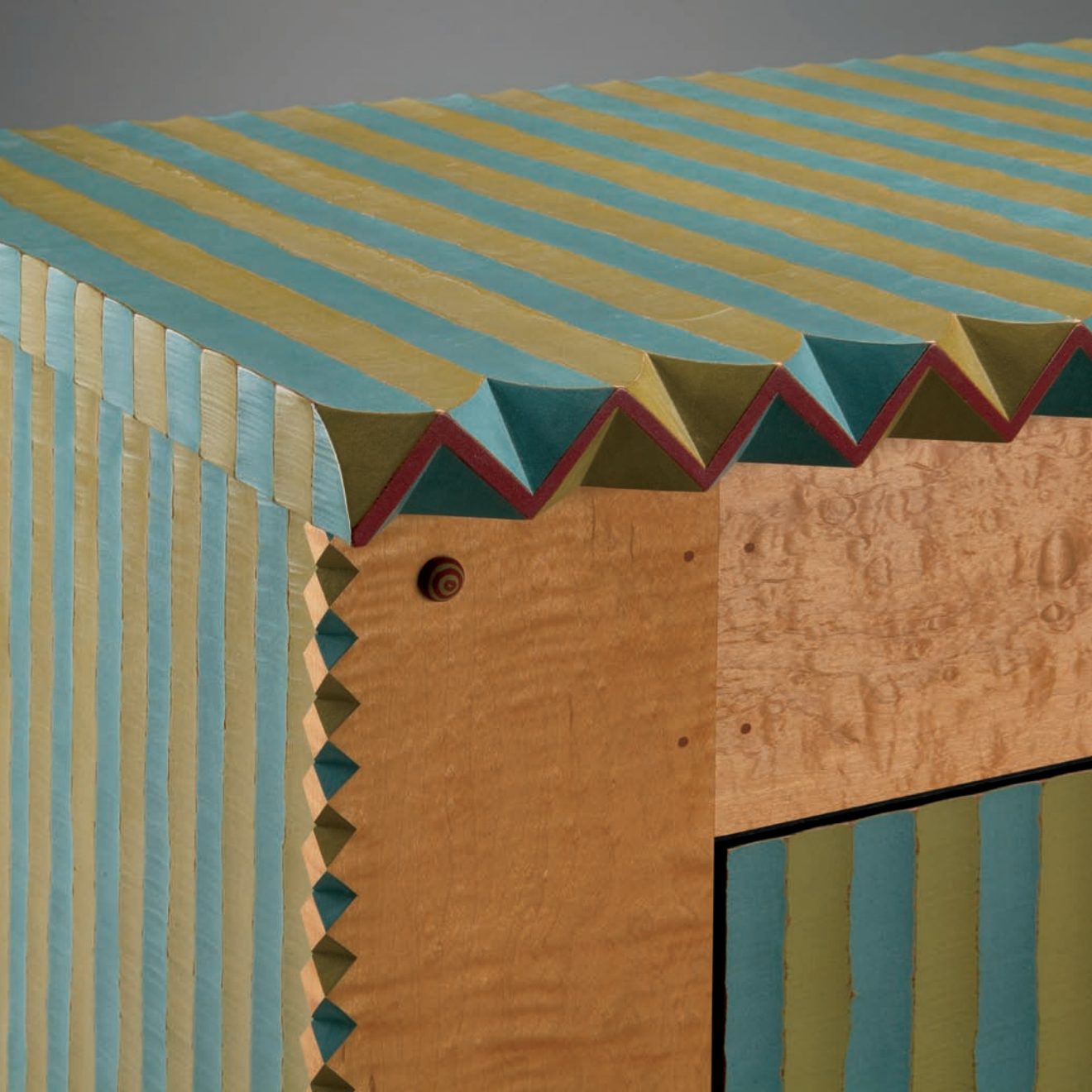
Even Loeser's most ambitious projects—for example, a series of lightly built, swerving forms inspired by the demanding craft of boatbuilding—have something of the fairground attraction about them (fig. 2). And his real comfort zone is in objects that seem comparatively simple to make, avoiding the technical showboating of many other contemporary makers, and are unmistakably a load of fun to use. Loeser's furniture folds, slides, swivels; it grows out of (or into?) the woodland landscape; it teeters like a column of trained acrobats. It is the stuff of playgrounds and fairytales (fig. 3).

But let's not forget that child's play is serious business. Since the publication of Johan Huizinga's pioneering 1938 book *Homo Ludens*, a veritable industry of theory has grown up around the subject. One of the key precepts of this extensive sociological literature is that play is something like a rehearsal for adult life. This insight is important in understanding the actual industry of childhood, which provides youngsters and their parents with a steady stream of toys, films, and other commodities. Children love to assemble and smash apart Lego buildings; in doing so, a sociologist would argue, they are getting an early lesson in the principle of "creative destruction" that underlies capitalism. Toys also play a crucial role in the development of sexual desire and identity. For good reason, feminists have attacked the "as long as it's pink" dictates of marketing toward little girls, the impossible body mechanics of Barbie dolls, and the uncontained violence of toys aimed at boys. For a certain type of cultural critic, childhood is an unregulated battleground, and the future hangs in the balance.

Fig. 3: *Chairiot* (pl. 20)

Such theoretical and design complexities are the backdrop for Loeser's various forays into our bodily experience, and in this light his work appears not so innocent after all. In returning us to our early years and recovering our long-lost sense of disequilibrium, Loeser is inviting us to doubt some pretty fundamental things about the way we live. He is a gentle utopian, eager to upend our expectations. In furniture, he has found the perfect métier for this purpose. Chairs, tables, and chests condition our everyday experience. They hover slightly under our radar. When Loeser uses these usually obedient forms to destabilize our bodies, he is by implication destabilizing our general sense of normalcy. When you sit in one of his chairs, everything is suddenly (sometimes quite literally) up in the air.

About a year ago, I took a new job as a museum director in New York City. After a career of writing scholarly and critical prose, I suddenly found my priorities shifting. My target audience used to consist primarily of graduate students and other academics; now, children are among my most important critics. Already, I have begun to feel that the best test of an exhibition is whether it works for both children and adults—and if I had to choose one, I'd definitely go with the kids. Maybe we should turn the insights of the play theorists around, and follow the wisdom of Dr. Seuss, who observed, "adults are just obsolete children." It seems to me, following this logic, that the really impressive thing about Tom Loeser's work is not that it gets us older folks to think differently, or that it expands the formal domain of furniture. It certainly does do those things, but I think he's aiming much higher. He's actually, genuinely, playing around. ■



Points of Departure and Frames of Reference

LAURIE BETH CLARK
Professor in the Art Department at the University of Wisconsin–Madison

Tom Loeser is one of the artists whose work has defined contemporary fine art furniture. As early as 1985, Karen Chambers described Loeser in *Craft International* as "one of the most ingenious furniture makers around." By 1992, Lloyd Herman, in his catalogue essay for *Sixty Five Drawers, Eleven Doors and Four Lids* at Peter Joseph Gallery called him "a source of inspiration to the next generation." In his catalogue essay for the definitive 1989 exhibition *New American Furniture: The Second Generation of Studio Furnituremakers* at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Edward Cooke wrote, "Loeser's combination of high-tech form and colorful paint has brought him wide recognition both in America and abroad." With Loeser's election to the American Crafts Council in 2013, he is formally recognized as one of the foremost North American woodworkers.

CONTEXT FOR TOM LOESER'S ARTWORK

Studio furniture artists produce one-of-a-kind objects and limited edition runs of functionally oriented sculptures. In the catalogue for *New American Furniture: The Second Generation of Studio Furnituremakers* curator Edward Cooke explains that studio furniture makers have "drawn new ideas and vigor from the interplay or tension between three points of view: the idea and emotion of art, the form and concept of design, and the technique and materials of craft." The artists represented in the exhibition had been working and showing together for a period of about five years prior to 1989, and they continue to this day to reflect the state of the field. These artists had traditional craft training in furniture making and felt they wanted to take their work further in terms of content and meaning. Their

Fig. 4: *Blanket Chest* (pl. 18, detail)

works are designed to hold up well under the aesthetic scrutiny of a fine arts context *and* to occupy utilitarian roles in the domestic setting.

Fine art furniture makers of the first generation (1950s–70s) are characterized by their allegiance to natural wood and by designs that serve to display the beauty of the natural materials. Combining Asian and European (especially Scandinavian) influences, their work emphasizes high-level craftsmanship through traditional methods of joinery and construction, much of which the artists accomplished by using hand tools and non-production techniques. There was a sometimes implicit and sometimes explicit rejection of machinery and industrial technology. The movement was modernist. It favored minimal, unified, straightforward designs with little or no ornamentation, in a "form follows function" aesthetic system. The work was always functional and almost always produced by self-sufficient solo craftsmen.

The artists of the second generation, to which Tom Loeser belongs, have been active for several decades making work utilizing the high-quality construction systems with which they had been trained. But the work differs from that of the previous generation in more and less obvious ways. Most conspicuous has been the introduction of color. Early on, these artists began experiments using a full palette to enhance forms and shapes, lines and planes. Later work is more playful in its surface design, incorporating textures and color as compositional elements and making unlikely juxtapositions. In challenging the assumptions of the first generation's aesthetics, the second-generation artists mix classical and modern forms in one piece, combine painted and unpainted surfaces, and are often willing to favor meaning over function. In their pieces, function is a signifying system; it is as often deployed metaphorically as pragmatically. Practical concerns often give way to formal play, visual interest, structural amusement, and in many cases referential content. In this, the work takes a distinctly postmodern stance. It is as influenced by the Italian design group *Memphis* and post-modern architecture as by its predecessors in craft (fig. 5). Yet while these differences may set the second generation apart from its formal craft origins, the artists remain committed to making objects that are well constructed. The production of the work is still labor intensive and meticulous. Furthermore, the functional component, while frequently liberated for formal play, is never fully abandoned. Function may no longer be the ultimate goal, but it remains the source of

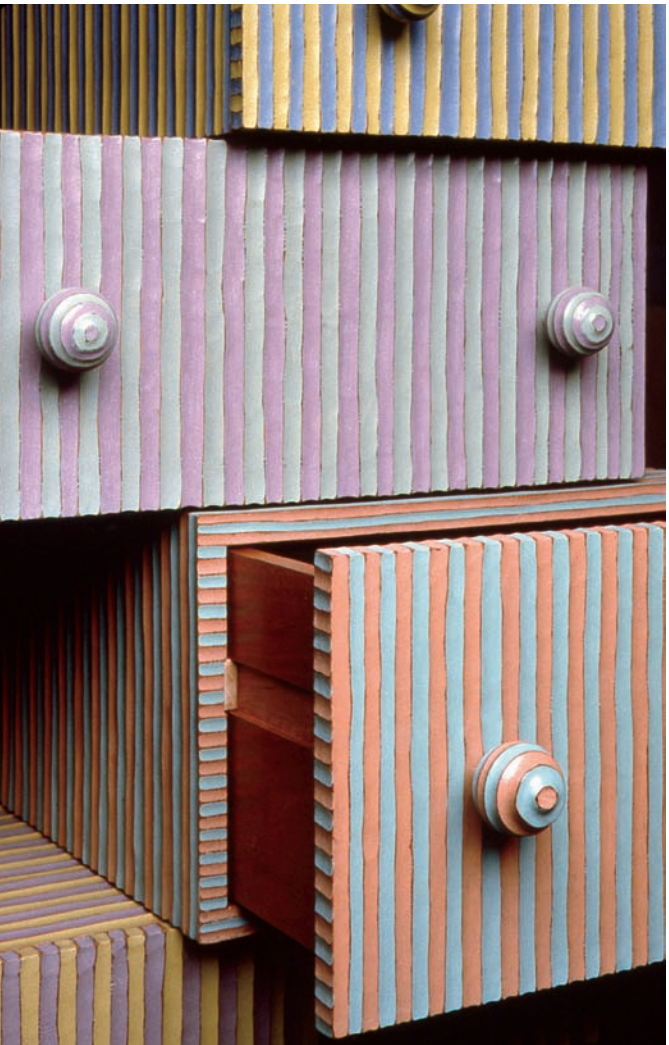


Fig. 5: *Chest of Drawers* (pl. 6, detail)

inspiration, the point of departure, and the frame of reference.

