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Design, art and fun; Roy McMakin creates furniture, paintings and drawings, juggling functionality and expectation with a sense of play. His work is soon to be the focus of a MOCA retrospective.

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Abstract (Abstract): CONTRASTING FORMS: In the stark, Modernist Getty Museum, designed by architect [Richard Meier], [Roy McMakin] provides comfortable havens.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Edmond Barr; HOME IN SEATTLE: "I used to think I was about simplicity," says McMakin. "Now I find that more and more I'm about complexity and denseness and piling up."; PHOTOGRAPHER: Jeff Reinking For The Times; ART OR DESIGN? The detailed "Benedek House Model" (2002) for a Long Island estate is built into a table carved with the property's topography.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Mark Woods; NOT DEFECTS: In works like "Would Side Table Extra Patchy" (1991), McMakin makes decorative surfaces of marred wood others might toss.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Mark Woods; IN-SECURE: An early work, "[Hugh Davies] Credenza" (1986), serves as a traditional locked office cabinet but has openings cut into it.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Philipp Scholz Ritterman; DUAL PURPOSE: This "saddle seat" is both a table and place to sit while putting on your shoes.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Mark Woods; VARIETY OF FORMS: In styles both conventional and surprising, McMakin's furniture, architecture and artworks encompass a wide vocabulary of eye-catching elements; PHOTOGRAPHER: Philipp Scholz Ritterman; VARIETY OF FORMS: In styles both conventional and surprising, McMakin's furniture, architecture and artworks encompass a wide vocabulary of eye-catching elements; PHOTOGRAPHER: Edmond Barr; VARIETY OF FORMS: In styles both conventional and surprising, McMakin's furniture, architecture and artworks encompass a wide vocabulary of eye-catching elements.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Mark Woods; VARIETY OF FORMS: In styles both conventional and surprising, McMakin's furniture, architecture and artworks encompass a wide vocabulary of eye-catching elements.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Mark Woods; UNUSUAL DETAILS: McMakin's "Swofford Chest of Draweds" (2001), nearly 5 feet high, intentionally mismatches colors and drawer handles.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Mark Woods; VARIETY OF FORMS: In styles both conventional and surprising, McMakin's furniture, architecture and artworks encompass a wide vocabulary of eye- catching elements.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Mark Woods

Full text: CORRECTION: SEE CORRECTION APPENDED; Hugh Davies -- A profile of artist-designer Roy McMakin in Sunday's Calendar section identified Hugh Davies as director of the San Diego Museum of Art. Davies is director of the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego.; Hugh Davies - - A profile of artist-designer Roy McMakin last Sunday identified Hugh Davies as director of the San Diego Museum of Art. Davies is director of the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego.

The big pink chest of drawers has knobs that don't match and a couple of odd-colored drawers. Finely wrought in every detail, it has some knobs that are a little too big, others a little too small. Colors change almost randomly -- a top drawer and one of the middle drawer's knobs are white, the bottom drawer and its knobs are red.

This is not your grandmother's bedroom bureau, although at first glance that's what it looks like.

Enter the looking-glass world of Roy McMakin, where simple design is not that simple and familiar forms are altered just enough to throw perception off balance. An accomplished artist as well as a designer of furniture, interiors and architecture, McMakin knows that the ordinary can be raised to new heights by small adjustments and a sense of play.

"I think it's part of the 'how to make an archetype be both more of an archetype and not' series I have been

doing since my first table," McMakin says of the "Swofford Chest of Drawers" (2001), named after Beth Swofford, who commissioned it. "The form is slightly overscaled, which I think has to do with memory, and the various colors and knob sizes are about calling attention to something."

Soft-spoken and friendly, McMakin, 46, displays none of the airs one might expect of someone whose clients include many on Hollywood's A-list, and his dedication to the 20-some artisans and architects who work for him underscores his commitment to quality craftsmanship -- utilitarianism with a twist.

Hard to classify, he is best known for his Domestic Furniture Co., which he first established with a showroom on L.A.'s Beverly Boulevard in 1987. There, his work caught the eye of many in the world of entertainment and art, and he quickly moved from selling individual pieces to overhauling entire homes. But he wasn't happy living in L.A., where for a variety of personal and professional reasons he had given up making art in favor of design.

In the early 1990s, he fled to this city outside the arts mainstream, a place plentiful in lumber and lovers of crafts. As he downsized his L.A. showroom -- he now has a small space on Wilshire Boulevard, near Fairfax Avenue -- he slowly built up a workshop here that continues to serve his national clients and also gives him greater freedom. In the process he became what he is today -- equal parts artist, designer and businessman.

