

PERSONAL PROSTHESIS

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Personal Prosthesis

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There is truth and inherent beauty in incomplete thoughts and half lived ideas. Muddling through the nature of aesthetics is enough to support multiple bodies of work. Add to that a rich historical tradition based in craft, and you will find not only a complex set of ideas and contradictions, but also a sense of pride mixed with resentment. At the heart of the matter, creativity and curiosity remain the main motivational factors for approaching each day with a desire to make and to work with ones hands.

Why furniture design? There is a conscious choice there; it is a very specific choice that relates to a very large body of people. Furniture derives much of its inspiration from comfort, furnishings that aid in making life more comfortable and as tools humans relate to in the definition of interior and exterior space. This is not to say that furniture is simply décor, but at its root, furniture fulfills a function first. To get to the nature of what furniture fulfills after that point, is solely contrived and defined by first the maker, and secondly by the user. A piece of furniture will inevitably be evaluated for its function as well as design. It can be said that with the advent of the studio furniture maker, design took center stage, with function becoming a backdrop; almost a given.

Concept, technique, and materials, have long been thought of as the main interest of the studio furniture maker. (Cooke 13) The first generation of makers is well known for having a love and passion for fine exotic woods and a technique based design approach. (Firzgerald 98) There was an excellent response to the

work of the first generation of studio furniture makers, who focused on craftsmanship, joinery, and wood.

While this is where the studio movement derived its origins, it is not where every maker's focus has been in subsequent years. In 1979, sculptor and furniture maker, Gary Knox Bennett, expressed the frustration felt by some makers with a piece of furniture, a finely crafted casework out of exotic wood, which he eventually drove a sixteen-penny nail into the front of.



Gary Knox Bennett, *Nail Cabinet*. 1979.
Photo courtesy finewoodworking.com

Bennett is quoted as saying, “ I wanted to make a statement that I thought people were getting a little too god damn precious with their technique. I think tricky joinery is just to show, in most cases, you can do tricky joinery.”(Cooke 73)

So where does this leave the newest generation of furniture makers, a mass of artists and craftsman, yet undefined in scale? Acknowledgement of the past is certainly an important place where most seem to start; furniture is after all a craft, handed down from generation to generation through apprenticeships, and now higher education. But where the lines of communication break down is in the struggle between art versus craft. Craft has in many ways always been looked down upon by high art definitions, as a medium which can be dismissed simply because function is ever present.

Craft and Making

Craft has long been seen as something of a joke to the high art scene. Dismissed as art of ritual and function, craft is often overlooked for its process and aesthetic beauty. There is something of an indescribable nature about craft, in which a maker gets lost in constructing a beautiful object, something made for use. The objects of craft are in many ways beautiful because they have been meticulously labored over and carefully planed and contrived by a single individual, a single perspective. Often time's craftspeople will describe their work as simply, the joy of making. (Dissanayake 43)

Questioning the motivations of craft is only natural. Why do we need a table that is both functional and beautiful? Can this question be boiled down to a question of the nature of design? Questioning the act of design seems a pursuit as old as time. Why? Why is the ultimate question, and the main

question behind the relevance of designing objects beyond the definitions set forward by function alone. Design has its origins in man's search for something better. Why make something that already exists? The answer lies in finding the beauty of making something better, making something that has been so thoroughly thought through time and time again, whatever reiteration it may be. In the end, a designer can be anyone; at our base humans are problem solvers. Designers are simply people who can give form to any given idea. (Nelson 18)

Current Perspectives

All of this historical perspective is simply a primer to the ideas and questions of a body of work. Aesthetics, design, furniture, craft, beauty, tradition are all simply the beginnings of ideas. How do these things make their way into the world? Moreover, why does anyone care that these things are or are not in the world? Making is something everyone does, the artist simply has the burden and gift of being able to make something which lasts, something which can change someone's perspective, even if only momentarily.