Some of the impetus for the explorations of the second generation can be found in the artists' frustration at being ghettoized in "craft" circles for looking outward, incorporating aspects of both fine art and industrial design. They additionally turned to the fine arts for display strategies and systems of distribution. The art market, with its emphasis on one-of-a-kind museum display, commands a more serious regard for individual pieces. Many second-generation artists, such as Loeser, seek to have people address their work in the same way they would a sculpture. The artists ask their work to do more conceptually than simply to be examples of excellent craftsmanship. They hope for intellectual challenge, a more demanding discourse, a shift in their critical conversations away from one centered on technique toward one centered on meaning. Whereas the first generation emphasized its artisan heritage as an antidote to technology, second-generation artists looked to industrial design for models as they began to consider production runs of a limited number. These artists also learned from the field of industrial design a new language for talking about their work, a rigorous approach to design, and to embrace

technology in terms of materials and processes. Second-generation artists have relaxed their allegiance to wood and enthusiastically added materials such as glass, steel, plastic, and laminates.

TOM LOESER'S EARLY CAREER

Loeser began his work in wood with technical training in the traditions of woodworking at the Boston University Program in Artisanry, where he studied with Jere Osgood and Alphonse Mattia. In 1982, while Loeser was still a student, his work was featured in the show of art furniture *Young Talents/ New Directions* at the Workbench Gallery in New York City. After graduating, Loeser joined the Cambridgeport Cooperative Woodshop. Typical of the period and the field, this workshop was one of several in the Boston area—though perhaps the largest and most influential—that formed the nucleus of a woodworking community. At Cambridgeport, seventeen woodworkers shared space and equipment, producing a spectrum of work from sculpture to cabinets. They exchanged skills, resources, labor, income, and opportunities. More than just a low-overhead way to continue to produce work, the coop provided an extension of the school environment, where a community of artists and craftspeople could sustain a critical dialogue. Over the next seven years (1979–86), as a member of Cambridgeport Cooperative Woodshop, Loeser produced work in both fine art furniture and cabinetry. He established his reputation with color to the point that now, when his name is mentioned in professional circles, color is one of the first associations that springs to mind. He continued to show his work in galleries throughout New York and began his affiliation with Heller Gallery, where he held two successful solo exhibitions. Loeser also exhibited regularly with a group of peers in shows all over the world.

During this period, Loeser designed and produced the *Folding Chair*, which established his place in contemporary furniture making (pls. 4, 5). Loeser initially created the chair in response to a self-imposed, fourth-year production-oriented "assignment project" at the Program in Artisanry; his intent was to maximize material use and efficiency by cutting the chair fully from one sheet of plywood with as little waste as possible. The chair was Loeser's first attempt to design a piece that could be produced in multiples, in other words, a production piece. This project exemplifies the aforementioned negotiation of industrial design, fine art, and contemporary craft that characterizes second-generation furniture making. When the chair is folded flat and hangs on the wall, it functions as a painting (and it also

gestures toward the Shaker custom of hanging chairs on the wall). When unfolded, the chair functions as a seat. It is a bridge object, simultaneously conceptual and practical, both a painting and a chair. It successfully met not only the artistic challenges but also a material need: it had tremendous appeal among people who lived in small apartments in Manhattan. As a result, the chairs made Loeser a highly visible artist in New York. Lloyd Herman, in his book *Art That Works* (1990), called Loeser's *Folding Chair* an "icon of the decade." Loeser produced thirty-nine chairs between 1979 and 1986. Cut from the same basic design, each one is uniquely finished. The chairs are in the permanent collections of the Brooklyn Museum, Yale University Art Gallery, Rhode Island School of Design, Cooper Hewitt Museum, Chazen Museum, and Racine Art Museum.

In 1989, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston held the *New American Furniture* show. Loeser's work and that of about twenty other "young" artists was brought together to confirm the emergence of a "second generation" of fine art furniture makers. The collector Peter Joseph, who had been following the field and collecting the work of the emerging artists, bought *Chest of Drawers* by Loeser from that show. In 1991, Joseph opened a gallery in the 57th Street area in New York that focused entirely on fine art furniture. The gallery, which represented eighteen of the most important figures in fine art furniture, including Loeser, gave the field a venue. It exhibited the work of its artists with the quality of exhibition practices and budget support previously found only in fine arts galleries.

MID-CAREER

As an artist with the Peter Joseph Gallery, Loeser had solo shows in 1993, 1995, and 1996. The support services of a gallery run by a patron/collector allowed him to concentrate his work in "bodies" or "series" and, thus, to produce solo shows that were coherent, that explored facets of a theme, shows that had more depth and complexity than merely a group of pieces. Loeser had joined the faculty in the Art Department of the University of Wisconsin–Madison in 1991, and his position as a faculty member further made it possible for him to explore more conceptual and sculptural (perhaps less commercially viable) directions in his work. These two concurrent developments framed Loeser's adoption of a research model for his art making. The work in the first solo show (1993) included pieces that involved manipulation, so that the viewer had to engage as an active participant. With his chests of drawers, Loeser punned on the notion of drawers by having them go in more than one direction.

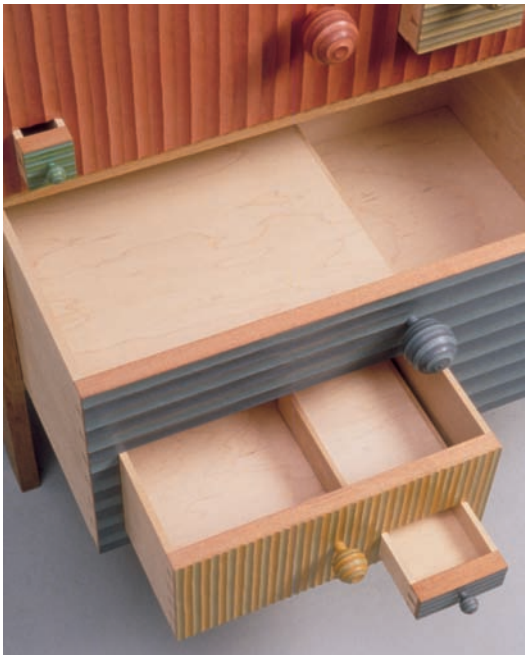


Fig. 6: *Multiple Complications* (pl. 14, detail)

In the *Sliding Wall Cabinets*, hidden drawers are brought into view by sliding a central column horizontally through the cabinet (pls. 10, 11). The pieces reveal themselves slowly and cannot be taken in all at once, nor can they be reduced to function. Because the drawers have to be "found," these units require an active user rather than a passive viewer. Clearly, in the second-generation framework, form does not follow—it leads. Like much contemporary art, Loeser's "performative" furniture demands investigation and rewards the persistent spectator.

In Loeser's second solo show (1995) at the Peter Joseph Gallery, *Additions, Distractions, Multiple Complications and Divisions*, he embraced a more spontaneous model for his work, one derived less from technique or practicality. He used simple forms that allowed him to emphasize color, carving, and pattern over shape. He was playing with expectations throughout the series and often employed straightforward facades that reveal complex or unexpected interior architectures (fig. 6). There are large drawers with thick walls that produce tiny compartments, enormous knobs on tiny drawers, drawers within drawers, and other playful variations. Loeser's third solo show (1996) at the Peter Joseph Gallery, *This Ain't No Floor Show*, featured wall-mounted rectangular boxes designed to be shown on a single wall in multiples. Much like the theme and variations approach of music, Loeser's boxes established a base motif, in relation to which the artist investigated modifications. Unlike with his previous works, which may be understood as a series of solutions to individual problems, Loeser designed the boxes to be one multifaceted solution to a singular problem.

Fig. 7: *Roller #1* (pl. 19)

Fig. 8: *Chair³* (pl. 25)

When Peter Joseph closed his gallery, Loeser joined Leo Kaplan Modern. His first solo show at Kaplan was the 2001 *Rollers, Spinners, and Sliders*. The show featured mobile furniture, for which Loeser had used wheels and caster mechanisms to play with viewer expectations. He had re-envisioned traditional blanket chests so that their tops remain in place while the storage areas below pivot 360 degrees (fig. 7). With this show, which included public seating that resembled a giant lazy Susan (pls. 20, 21), as well as spinning Adirondack-style chairs, Loeser inaugurated his ongoing explorations of the social dimensions of seating. In each of these kinetic works, a single user's action affects other users' experiences of the work.

In 2003, Loeser premiered *Chair³*, a group of nine chairs, at the Clark Gallery in Massachusetts. This conceptually driven project features chairs of varying proportions (fig. 8). The chairs, which are exhibited in a 3 x 3 grid, become progressively wider along one axis and taller along the other. In installing these chairs, Loeser began to explore the social and mathematical definitions of a "set" and the ways in which conventional systems of seating embody hierarchies. This and subsequent projects gain meaning as they are performed in multiple permutations. The 2005 *Disequilibrium* show at Leo Kaplan Gallery, New York included *LadderbackkcabreddaL* (pl. 28). Like its title, this work is a palindrome, twin chairs co-joined at the back. This work riffs on traditional furniture

practice, plays with the history of furniture making, and once again marks Loeser as a thinker as much as a craftsperson. The show also included three sets of rockers that were made for paired occupancy and, in their use, illustrate facets of relationships (pls. 30–33). The first does not balance without two participants, the second forces intimacy between the two by canting the seat platforms toward one another, and the third creates an even more intimate space by facing the users toward each other.

AS A SENIOR MEMBER OF HIS PROFESSION

In mid-career, Loeser began to engage with a number of projects that pushed the boundaries of his previously "disciplined" practice. Whereas the decorative arts ordinarily innovate on past work within a closed system, Loeser has been trying to open up this conversation by exploring new materials and new concepts. His project at Tandem Press is in this vein. *2D or not 2D* consists of two large prints, done in woodblock with silkscreen detail, which can be assembled to make a chest of drawers (pl. 16). The hybrid project challenges disciplinary conventions in both printmaking and woodworking, while resonating with Loeser's early *Folding Chair*. His project for *Waldkunstpfad*, a forest art path in Darmstadt, Germany, negotiated the natural and cultural

Fig. 9: *Forest Furniture—Wisconsin* (pl. 34)

understanding of wood by relying on standing trees to take an integral role in the crafted seating. Loeser's contribution to *Forest Art Wisconsin* can be viewed as a sequel to this project in that it also explored seating opportunities for the forest. But in this later project, which Loeser developed in collaboration with his partner Bird Ross, the chairs are of a common commercial molded-plastic variety, but made of steel, aluminum, vinyl, and wood. In keeping with the exhibition's theme of "Native/Invasive" and the game of musical chairs, the work draws attention to the ways in which seating, while it may be playful, is not always

Fig. 10: *Pods* (pl. 56, detail)

democratic (fig. 9). Loeser's concern with the "politics of seating" is expressed in some of his earlier gallery projects, but comes into more full realization in the later work.

