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# Chair and Table

RISD Museum

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This is Tony Cokes. I teach in the department of Modern Culture and Media at Brown University. I teach media production. I'm here with *Chair/ Table*, 1980 by Richard Artschwager.

One thing really signal about Artschwager's work is a kind of interesting investment in using materials in a kind of semiotic way, in a way of undermining their supposed materiality, and questioning what it is that we are making or looking at when making sculpture. In some ways, I think the chair and table which are in their sort of material heft contradictory to their function as furniture, is a particularly apt example.

One thing I find particularly appealing is that questioning: what something is made of, how we're meant to look at it, how we're meant to interact with it, the fact that it has a drawer, are we meant to pull it – probably in a museum context. It's kind of the careful mimicry in some ways, but in terms of scale, proportion, and ultimately, material, the relationship is more maybe conceptual or semiotic than actual or useable.

I think the thickness of the leg posts for both the chair and table, and the relative thickness of the table surface in proportion mimic the kinds of relations we'd see in furniture. But the fact that you can just barely get the chair under the table, and probably could not sit on the chair when it is under the table, kind of clues us in that there's a kind of tweaking of our respective relationship, at least with the idea of furniture. It draws our attention back to the question of what the form is.

My name is Rosanne Somerson and I'm the provost at RISD. I'm reflecting on Richard Artschwager's *Chair/Table* piece, which is a wonderful part of our collection here. Artschwager initially trained as a physicist and I think that through physics, one often learns something about scale. I think as his career morphed more into making sculpture via making furniture en route, the sense of scale clearly comes into play in this overscale table and chair piece.

It's interesting looking at it from the view of a furniture maker which is my background, and my teaching area was furniture design. There are some really funny decisions made about structure and grain patterns in the simulated grain, which is actually Formica. . But it's not about accurate representation. It's really about creating an illusion for the viewer, and I think that's done very successfully.

Typically, Formica would've been edge banded with another material. This is not the standard way that Formica's applied, but it's a perfect support of the idea here in that it's overscaled, exaggerated, and it's almost as if it's painted on. But yet, the fact that it's Formica, which is generally viewed in the context of something cheaper, plays with the sense of what is real or simulated, that I think Artschwager is pointing us toward here – taking something that's a cheap material and elevating it into a context through his strong concept. Just like he's taking these iconic furniture forms and overscaling them, he's overscaling the idea of how Formica can be interpreted.

I've seen this object for many years, and I always see something different in it when I look at it again and again. I think one of the main themes for me is to look at furniture objects as art. But it's so clear here that these objects are symbolic of furniture. But if you look at some of the other objects in our collection here, in a way they're just as symbolic as functional objects because they never really were intended to be used. They were showpieces. They were pieces that asked us to look at questions of our times around material use, decoration, form, and structure. So in a way for me, this piece is a continuum of that long-standing tradition we have from the classical time to the present about the role of the furniture object as it defines its own time.