Questions are apart of any artist's process, but for the furniture maker, they seem an even greater and more precarious set of questions. Studio furniture makers are in the unique position, unlike any other current studio craft field, of having many of its first generation, its original masters, still being alive and adding to the life force of the discipline. Most makers therefore have a great struggle in their personal journey, not wanting to insult the masters, yet being fed

up with their obsessive technique based works and resolution to singular defining aesthetics. How does the work of individualized furniture makers represent the history of furniture, and in what way is it a new perspective? So often, as dictated by the post World War II first generation studio furniture makers, as well as recent historical perspective, furniture is about tradition.

Tradition today seems so subverted by technology and economic factors that it is becoming more important for a maker to represent concept as the for-most important factor, allowing historical perspective to be an inherent influence. Now the most important way makers can add their own touch to furniture, is through concept, through personal perspective, not joinery. Joinery has become devalued because of the easy access to CNC and laser cutting technologies. There is now a whole world of things that can be popped out of the computer that would have taken traditional craftsman weeks to create. Embracing technology is the most important thing a modern maker can do, but within limits.

To honor the traditions of woodworking and furniture making are certainly important, but why spend hours honing and prepping a hand plane when a modern machine can flatten a board with the flick of a switch. While the acknowledgment of historical process is important, it also seems just as bewildering to pretend that the modern machines we have are not just as good and rapid. While faster is not always better, and faster may be looked at as a need of a current generation, it seems more important to focus on design and concept, rather than a perfectly honed hand plane.

Personal Spaces/ Possibilities

So why even bother making furniture, if technique and wood are “dead”? Why even forage ahead with furniture design other than to pay the bills? There are so many options for the furniture maker to express reiterations of forms in furniture, but function always precedes any other conceptual motives.

My current work, explores the idea of biography and perspective in the places where furniture leaves off. In its now well-explored nature, furniture as form has a very limited amount of true perspective into what I, the maker, really has to say. While the representation of historical perspective is in fact a valid concept, it is not what is truly at the base of my motivation for making, it is not the reason work is made; it is merely an important contextual overlay. These works have come out of the role of process, as well as the search for a sense of place, an understanding of the future, an understanding of what the future as a furniture maker looks like.

The fiberglass forms where in many ways a search for a repeatable, cost effective process in which a series of work could be made like a product line, but in a way that allowed each piece to still have a strong sense of personality and the craftsman hand. The individual, one of a kind, is something that is important to both the maker and the patron. One of a kind works of art are something that a patron will remember because there will always be a feeling of pride created by a physical individual interaction, there was a personality that goes with the furniture, something that is so often not possible in the large furniture design

industry. We as humans thrive on personal interactions; we are meant to form a bond with personalities.

The current tables in the *Prosthesis Series*, are a long drawn out look into a rejection of traditional wood based furniture, while remaining true to the roots of craftsmanship. The thesis body of works has have a general ambiguity in their overall form because there are some changes within the base form as well as the attachments that change from piece to piece. Ambiguity is a strangely perfect place to be, not having to pick just one right solution, and being able to represent multiple solutions through the series. The works help to further a personal sense of directionless wander, while simultaneously seeking to represent every real personal moment.

These fiberglass tables have, to date, been the most successful in my pursuit of making furniture in serving as an extension of my personality and myself.



Prosthesis Four, Prosthesis. 2009

The Prosthesis tables represent so many different things, and can function in many ways that are a bit odd, and yet endearing, they are almost grotesque, almost elegant, almost something other than a table. But they are just almost all of these things simultaneously; again the idea of this ambiguity is what is so important about the works as a maker. Allowing the viewer to feel safe to make any assumptions they may like is where this work fulfills a makers desire to create and also have a challenging dialogue the approach to design. The works are titled the *Prosthesis Series* because the original concept to the work was to make a central fiberglass component that was a visually interesting form by itself, but ultimately something that relied on additional materials to make it complete; the prosthesis.