In recent years, Loeser has been able to act on his abiding interest in vernacular construction techniques. He pursues these techniques in part because they offer a counterpoint to the dominance of European modernism in fine art furniture; they offer an alternate history for material culture that includes more local and idiosyncratic solutions to functional design. In 2013, he created an installation in collaboration with David Chapman, a furniture maker from Spring Green, Wisconsin, that is part of the permanent design of the public library in Madison. In this work, Loeser and Chapman used cane willow to craft three different "reading pods," each of which offers a cozy and semi-private nook for the reader (fig. 10). What is striking about the design of these pods is the way in which Loeser brought forms from the European tradition into contact with rustic materials and transparent technique. The geometric windows, for example, depart from a conventional willow-cane structure, which favors certain "organic" forms. The integration of these two divergent approaches to design is Loeser's innovation into the sometimes-rigid traditions of vernacular woodworking.

Concurrently with developing the reading pods, Loeser collaborated with Bird Ross to create *The Stoop Project*, which consists of front steps detached from houses (fig. 11). Crafted using techniques derived from popular carpentry, the

Fig. 11: *The Stoop Project* (pl. 55, detail)

stoops exaggerate a "working-class" "gingerbread" aesthetic vocabulary, with repetitive geometric patterns used to create colorful decorative surfaces. The stoops play on the tradition of socializing with neighbors and passersby in the liminal zone between sidewalk and front door, and formed a communal zone for conversations within the museum environment. The work is the third in a series of site-specific seating projects that Loeser developed for the lobby of the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, all of which devised innovative social spaces. The earlier iterations were seating made from industrial felt that was wrapped around the atrium's structural columns in 2007 (pl. 35) and in 2000, playful spinning seats whose balance and positioning had to be negotiated among the four people who shared them (pls. 20, 21).

A related project can be seen at the Madison Children's Museum, where Loeser and Ross partnered on an interactive reception desk that provides dynamic opportunities for children to play while their parents purchase admission tickets. The forty-foot-long sculpted desk includes places where small hands can be safely inserted to find surprises and parts that spin, swing, push, pull, stack, or turn (fig. 12). Graphically compelling and narratively engaging, Loeser's displays—for the Madison Library, Museum of Contemporary Art, and Children's Museum—demonstrate that functional spaces can be given an aesthetic, social, educational, and engaging playful dimension.

In Tom Loeser's work, we see a fundamental interest in and concern with the social dimension of furniture—the ways in which these sculptural interventions shape human interactions. Whether it is to explore hierarchy or to incite sociality, his furniture has an integral role in defining, articulating, enhancing, or limiting the parameters for human relationships. ■

Fig. 12: *Reception Desk*, 2010
Madison Children's Museum
Collaboration with Bird Ross
Wood, paint, metal, water, Golden Books, felt, concrete, rotary dial pay phone and other found objects.
14 ft. long

On Seating

JENNI SORKIN
Assistant Professor of Contemporary Art History in the History of Art and Architecture Department at the University of California, Santa Barbara

Chairs are a natural component of any woodworker's repertoire, but Tom Loeser has utilized the seated form to extend the social and metaphoric possibilities of space. Seats themselves are replete with metaphors about being at the center: getting a good *seat*, the heart and soul of a particular locale; a county *seat*, the site of governance and authority; by the *seat* of one's pants, the gut and verve of spontaneity; and the *seat* of a garment, a solid bottom that covers the human buttocks. For Loeser, seating is also the epicenter of community and connection, a way to initiate contact and harness the potential for interaction.

Some of his earliest works are seats that interrogate modernism's historic proclivity for individual chairs, such as Marcel Breuer's ca. 1925 *Wassily Chair* (fig. 14). Loeser's *Corner Chair* (fig. 15) from 1982 can be read as a response to such masterworks. *Corner Chair* is an architectonic, triangular chair that fuses the club chair with the corner office and its dark undertones of power and status. Comprised of deep diagonals and hard-edged geometric lines, it is an aggressive but tasteful piece of furniture, with a bright color palette modeled after the 1980s-era executive suite: black legs, purple wool trimmed in cherry red piping, and lavender accents. Purposefully oversized, such a throne, when sat in, offers something self-anointing. Even its placement, intended for the corner, implies a corporate man-of-the-city in the manner of Robert Longo's famed *Men in the Cities* (1979–82) series of paintings made at the same time—the power broker in a crisp white shirt and skinny black tie, simultaneously isolated and omniscient.

Fig. 13: *Forest Furniture—Darmstadt, Germany* (pl. 27)

Fig. 14: Marcel Breuer (1902–81), *B3 Wassily Chair*, 1925
Tubular steel, canvas

Fig. 15: *Corner Chair*, 1982
Wood, wool, paint
27 x 58 x 47

Furthering his critique of modernism's singularity, Loeser mined the lowest common denominator of individual seating: the folding chair. Stacked metal chairs in black or gray are synonymous with temporary gatherings and communal events. Ubiquitous and anonymous, they are associated with church basements, recovery meetings, town halls, middle school assemblies, and high school graduations. As a challenge to their mass-produced quality, Loeser embarked on his own version of the folding chair, heavily influenced by the post-modern contributions of such disparate makers as Garry Knox Bennett and Robert Venturi. Whimsical and funky, Loeser's *Folding Chairs* (1982–83) supplant factory production with the thoughtful artisanship of handcrafted mixed-media furniture (fig. 16). The result is individual seating that is brightly hued, singular, and geometrically complex, a savvy origami of wood and steel in a trove of textures and candy colors that neatly folds up and attaches to a wall mount. When not in use, the chair, whose one leg comes to rest on a steel ball, doubles as a two-dimensional sculptural collage. Loeser's objects, then, purposefully resist the categories of either purely functional or purely decorative, instead, defying the barriers between design, craft, and the historic fine arts.

Fig. 16: Folding Chair (pl. 5)

Interpersonal relationships are a constant theme in Loeser's seating arrangements. *Double Rocker* (2005) is a series of tandem rockers built for two that experiments with the intimacy of coupling (pls. 30–33). The series is deceptively simple: two wooden ladderback chairs painted with white and green stripes fixed to the same rocker. But there are unexpected reversals. *Inward Leaning* features two chairs that are angled slightly toward each other, as if to convey familiarity. *Reverse Facing* has one chair flipped, offering only loose affiliation, allowing the sitters to look at each other but engage opposite directions. *Back to Back* expresses outright hostility, with two chair backs uncomfortably pressed up against each other, as though these inanimate objects have had a fight. These sculptures transfer powerful dispositions to their sitters, as if the sitters were engaging in a, perhaps, reluctant performance and series of compromises, not unlike a primary relationship. As the artist writes:

> I'm interested in how seating can organize, influence, and structure social relations. The double rockers involve shared seating for multiple people that encourage cooperation and social interaction. For the *Double Rocker* to stay balanced, it requires two people sitting on the chair and working together to rock sideways. A single sitter is unbalanced and will put the chair out of equilibrium.

The *Double Rocker* chairs, therefore, become a metaphor for the modalities and difficulties of coupling and its intimate accommodations of anger, contentment, and closeness, all of which

Fig. 17: Cinch (pl. 35)

are made more trying given the constant rocking motion, a stand-in for the passage of time.

Temporality has also occupied Loeser's seating designs. Most recently, he has been commissioned for temporary public installation-based projects. In 2007, he made a sculptural work titled *Cinch* at the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art (fig. 17). Employing the existing architectural supports, Loeser focused his efforts on the museum's load-bearing columns—the oft-forgotten workhorses of a building's structure. Wrapping the pillars tightly in layers of cream, black, gray, and brown industrial felt, held in place by steel strapping, the artist created plush temporary seating—invitingly soft, circular benches that happily distinguished themselves from the hard, rectangular wooden or granite slabs more commonly found in museum exhibitions. While expanding the artist's own material range, *Cinch* pays homage to a rich legacy of historic museum projects, including J. B. Blunk's *The Planet* (fig. 18) from 1969, a vast carved circular redwood burl permanently installed at the Oakland Museum of

California, one of the earliest artist-initiated museum seating projects, onto which guests are invited to scramble and climb. Another is the famed felt project *Plight* (1958/85) by the German conceptual artist Joseph Beuys. The permanent room-sized installation of industrial felt rolls at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, in which the walls and floors are entirely covered in felt, silences all activity (fig. 19). Somewhere in between these two extremes, Loeser's work sits in the balance.

Ultimately, Tom Loeser's thoughtful investment in the reception of his public projects elevates his seating oeuvre as an exemplary example of an artist's negotiation with his audience: demonstrating that seating has its own effect, while still being an effective means of communicating to a wide, and sometimes unsuspecting, public. ■

Fig. 18: J.B. Blunk, *The Planet*, 1969

Redwood burl

Collection of the Oakland Museum of California, Oakland Museum Founders Fund.

Fig. 19: Joseph Beuys (1921-86), *Plight*. (Installation originally created in London at the Anthony d'Offay Gallery, London, autumn 1985.)

Painted felt

10 x 29 x 59 ft.

Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France. Inv. AM1989-545.

Post-Cartesian Things

MICHELLE GRABNER
Artist|Curator and Professor of Painting and Drawing
at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago

Materiality is always something more than "mere" matter: an excess, force, vitality, relationality, or difference that renders matter active, self-creative, productive, unpredictable.

—Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, 2010

What is there in the room at home is the table (not "a" table among many other tables in the other rooms and houses) at which one sits in order to write, have a meal, sew, or play. Everyone sees this right away, e.g., during a visit: it is a writing table, a dinner table, a sewing table—such is the primary way in which it is being encountered in itself. The characteristic of "in order to do something" is not merely imposed on the table by relating it to something else which it is not.

—Martin Heidegger, Ontology: The Hermeneutics of Facticity, 1910

Fig. 20: *Pods* (pl. 56, detail)

Many contemporary artists who are committed to making objects and whose work is indebted to the transformative properties of materials have been influenced by theories of new materialism and new ontology. As social theorists Diana Coole and Samantha Frost explain, "In sum, new materialists are discovering a materiality that materializes, evincing immanent modes of self-transformation that compel us to think of causation in far more complex terms: to recognize that phenomena are caught in a multitude of interlocking systems and forces and to consider anew a location and nature of capacities for agency."[1] This conceptual underpinning provides a useful way to think about the work of Tom Loeser.

Until quite recently, René Descartes (1596–1650) and similar early modern thinkers shaped our general understanding of matter and its philosophical potential. As Coole and Frost have noted, these seminal theoreticians regarded matter "as a corporeal substance constituted of length, breadth, and thickness; as extended, uniform, and inert." Such rational belief serves as the foundation to our modern comprehension of nature as an arena of innumerable discrete objects: quantifiable and measurable, things move by the will of external forces according to a linear logic of cause and effect. And this is still how we understand the world of things—their objecthood, as well as the stuff of which they are made. Yet newer theorizing about nature and the complexity of materiality by scholars and artists alike is expanding our traditional, intuitive perceptions of things in the world.

In Loeser's work, awareness of the generative powers of material can expand form invention and make elastic the interrelationship between audience and the object. As ornate objects tether bodies to place, alternative possibilities of public and private spheres can unfold. Loeser is not fully dispensing with a traditional or Cartesian understanding of the material's potency, nor its practical systems of hierarchy and order. For example, his range of work—from the domestic objects to his social sculptures—engages in normative, discursive, and philosophical dimensions. But he also acts with delightful liberty and curiosity when it comes to the inventing and crafting of objects. In some artworks he treats matter as "becoming"—the New Materialist position. In others he handles the work's material matter as determinate—the Cartesian position—his studied design strategies in which the length, breadth, and thickness of material is fundamental to the overall aesthetic of his objects. And although style and formal invention are also vital in his publically sited works, such as *The Stoops Project* (2013, pl. 55) and

his *Cinch* seating (2007, pl. 35) the material and form of these works are dependent on viewer participation.

