OBELISK

VOLUME II, ISSUE 1

PETER SHIRE ON ECONOMY AND DESIGN

The view from Peter Shire's Echo Park home; Photo: Will Nettles

In the 1960s, when many other artists went to Venice to rent studios after graduating from Chouinard, Peter Shire stayed in Echo Park, the winding, intricate neighborhood in northeast Los Angeles where he grew up. Along Echo Park Avenue, which connects his current home and studio, houses are close-set and yards, divided by cypress and lattice walls, are dense with Saguaro and fruit trees serving as scaffolding for hanging herbs, vegetables, and vining flowers. In a similar way, Shire's studio is a series of open, gabled sheds and garages and built-out rooms with tools and sculpture secured to walls and suspended from beams. In the recesses, brightly colored, lacquered flat files store his sketchbooks and drawings—the beginnings of every three dimensional work—and larger, fleshed out compositions diagraming his ideas about process, tools, and engineering.

Shire's studio as an organic construction is an expression of his work that has evolved over time, and having stayed in one place, he can tell a myriad of stories about his neighborhood, other creative and industrious satellites like Venice and Burbank, and further-out destinations like Yosemite, where he made excursions as a kid. Unsurprisingly, his work is influenced by the mechanics of cars and motorcycles, considering the driving culture of L.A. When he was a teenager, he started riding and working on motorcycles with "a guy down the street" named Dean Lanza, around the same time he started producing metal sculptures. The ceramic movement of the '60s in Southern California initiated by artists like Peter Voulkos and John Mason also influenced Shire, and he found work at a local pottery manufacturer, Franciscan, while he was at Chouinard. In 1979, Shire left California temporarily for Milan by invitation of Ettore Sottsass to work with several architects and artists who would form the Memphis group in 1981. There, with George Sowden, Matteo Thun, and Marco Zanini, he continued to build upon his body of work, all the time breaching the categories of sculpture, craft, and industrial and furniture design.

When Shire returned to LA, he began producing large-scale public sculpture. Today, Shire's work can be found throughout the city in West Hollywood, North Hollywood, Malibu, Venice, and of course near his home. Elysian Park nearby is crowned with his memorial to Frank Glass and Grace E. Simon, "City on the Hill" (1992), at his highest point. The sculpture which reflects the downtown skyline below, like most of his work, appears to be an assemblage of architectural parts—posts and lintels, trusses, and spheres—at inappropriate scales, freely rotated, balanced, and welded together. Each part is its own color, thereby

articulating the irrational construction of the whole. These formal and color rules apply to the design and painting of his teapots, for which he is most widely known; however, he also paints figuratively on clay, such as for his series of portraits and city narratives on tile, and some of his utilitarian tableware is washed and spattered with glazes in reference to the paintings of Sam Francis. Shire's public art can also be found in Las Vegas, Phoenix, and Tokyo, and his work, frequently exhibited in California, belongs to the permanent collections of LACMA, the Metropolitan Museum, and the Victoria and Albert Museum, among others.

The Frank Glass and Grace E. Simon Memorial at Angel's Point, 1992; Photo: Lori Bucci

When I approached Shire about an interview, I wrote to him primarily about how I have been noticing a new demand for the handmade, or at least the look of the handmade, indicated by the prevalence of ceramics in museums and for retail. The Metropolitan Museum, for example, ended the year with a retrospective of Ken Price's sculptures and drawings, and ceramic studios have cropped up in gentrified areas of Brooklyn, which is surprising as the cost of equipment like wheels and kilns is so high. I was wondering if, to some degree, the ideas of Memphis are being re-expressed today, or if only the aesthetic seems fresh to collectors. I also told him that I was reintroducing myself to LA via Bukowski, William S. Burroughs, and footage of the Hell's Angels, since I knew vaguely of his interest in motorcycles. As it turns out, Shire's work has been informed by his pastime of rebuilding motors, and he attributes a good amount of his understanding of metal fabrication and prototyping to working on cars and bikes. I asked him to talk about his proclivity to use clay and metal and his sculptural production versus everyday wares, such as his lower-cost Echo Park Pottery, in consideration of the changing economy since the beginning of his career.

Hourglass Teapot, 1984

AK: I wrote to you earlier about the growing demand for the handmade, which is hard to make sense of in light of the recession. People who can't afford a middle class lifestyle are seeking out one-of-a-kind and designer goods with the same energy as the upper class. What was happening in the '60s when ceramic art was gaining momentum here?