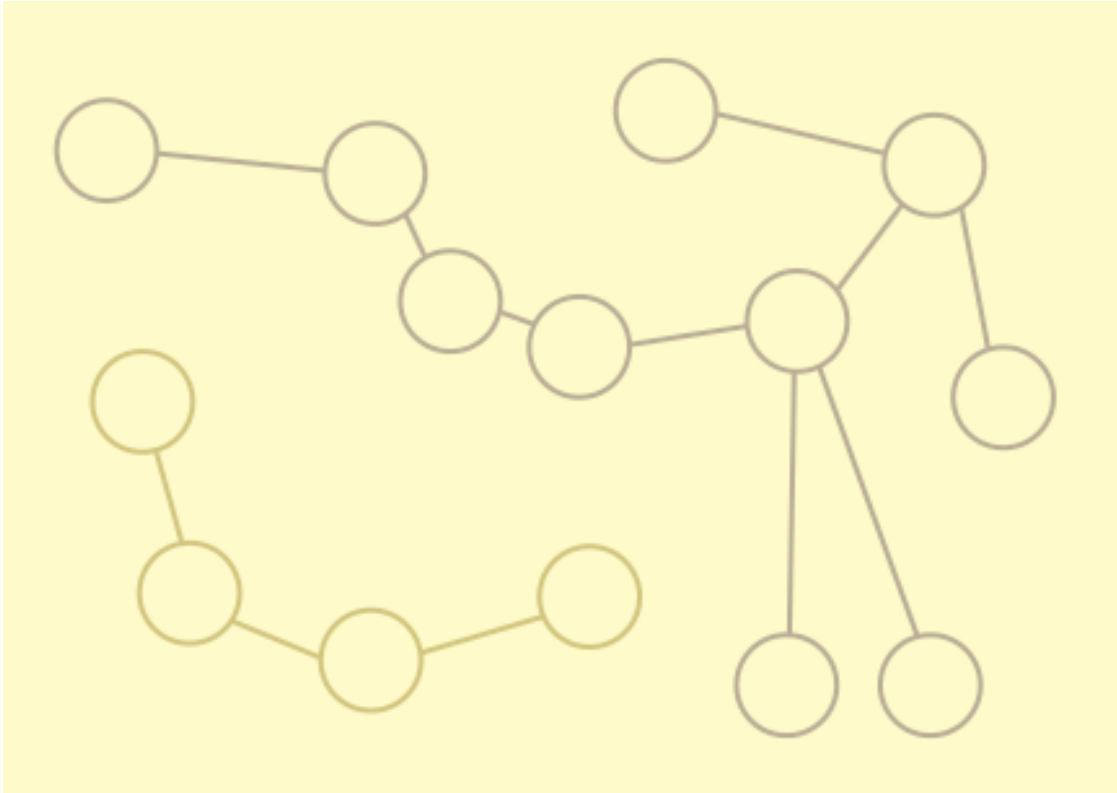


Prosthesis Three, Seven, Eight. 2010

The prostheses are added to the main body of the forms as a way to complete the form and define it as a table. The thought behind this idea, and the reason for calling them prostheses is to establish that these legs, or nubs, are extensions added on to complete the work, much like we add on additional information to our personalities, thoughts and person. It also gives the viewer a chance to imagine these works as having their own personalities, both because of the animated qualities, but allowing them to think about the choices we make every day. Often times a scenario plays out in my mind where one of the white fiberglass forms, before having anything added to them, waking up in morning, standing naked in front of the mirror and having a conversation with itself, “ huum, do I wear, the long walnut nubs with the dark top, or perhaps the mahogany and gold would be best today?” While this is a completely preposterous scenario, it is the thought process that allows each of these pieces to have an overarching aesthetic while still remaining very individualized in appearance, just how humans set themselves apart from one another.