McMakin now moves easily between making paintings and drawings, creating vast arrays of furniture, and designing and renovating houses. And with the help of a manager, he juggles the day-to-day affairs of a business that relies on keeping his clients happy. He talks about his clients as "best friends" and his staff as family. Such close, ongoing relationships are clearly important to him -- trust is what allows him to make work that moves beyond expectations.

His furniture is often traditional in its forms, but the range can be huge -- from overstuffed upholstered armchairs to simple daybeds to ornate library tables. His style is modern and nostalgic at the same time, open to incorporating delicate Regency style in one renovation project and rustic ranch style in another. His artwork, too, ranges in style and mediums. He's made sculptures that can be used -- what looks like a bureau on one side is a bookshelf in back. And he's made others that look functional but aren't -- such as a painting of a vanity that can't be opened.

These days he's also making public artworks, including major commissions for San Diego, San Francisco and a piece for a park in West Hollywood. And he's spent a good deal of his time in recent months putting the finishing touches on a retrospective of his art and design work, "Roy McMakin: A Door Meant as Adornment," opening next Sunday at the Museum of Contemporary Art at the Pacific Design Center.

"I used to think that I was about simplicity," McMakin says. "Now I find that more and more I'm about complexity and denseness and piling up." Distinctions between craft, fine design and art fly out the window. This is a man who appears to know everything there is to know about wood, but calls himself a conceptual artist.

"Basically, because of the time we live in and my education, I think I live my life as a conceptual artist," he says. "My art is expressed in a variety of ways, and some of them exist to serve people and some are done as art, but while I segregate them in the way they're consumed and partly how I think about them, ultimately they're not separate. They're just different endeavors interpretable by the user."

He has found that there are, however, limits in how far he can go in tweaking something to be used by a client. "There is a big difference between getting an opportunity to remodel a kitchen, and art," he says wryly. "I got to a place in my business where I felt I'd created a really fabulous, super subtle design, and then the person that got it said, 'What is this?' And I realized that had this been in an art gallery, people would have different expectations. So that's what I went on to do."

Collaboration with craftsmen

As he's about to leave his workshop, now known as Big Leaf Manufacturing Co., one rainy Monday afternoon, McMakin stops to talk to one of his master craftsmen. Chris Fast has been building a tree- shaped table lamp, and he wants McMakin to determine the angle of a quarter-inch notch in the support that holds the electrical fixture. Only he can say how the brass chain on the on-off switch should fall against the wood.

"Make it 45 degrees," McMakin says without hesitation after nodding his approval of what he sees so far. Fast smiles, and they're done. And in 30 seconds, two crucial elements of McMakin's design philosophy are revealed: Every detail matters, and collaboration is a large part of a work's success. McMakin says he wants his artisans to make decisions, and he insists that each piece is signed by the craftsperson who made it.

A design effect often relies on very subtle manipulations of scale. McMakin has found that even a 1/8-inch deviation in his design can radically change the message, but believes this kind of subtlety exists everywhere in life.

"Think about Nicole Kidman's nose in 'The Hours,' " he says of the ungainly prosthetic the actress wore to play Virginia Woolf. "Scale can so easily shape the whole emotional hit you get from something. The tiniest bit of extra flesh here or there can be the difference between looking drawn and unwell or vibrant. I think, as perceptive beings, we're all super, super sensitive to scale."

Decorative elements can also have powerful connotations. A rectangle with cutout curved corners is a common device in cabinetry, and he found himself repeatedly using the form in his furniture as well as his artwork long before he remembered that it was a key element in the vanity in his childhood bathroom, a place where he'd often take refuge.

One of the most remarkable elements in McMakin's work is how it feels to the touch. The wood surfaces are so smooth that you want to run your hand across, say, the length of table. The fabrics are richly textured -- velvet and toile, patterns and solids mix and match in unusual combinations.

By contrast, his artworks tend to be more monochromatic and plain in their surface texture, exploring issues of form over finish. A series titled "Alphabet Sketches" from 1997, for example, consists of 143 small, white wooden sculptures reminiscent in their scale of a child's blocks, which, when arrayed together on a long table, become a miniature white city, or perhaps an incongruous mix of objects one might expect to find in a swap meet display. For the artist, it was a chance to experiment, in miniature, with a visual vocabulary.

It is primarily in McMakin's pencil drawings, a selection of which will be exhibited in the MOCA show, that his more personal, refined touch is revealed. Among them is a series he completed late last year. "I found that I wanted to do something that is purely me, that I didn't need my shop to build. I love drawing and I draw all the time," he says, referring to his design sketches. "So I decided to do drawings that are complete in themselves, just with my simple mechanical pencils. I decided to do this for a month and see where they ended up." He told himself that he'd work on each one without caring what it would become, and in the process the pictures began to invoke issues of language and decoration, mixing words and flourishes.