Compellingly, Loeser's freedom to navigate the ontology of the materials he employs—wood, industrial felt, paint, Kevlar, steel strapping—and the resulting objects that he creates give further conceptual mobility to his entire body of work. Many of his chairs and tables deploy furniture tropes such as legs and arms to suggest movement, vernacular form, and human engagement. Yet his sculptures are too material, too exquisitely crafted, too adorned, and too discrete to participate solely as a social platform. Loeser makes formal, intellectual, and material objects that conceptualize mobility, and critique it, as is the case with his public seating installations—where Loeser's great artistic achievement is fully revealed (fig. 20; pls. 35, 55, 56).

In the end, Loeser's steadied and unwavering relationship to craft and invention prompts a unique interpretation on the nature of things and materials. He deploys his formal and technical talents to produce works that extract new meaning from the objects that we think we know, whether that is a chair, a clock, or like Heidegger, the table. He is not interested in perpetuating a "networked" position in art production that "need[s] to be compliantly modular, always orientated toward higher levels of aggregation and fragmentation, capable of being moved, dropped indefinitely and retrieved on demand."[2] Instead, Loeser's resolute and aestheticized objects slow us down and welcomingly fix us in spaces where our bodies reside. He is an artist who has dedicated his practice to the creative freedom that comes from working between form and function, critique and whimsy, craft and fine art—a maker and a conceptual practitioner who is as much a Cartesian as a New Materialist. ■

ENDNOTES

[1] Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, eds., *New Materialism: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Duke University Press, 2010)

[2] Lane Relyea, *Your Everyday Art World* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2013) p. 17.

It's All Wrong Tom.

FO WILSON
Artist|Maker, Educator, Writer, Independent Curator, and Associate Professor at Columbia College in Chicago

The nature of Tom Loeser's objects solicits a particular engagement that suggests grown people needn't abandon playful encounters with objects and space that adulthood might otherwise discourage. Loeser explores ideas about objects and materials, their proper function, and deliberately manipulates them in ways that test whether we are really looking and seeing.

From a certain vantage point, his work is *all wrong*. Nothing is where it is supposed to be, things don't appear in their right place, and function is many times appropriated as metaphoric poetry. In fact, Loeser's mature consideration for the nature of furniture is what makes his work much more interesting to encounter. He elevates what we think we know about how we are supposed to interact with objects and furniture to a place that skillfully recontextualizes and repositions their meaning and purpose with playful expression.

This playfulness, which I also see as a willingness to allow one's creative practice to be porous, malleable, and affected by evolving ideas, is the same attitude that is visible in his sustained and influential career as an educator. What is evident if you look at the work of Loeser's students is not necessarily an aesthetic imprint that is typical among singular leadership in a particular program of study, but a conceptual one that asks students to continually question the calculus of form and making. This is what I have witnessed Loeser doing in his own work, and one can see how his practices of teaching and making flow easily between one another.

Fig. 21: *Heavy* (pl. 26, detail)

I first met Tom when I was considering graduate studies in furniture making more than a decade ago. After many years working as a graphic designer, primarily using contemporary digital tools, I longed to engage more directly with my hands. Not that those digital tools are immoral in any way. I just missed the sweet space that the hand, mind, and eye create, and how this triad offers a certain visceral satisfaction that interacting with a keyboard oftentimes does not. Although I stayed on the East Coast where I am from to pursue my studies, we maintained a connection through what is a small community of makers that participates in discourse around practice, design education, and theory.

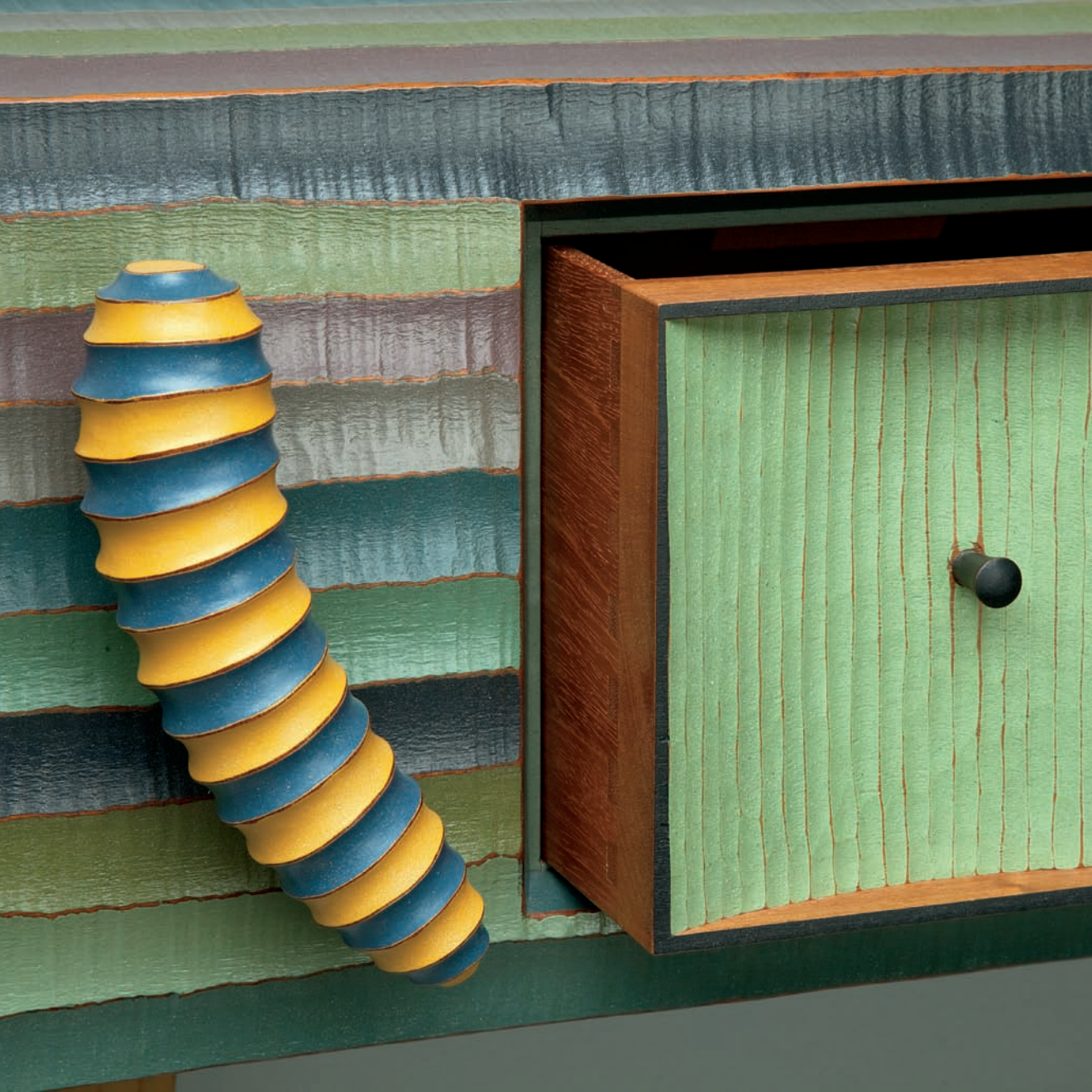
Loeser and many of those I have studied with represent a masterful level of making that I can only hope to achieve in my own practice, but he has not left it there. Consider *Heavy* (2004), a stool that came out of an exploration of technologies available at the USDA Forest Products Lab (FPL) on the University of Wisconsin–Madison campus (figs. 21, 22). Working with his students, who were tasked with making something that took advantage of the research accomplished at the Forest Products Lab, Loeser manipulated the four oak legs of *Heavy* using a large hydraulic press. He applied pressure to the wood, held vertically in steel tubes, until the point of "failure." If you study this piece, you will indeed notice something "wrong" with the legs. How many makers would find beautiful, as Loeser does, the act of disrespecting the wood to the point of failure?

Fig. 22: *Heavy* (pl. 26)

The stool is for sitting but also appears "sat on" by something heavy—both function and concept are simultaneously at play. This curious compulsion to not only test the limits of the material but also present the results as a creative and artistic intervention in what appears to be a simple, well-crafted stool is characteristic of the maker's predilection for entertaining metaphors, and a wrong-headedness that just can't leave well enough alone. Drawers coming out of drawers, chairs upside down and on top of chairs, double rockers that require cooperation between sitters to function—Loeser's work tests us, asks questions, or makes statements with unique, unexpected, and often colorful results.

At the panel *The Decorative Impulse and the New Aesthetic Democracy*, which my co-chair Yevgeniya Kaganovich and I invited Loeser to for the 2014 College Art Association (CAA) conference in Chicago, he presented young makers who, in willful acts of refusal, disobey traditional art historical categorizations and engage in work that at its conceptual core embodies multidisciplinary and boundary-straddling practices. These makers situate the decorative not in the realm of ornamentation but, as he proposed, in a theoretical framework that serves to locate, or strategically dislocate, the work in time and space. Ted Lott, Heath Matysek-Snyder, Heather McCalla, Erica Meier, Matthias Pliessnig, and Jason Ramey were among the young makers (and former students) that he discussed who subvert their skill to the service of thoughtful and contemporary meditations on history, function, ornamentation, space, and form. Their work, solidly rooted in the well-made, while conceptually rigorous, crosses boundaries between traditional decorative arts, design, sculpture, and other fine arts to evolve studio furniture practice in credible and exciting ways.

As a master teacher as well as a master maker, Tom Loeser continues to inspire new generations of makers that do it all wrong, and to produce a purposeful and beautiful wrongness all his own. ■



Plates

All works marked with an asterisk (*) are in the exhibition. The plates are organized chronologically except where it seemed more logical to create groupings of like objects. All works are lent by the artist unless otherwise indicated.

All dimensions are in inches: height x width x depth.

PLATE 1

Lamps, 1983

Collaboration with
Hank Murta Adams

Glass, wood, paint

(left to right)

Cowboy Lamp
72 in. tall

Streetlamp
84 in. tall

Boat/Egg Lamp
79 in. tall

PLATE 2

Lamps, 1987

Collaboration with Charles Crowley

Wood, steel, aluminum, paint

(left to right)

Enid
70 in. tall

Barney
47 in. tall

**Bertha*
77 in. tall

Lulubell
33 in. tall

Petunia
69 in. tall

Chester
41 in. tall

PLATE 3

*****Tall Chest***, 1987

Wood, paint

37 x 30 x 16

Lent by
Dennis Rocheleau

PLATE 4

*****Folding Chairs***, 1987–89

Wood, steel, paint

34 x 25 x 22

Chair on far right lent by Chazen Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Cyril W. Nave Endowment Fund purchase

PLATE 5

Folding Chair, 1989

Wood, steel, paint

34 x 25 x 22

Private collection

PLATE 6

(Left)

Chest of Drawers, 1989

Wood, paint

73 x 29 x 24

Collection of John and Coleen Kotelly

PLATE 7

(Right)

Blanket Chest, 1991

Wood, paint

19 x 68 x 18

Collection of Susie Shapiro and Andrew Magdanz

PLATE 8
(left to right)