The layout of the exhibition has also become a very important part of these works being displaying the work as a body, but also as a tool to describe a narrative about the way they were created. I have always been very interested in maps because they are systematic and organized and layout everything that is around us, just in a different language. This visual language is, for me, a way to show a viewer the process that has allowed each of these pieces to be a part of a collective, but also isolated as individual works. My thought process is

something that is very important to me to represent, and something that has often gone overlooked for its importance because it feels like second nature to me, but is not always clear to viewer.



Arial view of the map layout for the works as they were proposed to be installed in the gallery.

The idea of mapping has been a reoccurring theme for my work based on the quirks of materials, process, and appearance, though it has never had the appearance of a map. I often approach design from a, "if you can't beat them, join them," approach. The clearest, most recent, example of this is in *Bench 2009*, in which hardware was absolutely necessary for the work, but was something of an eyesore.



Bench 2009

This problem eventually became a deliberate choice to play up the existence of the hardware by not only putting an additional ring around the hardware to highlight and isolate it, but also in allowing the layout of the hardware to be an integrated part to the benches overall form.

The mapping for this show will act in a similar way to the hardware on *Bench 2009*, in that it will help the viewer to understand how each table is unique and important on its own, but that it is also part of a larger collective. It will also give a glimpse into the thought process that thematically allows for a square topped table in a room full of round-topped tables; other than just being made in a similar process. It's inclusion is just as important as the rest because it its part of the map, it is part of the progression of pieces, and while it may be divergent in

my mind and on the map, it is important to include because even the divergent paths are important.

Conclusion

The overall goal of these works individually and as an installation is to allow a viewer the freedom and joy in being able to make choices for today, but also being empowered by the knowledge that there is always tomorrow. This sentiment is something that I find myself thinking entirely too often, and seems like just one last sliver of information that is important to allow someone else to feel. While these may just be tables, they are their own unique quarks, and that is what makes them lovable.

None of these tables may be perfect, and none of them may in any way reflect the tradition of furniture and craft, but they represent the journey of this maker as I attempt to muddle through resentment and respect. Each day is a new adventure and the *Prosthesis Series* most importantly represents a sense of adventure and exploration.

Works Cited

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Education

- 2010 **Herron School of Art and Design**, IUPUI, Indianapolis, IN.
Master of Fine Arts in Art and Public Life
Specialization in Woodworking and Furniture Design
- 2007 **Murray State University**, Murray KY.
Bachelor of Fine Arts in Woodworking and Furniture Design

Professional Experience

- 2009-2008 **Instructor**, Furniture Design I and Advanced Furniture Design
Teaching Assistant for Cory Robinson, Furniture Design I, II.
Herron School of Art and Design, Indianapolis, IN.
- 2008 **Gallery Technician and Teaching Assistant** for grades 6 through 12
University School of Nashville, Nashville, TN.
- 2007 **Teaching Assistant** for Chris Weiland, Introduction to Furniture
Assistant to Artist in Residence Stephan Goetschius
Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Indiana, PA
- 2004-2005 **Shop Fabricator**, Odyssey Fine Woodworking, Custom Cabinetry
Nashville, TN. Summer 2004 and 2005.

Exhibitions

- 2009 **Herron Furniture Design: A 30-Year Tradition**. Indianapolis, IN
Furniture Society Faculty Selects Exhibition. Boone, NC
Doors, Drawers, and Surfaces. Indianapolis, IN
Herron @ Bungalow Gallery. Indianapolis, IN
- 2008 **Urban M.F.A.: Evolving Through an M.F.A Program**. Indianapolis, IN
Timetables and Other Fable: An Interdisciplinary Collaboration.
Indianapolis, IN
Artclectic 2008. Nashville, TN
University School of Nashville Alumni Show. Nashville, TN
- 2007 **B.F.A. Solo Exhibition**. Murray KY
- 2006 **OMAS Juried Student Show**. Murray KY