An early entrepreneur

McMAKIN was born in Wyoming in 1956 and grew up in the West. His father worked for oil companies, his mother was a homemaker. He loved art from a young age and in high school painted landscapes that, in a burst of entrepreneurial energy, he sold in exhibitions at his hometown bank. In 1975 he enrolled at the Portland Museum Art School in Oregon, a fairly conventional institution, but he transferred after two years to UC San Diego, which is well-known for its conceptually oriented teaching staff. There, McMakin began making installations of simple furniture arrangements, sometimes mixed with paintings he'd made, as well as photographs. The arrangements suggested real-life situations and unarticulated dramas, drawing upon feelings of nostalgia and other less defined emotions.

In San Diego he lived in a house designed by Irving Gill, a turn- of-the-century Modernist architect whose generously sized, simple geometric forms came to influence the shape and scale of McMakin's designs. He noticed how simple details can enhance the experience of a home in touches such as a slight bulge at the center of a mantelpiece Gill designed for the display of personal objects. Similar small accommodations have become a crucial element in McMakin's approach to design. His goal, he says, is sometimes to make life easier, other times to make it more fun.

An early example of the latter is an office credenza he made in 1986 for San Diego Museum of Art director

Hugh Davies. That piece, included in the MOCA show, has four cabinets that lock, but holes are cut into three of them, thwarting privacy. A gap in the top reveals how the piece is put together.

"It's an artwork," Davies says, and is part of the museum's design collection. However, the museum didn't officially accession the work until MOCA asked to borrow it for the upcoming show, demonstrating how fuzzy things can get in McMakin's world.

Another major museum opportunity came almost a decade later, in the mid-1990s, not long after McMakin moved to Seattle. The Getty Center was in its final stages of construction, and then-museum director John Walsh invited McMakin to design furniture for the museum's interiors. It was a chance-of-a-lifetime commission that would grow to about 250 to 300 pieces, including decoration of the director's and deputy directors' offices, all the meeting rooms, the library and other public spaces.

At the time, however, McMakin had virtually closed his business. He hired Erik Aasen to help coordinate and manage the project, and the two have worked together ever since. He also began to work with an array of Seattle craftspeople, which led eventually to the elaborate shop he has today.

"There was something so meticulous and also droll-to-hilarious about Roy's work," Walsh remembers thinking. A nice contrast to Getty Center architect Richard Meier's rigorous Modernism. Walsh also had a somewhat institution-serving notion. "The Getty is a culture of very serious overachievers," the now semiretired director emeritus says. "Why not make it pleasant for them to stay in their offices?"

As McMakin kick-started his new life here, he decided he needed to become more involved at every stage of the creation of his work, from choosing the trees for the wood to training craftspeople in his philosophy. It didn't happen overnight, and there were some blips along the way. Among the first was when he acquired a big-leaf maple tree and had it cut and cured for the Getty pieces.

"I was just up here from L.A.," he says, and the experience of going out into the woods was sort of surreal. "I felt like such a little urban gay guy. I also didn't realize how much waste there is in the wood from defects."

He figured out that if he were to cast off the wood that wasn't perfect, he wouldn't have nearly enough, and the budget was tight. But he remembered some damage intervention he'd done when his dog chewed up parts of a house built from Douglas fir that he'd been living in. By making patches and using his own colored stains, he had repaired the walls in a way that made them look interesting and allowed him to forgive the dog. The tactic has become a McMakin signature: Patches are pervasive throughout the natural-wood pieces, extending the usable wood and becoming a playful decorative element.

The Douglas fir house is now a thing of the past, and these days McMakin lives in a former grocery market in the tony Madrona neighborhood. Fronting the street, there's a showroom filled with his pieces; upstairs, the company's four architects are at work; and in the back is a spacious apartment filled with a spare but immensely comfortable array of McMakin's pieces. He shares this home with his longtime partner, Mike Jacobs, a molecular biologist working on the Human Genome Project, whom he married in a ceremony in Vermont last summer. There are also the two Chihuahuas, Joan and Kevin -- McMakin is quick to point out neither were the culprits in the wood-chewing incident.

Part studio, part business, part home, it's a warm place, reflecting the deliberate efforts McMakin makes to find a place of comfort in a challenging world. "It's really important to me to not be negative," he says, and he has made a conscious decision to live by that in both his life and his work. "So much art is dark and cynical, and I get the point of it, and I often like it, but I think there's a place to do good art that also has a real positive thing to it."

References

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Illustration

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