Dovetail Box, 1990
Corrugated paper
15 x 23 x 14

****Zig Zag Cabinet***, 1992
Corrugated paper, wood, paint
32 x 16 x 10

Lidded Chest, 1990
Corrugated paper, wood, paint
14 x 24 x 14

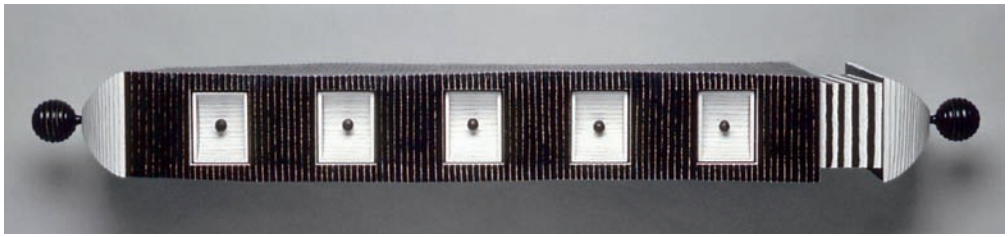
PLATE 9

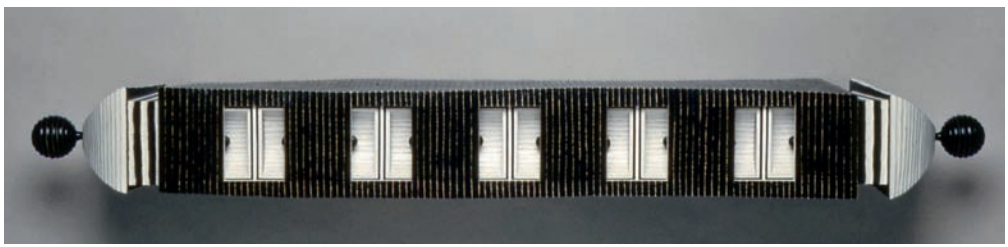
Chunk of Drawers, 1990

Corrugated paper, wood, paint

29 x 15 x 9

Collection of Wendy Evans Joseph





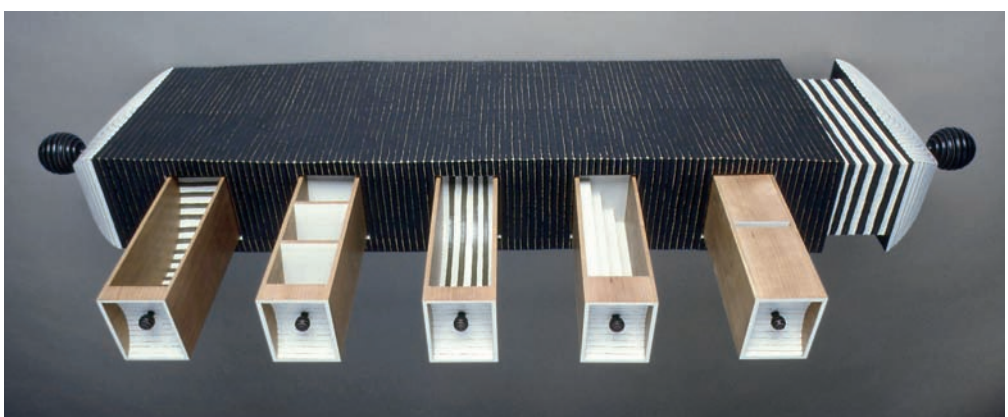


PLATE 10
*****10 Little Boxes***, 1992
Wood, paint
10 x 55 x 13
Lent by Diane and Marc Grainer

PLATE 11
*****Truth or Consequences***, 1992
Wood, paint
28 x 68 x 17
Lent by Diane Gutmann and Tom Palay

PLATE 12
Concentration, 1994
Wood, paint
32 x 65 x 20
Collection of Wendy Evans Joseph

PLATE 13

Four by Four, 1994

Wood, paint

44 x 33 x 17

Collection of Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum

PLATE 14
Multiple Complications, 1995
Wood, paint
50 x 34 x 21
Private collection

PLATE 15

More Multiple Complications, 1995

Wood, paint

50 x 34 x 21

Collection of Wendy Evans Joseph

PLATE 16

***2-D or Not 2-D?**, 1996

Constructible woodblock and silkscreen prints

Produced by Tandem Press, University of Wisconsin–Madison

Print sizes: 87 x 20 and 29 x 41

Assembled size: 26 x 13 x 11

PLATE 17

*****More Multiple Complications***, 1999

Wood, paint

50 x 34 x 21

Lent by the Milwaukee Art Museum, Purchase, Doerfler Fund

PLATE 18

*__Blanket Chest__, 1999

Wood, paint

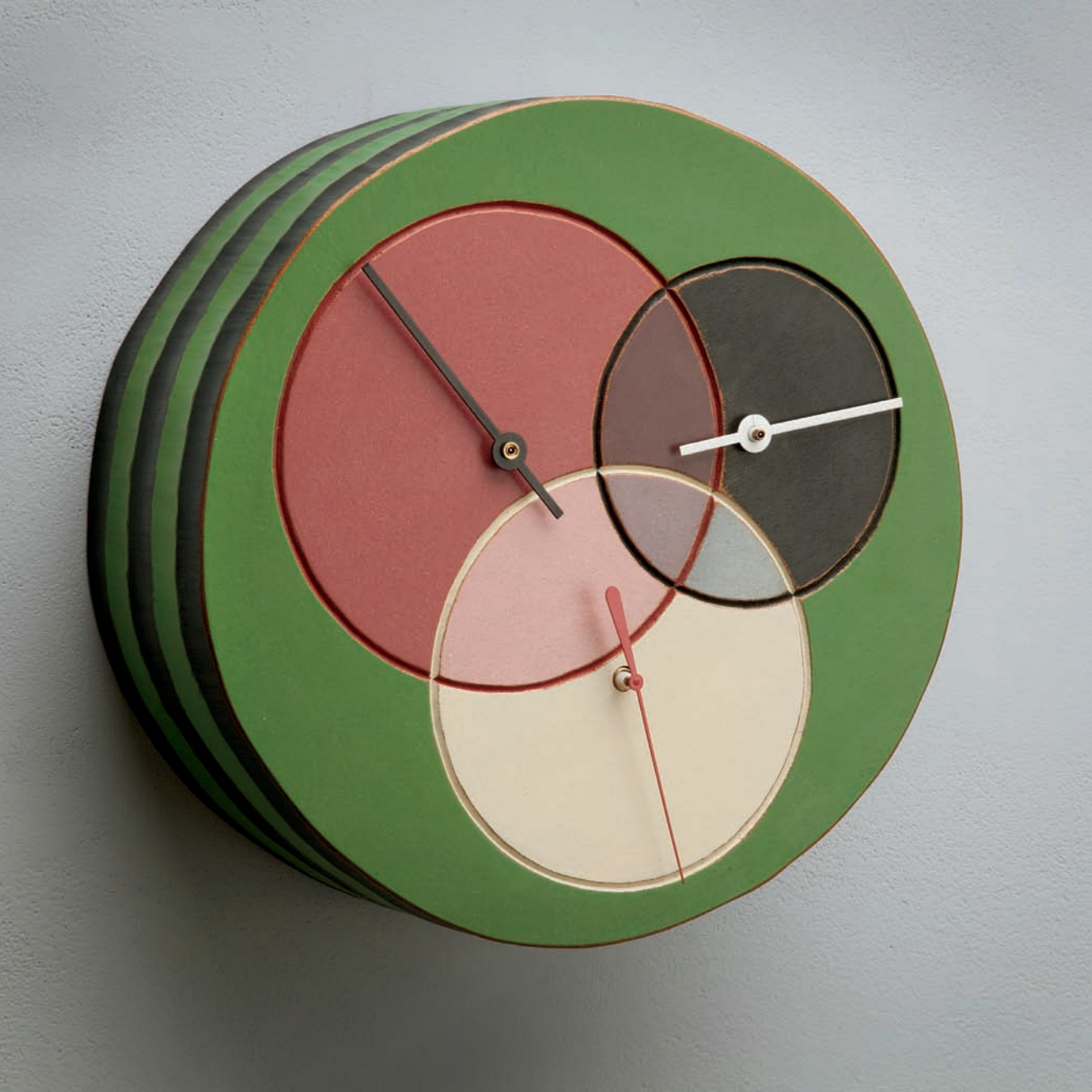
23 x 48 x 20

Lent by Laura Dronzek and Kevin Henkes

PLATE 19
*__Roller #1__, 2000
Wood, steel, paint
20 x 58 x 20

PLATE 20
*__Chairiot__, 2000
Wood, steel, paint
38 x 48

PLATE 21
__Panoramic Viewmaster__, 2000
Wood steel, paint
33 x 48
Collection of Mint Museum of Art



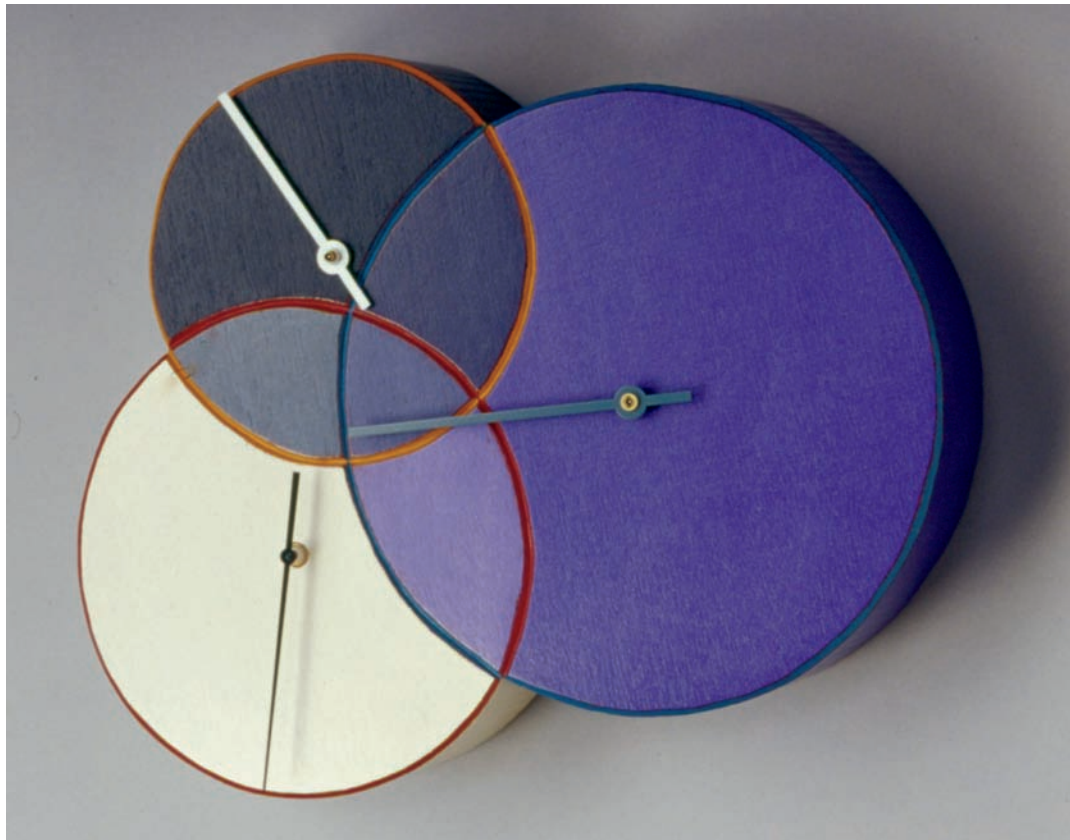


PLATE 22
*$Time^3$ #1, 2000
Wood, aluminum, paint
11 x 11 x 4
Lent by Chipstone Foundation

PLATE 23
*$Time^3$ #2, 2001
Wood, aluminum, paint
10 x 12 x 3
Lent by private collection

PLATE 24

*$\boldsymbol{Door^2}$, 2002

Wood, paint

24 x 22 x 7

Lent by Chipstone Foundation

PLATE 25

*_Chair³_, 2003

Wood, paint

Dimensions variable

Lent by Chipstone Foundation

PLATE 26
*_**Heavy**_, 2004
Pressure fractured oak, paint
25 x 12 x 14

PLATE 27

Forest Furniture—Darmstadt, Germany, 2004
Wood

(Opposite)
Bench
36 x 30 x 20

(Top)
Ladderback
74 x 20 x 22

(Left)
Double Chair
30 x 150 x 46

PLATE 28

***Ladderbackkcabreddal #1**, 2005

Wood, paint

87 x 41 x 21

Lent by Promega Corporation

PLATE 29
**Very Large Bed*, 2005
Wood, paint
47 x 91 x 86

PLATE 30
*****Double Rocker Upright***, 2005
Wood, paint
51 x 44 x 18

PLATE 31

Double Rocker Inward Leaning, 2005

Wood, paint

51 x 44 x 18

PLATE 32

Double Rocker Reverse Facing, 2005

Wood, paint

51 x 44 x 18

PLATE 33

Double Rocker Back to Back, 2005

Wood, paint

51 x 53 x 18

Fuller Craft Museum

PLATE 34
Forest Furniture—Wisconsin, 2007
Collaboration with Bird Ross
Found chairs
Dimensions variable

The Rest of the Forest, Part 1

The Rest of the Forest, Part 2

The Rest of the Forest, Part 3

PLATE 35

Cinch, 2007

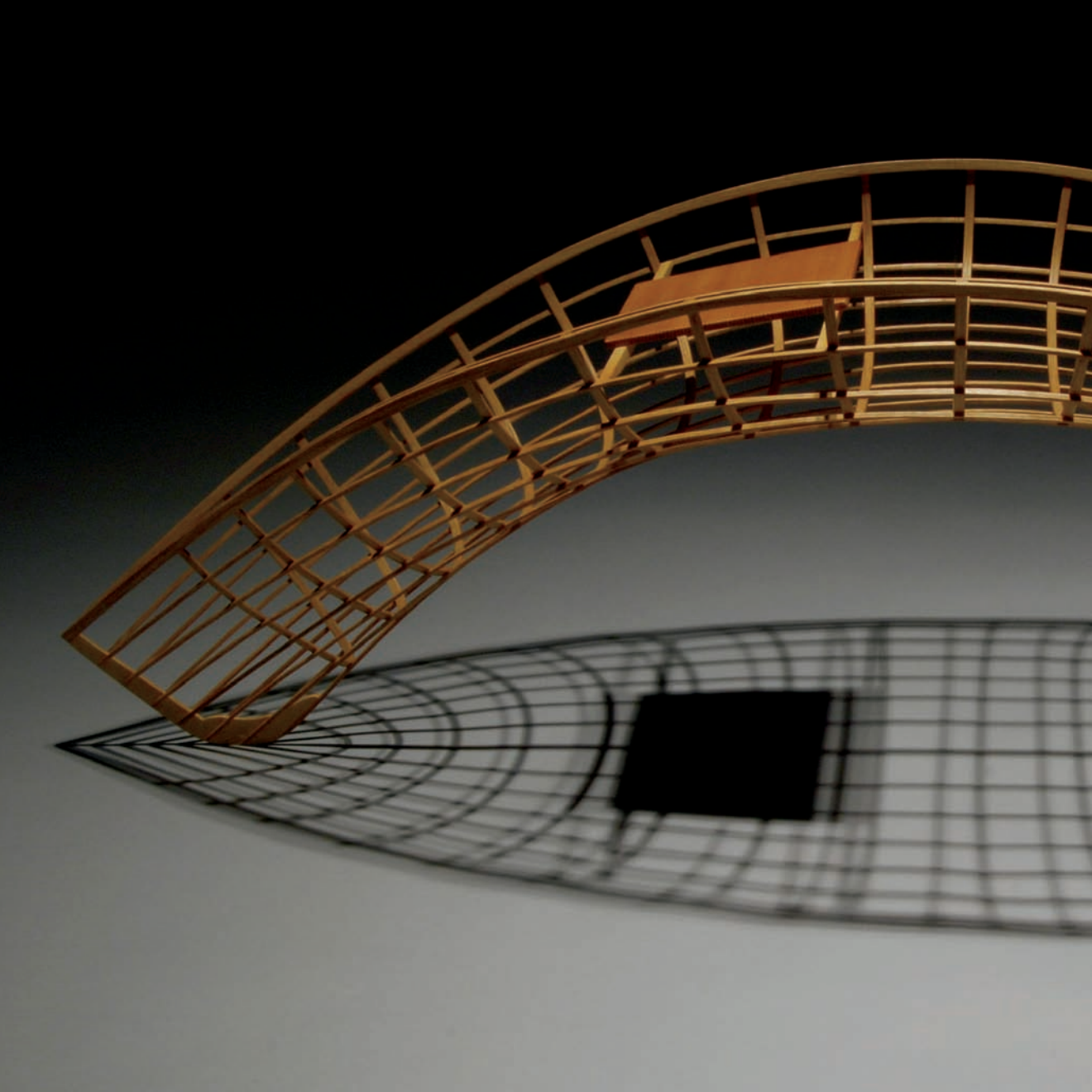
Public Seating for Wisconsin Tiennial 2007—
Madison Museum of Contemporary Art

Industrial felt, steel strapping

Dimensions variable

PLATE 36
*****Eddy***, 2008
Wood
32 x 32 x 17
Lent by Charlene and Paul Johnson

PLATE 37
*****Hard Left***, 2008
Wood
6 x 39 x 39



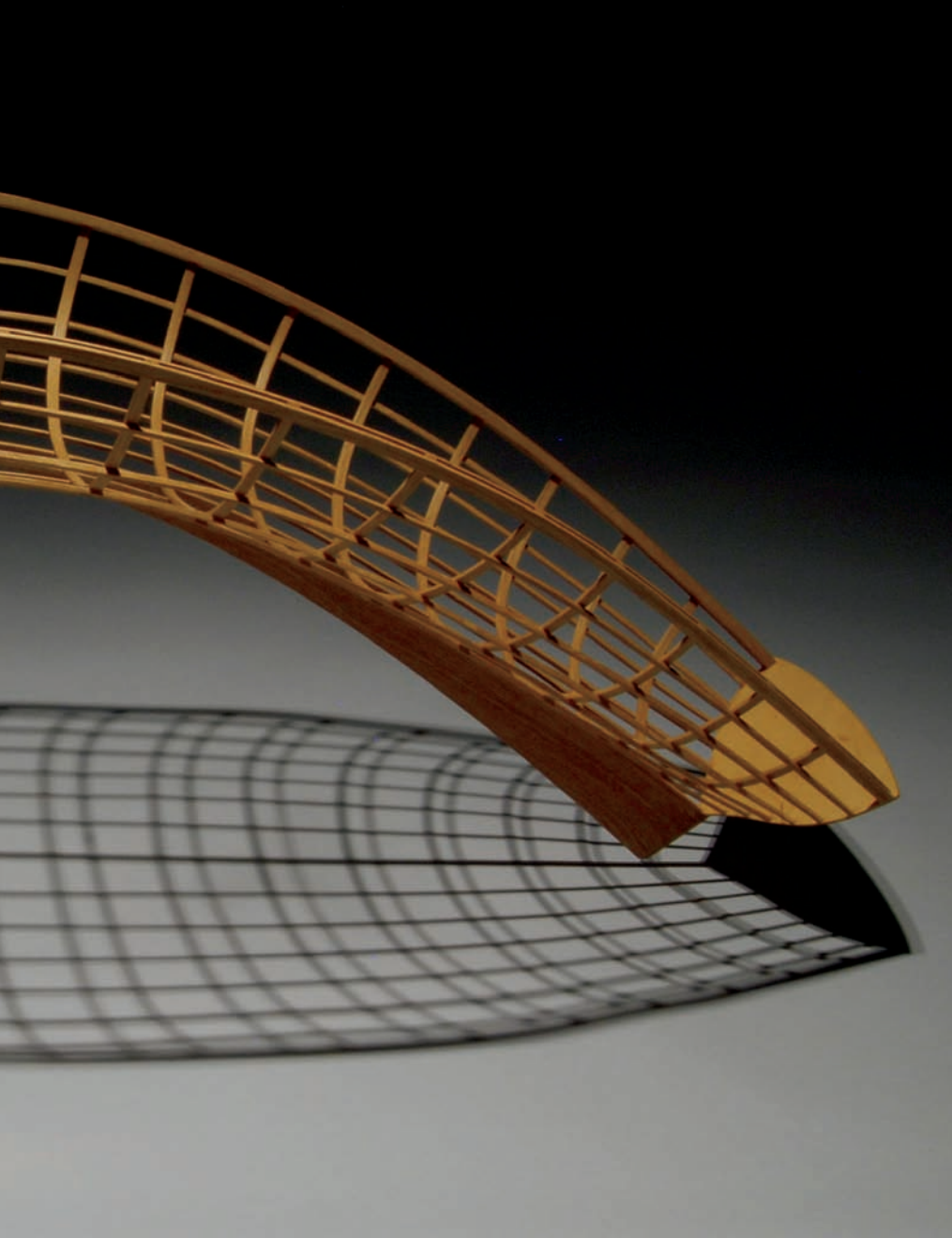
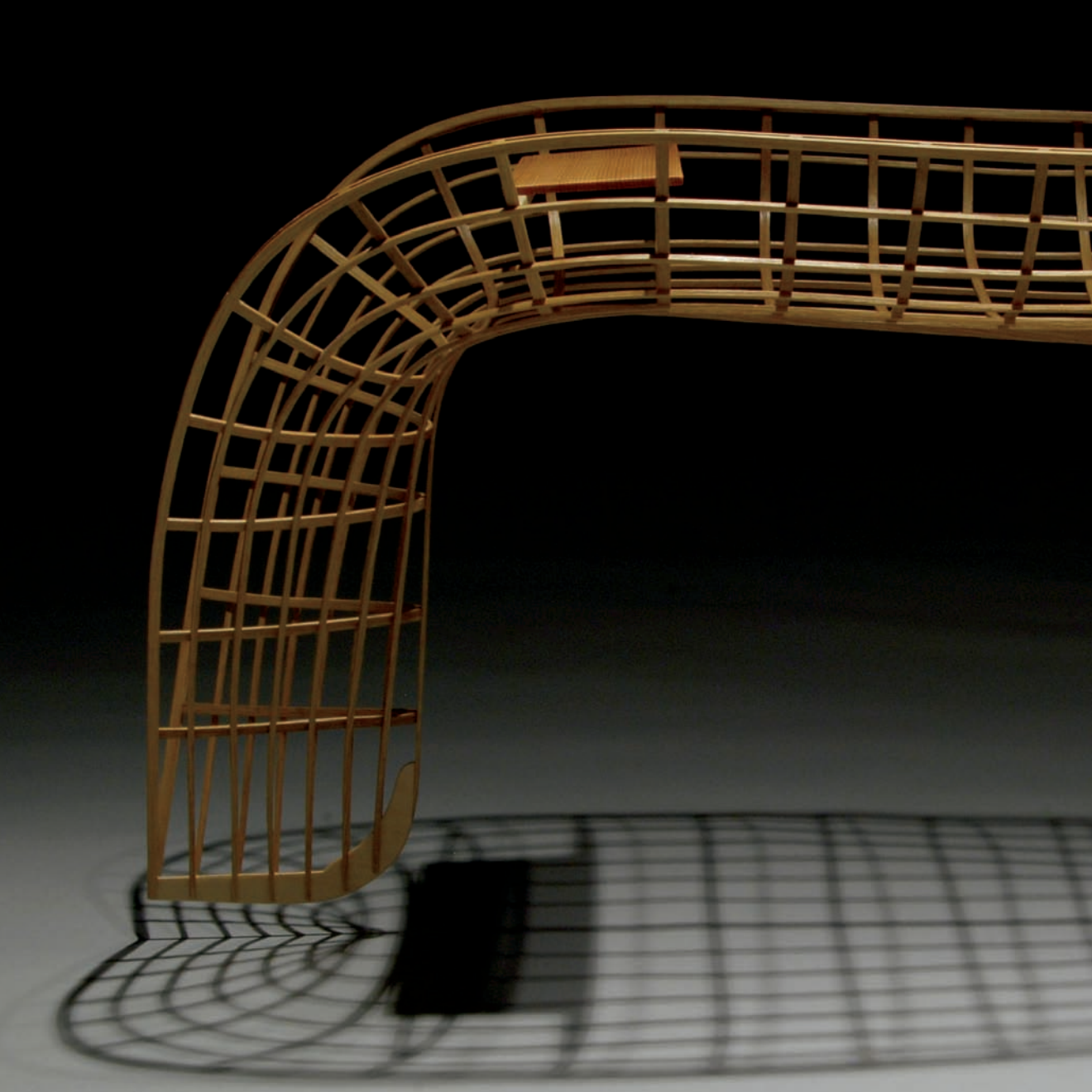


PLATE 38
*__Over__, 2008
Wood
16 x 50 x 6



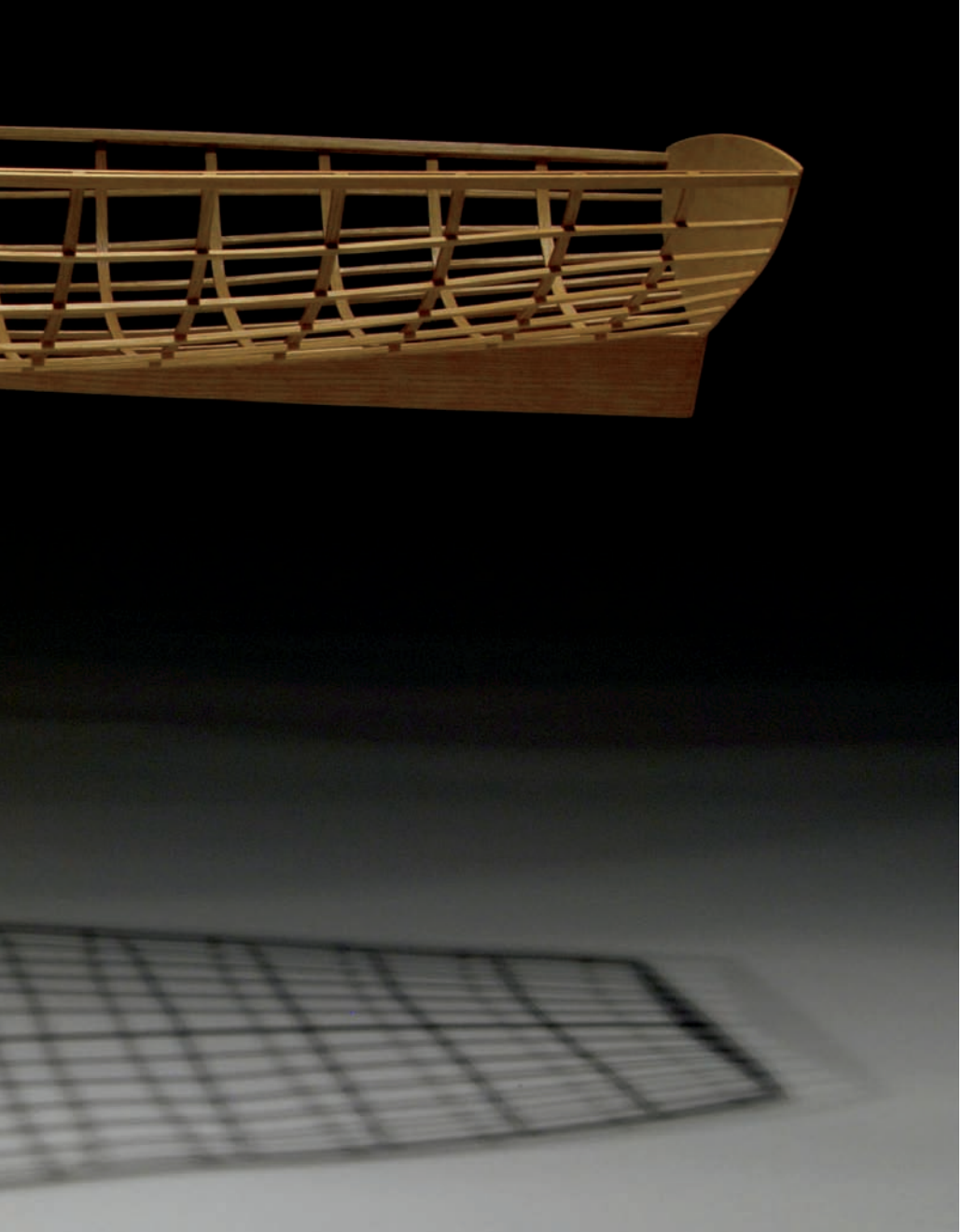
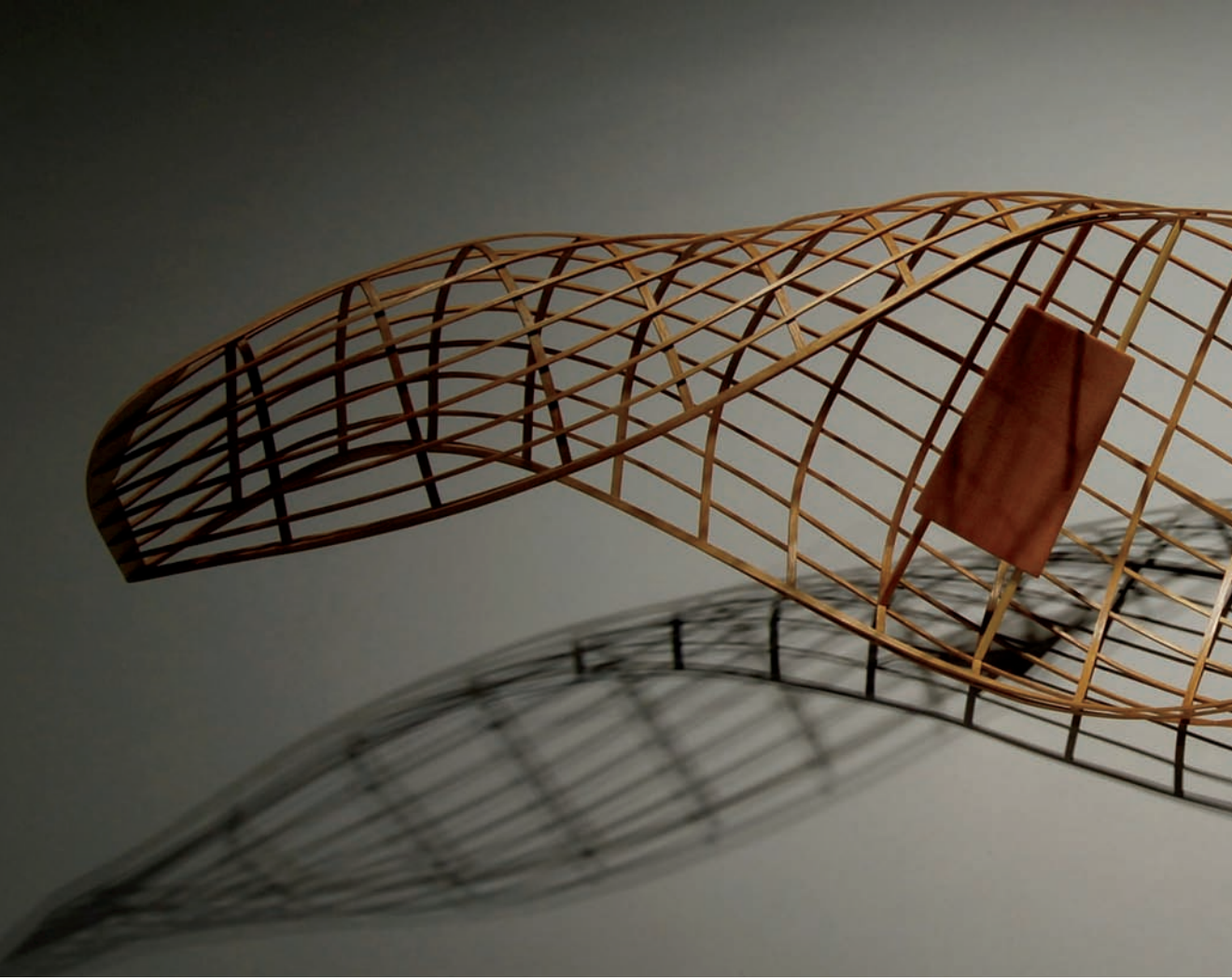


PLATE 39
*__Drop__, 2008
Wood
19 x 37 x 7



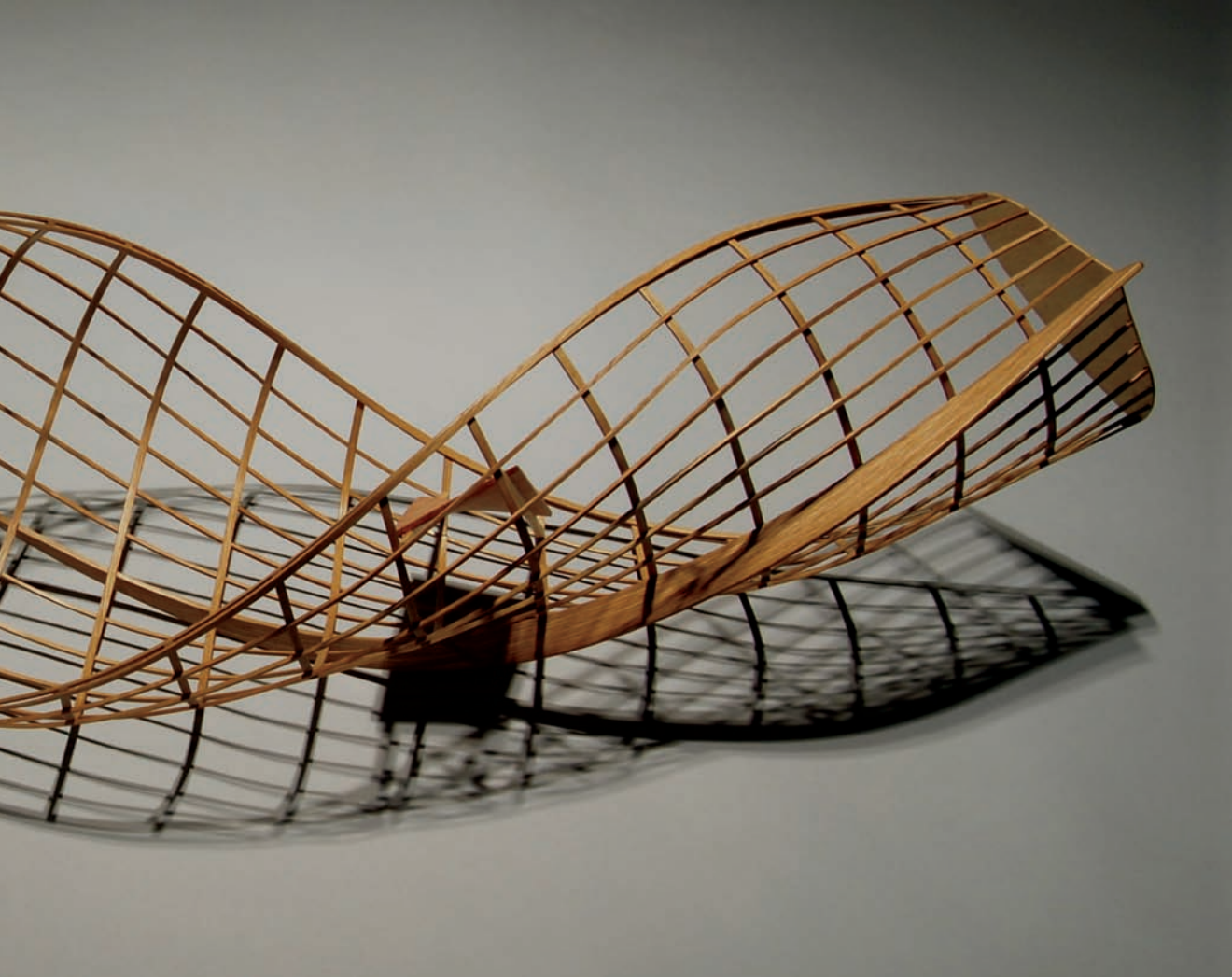


PLATE 40
*****Screw***, 2008
Wood
18 x 61 x 18
Lent by Phil and Hillary Burling

PLATE 41

****Swim***, 2008

Wood

6 x 60 x 18

Lent by the Chazen Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin–Madison, Richard R. and Jean D. McKenzie Endowment Fund purchase

PLATE 42

Soft Right, 2008

Wood

6 x 48 x 17

Collection of
Joyce and
Sherman Scott

PLATE 43

****Fractal Chairs Series***, 2008–14

Wood, paint

Tallest: 50 in.

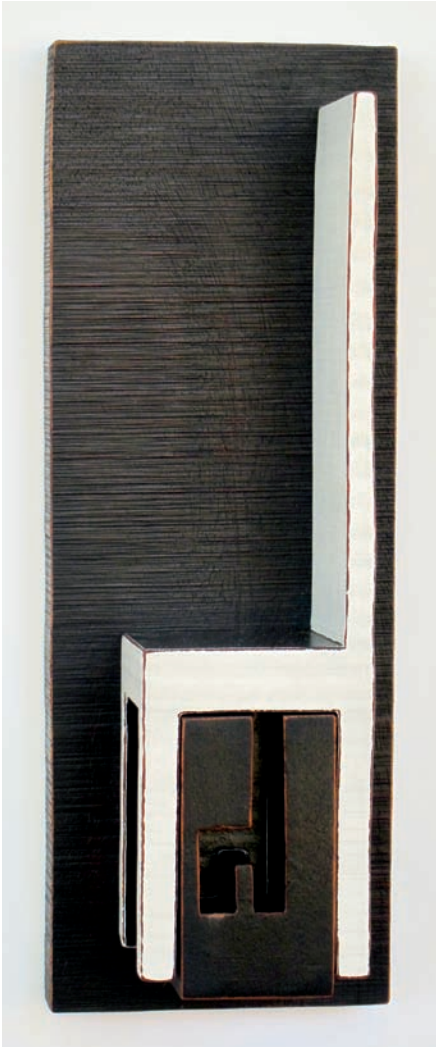


PLATE 44
*__Fractal Chairs Series__, 2012
Wood, paint
11 x 4 x 3

PLATE 45

***Fractal Chairs Series**, 2012

Wood, paint

20 x 6 x 5

PLATE 46

****Fractal Chairs Series***, 2012

Wood, paint

15 x 5 x 5

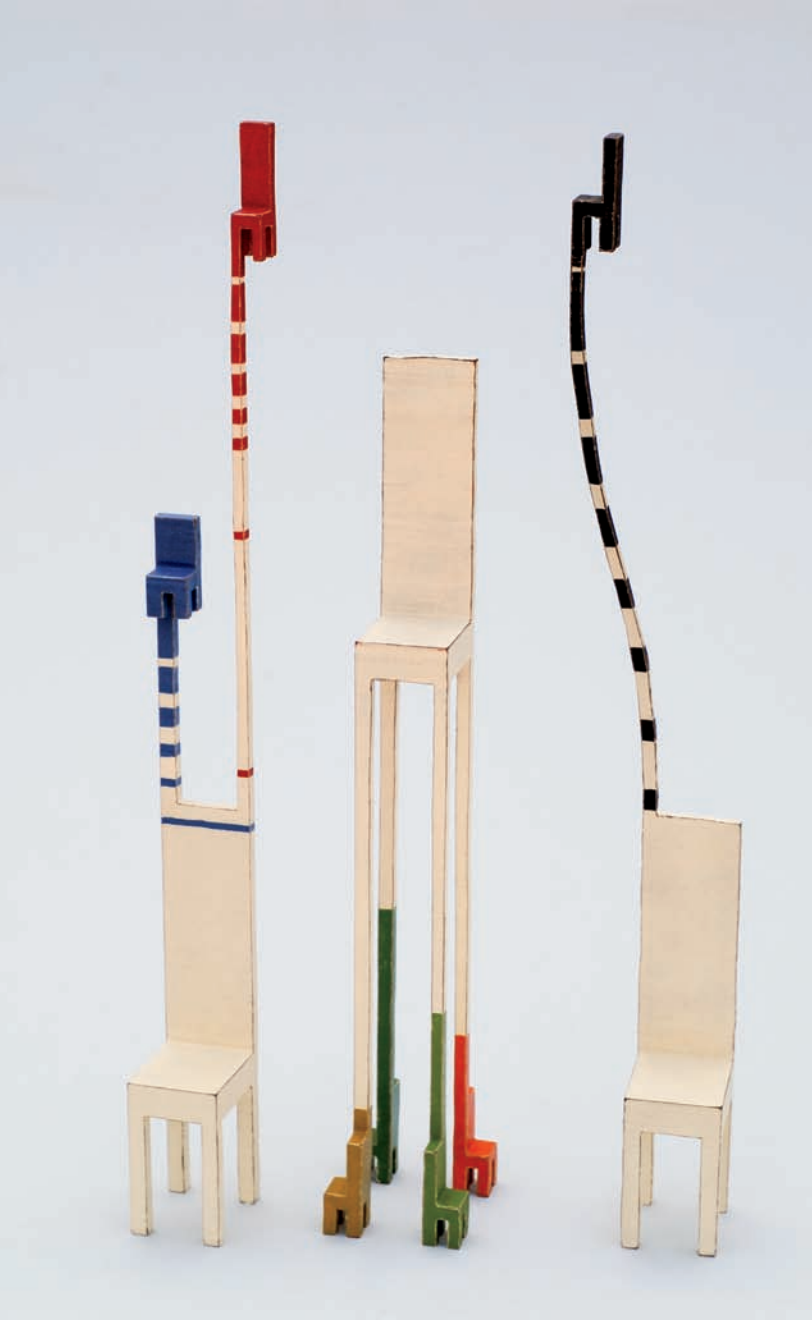


PLATE 47

****Fractal Chairs Series***, 2010–12

Wood, paint

Tallest: 21 in.

Lent by the Chazen Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin–Madison, Eugenie Mayer Bolz Endowment Fund purchase

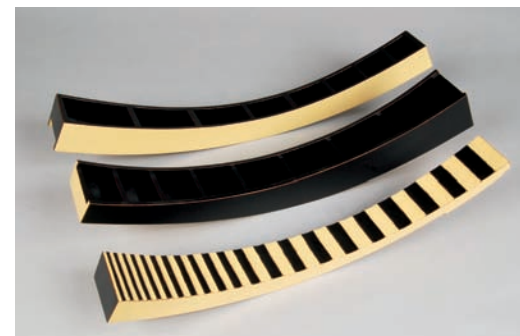


PLATE 48
*****Rock Box***, 2008
Wood, paint
9 x 28 x 4
Lent by Dennis Rocheleau

PLATE 49
*****Cyrano*** and ***Roxanne***, 2009
Wood, paint
Each: 29 x 10 x 5 ½

PLATE 50
(Left to right)

*__List__, 2011
Wood, paint
6 x 31 x 6

*__Sway__, 2011
Wood, paint
6 x 39 x 6

*__Bob__, 2011
Wood, paint
5 x 23 x 14

*__Tapir__, 2011
Wood, paint
5 x 37 x 5

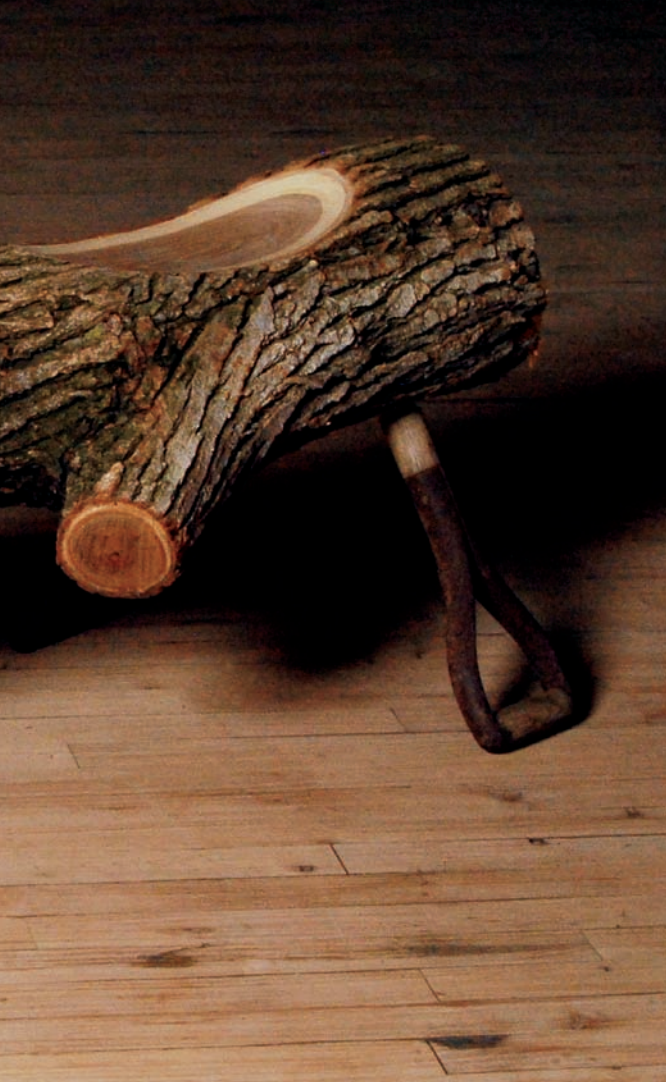


PLATE 51
(Left)
**How to Handle a Log*, 2010
Wood, shovel handles
41 x 16 x 14
Lent by Madison Children's Museum

PLATE 52
(Above)
**How to Handle Another Log*, 2010
Wood, shovel handles
15 x 73 x 13
Lent by Madison Children's Museum

PLATE 53

****21 and Over***, 2012

Wood, shovel handles

36 x 108 x 24

Lent by Promega Corporation

PLATE 54
*****Roll Ups***, 2012
Felt, firewood, steel
11 x 18; 16 x 19; 14 x 20

PLATE 55

The Stoop Project, 2013

Collaboration with Bird Ross

Public seating for Wisconsin Triennial 2013—Madison Museum of Contemporary Art

Wood, paint

(left to right in top image)

222 Rocky Way (Wilma)

742 Evergreen Terrace (Marge)

633 Stag Trail Road (Carmela)

Each: 85 x 60 x 59

Collection of Promega Corporation


Madison Museu

PLATE 56
Pods, 2013
Collaboration with David Chapman
Willow, steel, fabric
Tallest: 76 in.
Madison Public Library

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Cover: *Roll Ups* (pl. 54, detail); p. 1: *Eddy* (pl. 36, detail); pp. 2–3: Tom Loeser in his studio; p. 4: *Four by Four* (pl. 13, detail); pp.12–13: *Screw* (pl. 40, detail); pp. 26–27: *Cinch* (pl. 35, detail); pp. 34–35: *Dovetail Box*, *Zig Zag Cabinet*, *Lidded Chest* (pl. 8, detail); pp. 40–41: *2-D or Not 2-D?* (pl. 16, detail); pp. 46–47: *Truth or Consequences* (pl. 11, detail); back cover: *21 and Over* (pl. 53, detail)

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