PS: There are cycles as you are pointing out, and these cycles unearth social signifiers of what you got and how you communicate—by clothing, by jewelry, by facial hair. Of course, the big one here in Los Angeles is plastic surgery. I saw this gal on a bike path, and she looked like a fish, like a Garibaldi. Do you know what a Garibaldi is? I think it's like a giant goldfish that floats around Catalina Island, with pop-eyes and big lips. But people who have plastic surgery walk around and say to each other, "You look good!" It's something else to have. The handmade may be a sort of social equalizer.

I got into a couple of nice, let's say, active discussions with George Sowden years ago, but I never really understood he's such a working class hero. He's six or seven years older than me,

and he was in the middle of Carnaby Street in London in the ’60s. Being British, he was much more class structure attuned than I was when we met and dedicated to the idea of Bauhausian industrial integrity being trickling down to the masses.

AK: How did you interpret what has happening in New York in the ’60s, when Warhol was turning advertising into art and creating celebrities of middle class kids?

PS: The ’60s moment is hard to define. Artists out here in LA were doing similar things to Warhol: highly-finished multiples. I’m thinking principally of Larry Bell. It’s a different kind of multiple.

AK: When exactly were you at Chouinard?

PS: Between ’66 and ’70.

AK: And you’ve always lived in California? I know you moved back into your parent’s house about three years ago.

PS: People always ask what it’s like to live in your parent’s house. There are a few ghosts. I didn’t leave home until I really had to, until I really could, because the most difficult part of becoming a working artist is surviving those first years. I lived at home every time a girlfriend kicked me out. It was, “Here I am, I’m back!”

AK: But it’s always different—now your studio backs up onto a Pilates studio.

PS: We have two exercise salons in front of us. I keep my hipster credentials. How do these things happen? Thinking about jobs and the nature of jobs… there are all of these young people attending classes during what used to be regular working hours. The Indian culture of monks and yogis trying to attain enlightenment was based on a stagnant economy. When you talk about pilgrimages and spiritual ascension—these are guys that raised their families, and whatever it was that they were doing to make a living, they would stop and go for a walk, thereby making room for the young guys to take over their jobs. To all these guys doing yoga, the response was, get a job, buddy! When you started those pilgrimages, you get rid of everything you own and take some clothes from a big heap, and you walk sixteen hours a day. Now we have white kids chanting in front of me.

Clearly, the economic structure is changing. I went to see a movie and had oysters afterwards at place in Silverlake, and it was fifty bucks! What happened to three dollars at the diner? Have you heard the term ‘rolled’? Basically, it’s jargon for being fucked without a kiss. Five oysters and some fried corn balls? What’s that?

In the 1930s, my parents were organizing on the ideals of Communism. People believed in systems of government then. Now we know the systems are just as goofy as the administrators. So this is the deal: in the last thirty to forty years, we’ve been talking about lifestyle; before we talked about quality of life. When we talk about these restaurants like the oyster bar or anywhere the food is organic and farm raised and we’re told the farmers sing to the vegetables, basically, we don’t know what we’re paying for. Even though it’s kind of chicer, the quality isn’t necessarily there.

With this renewed interest in the handmade, hopefully there will be winnowing down of objects per household. You go into Walmart and you can have twenty lawn chairs and a BBQ, but it all falls apart. At Chouinard, there was this flamboyant guy, Scott Runion, who was in a dance troupe called the Cockettes. I remember one day at the student lounge, he walked in, threw himself into the air, twirled around three times, and landed cross-legged on the sofa. He later died in a pool house in a terrible fire–God knows what was going on there—and was mentioned in a John Water’s movie as a memorial. So he was that kind of guy, and I trusted him. His comment to me was, “I’d rather have one good cloth coat than a number of average quality leather coats.” What’s it gonna be? Twenty pieces from Walmart? We have so much stuff, we don’t know what to do with it, and our storage is costing more than what’s in it.

AK: You've been surviving as an artist since you were a student, and you've been working in a variety of mediums since then. Over the years, has the changing economy affected your production and what you're interested in making? Is there interplay between what you want to make and what people want?

PS: In the '80s and even into the '90s, the middle class and what we might call the slightly-higher-than-middle class were welcomed or allowed, rather, into the art world. My interest in objects quickly got transferred into sculpture, which was part of the economic throw of the '60s. I was born in 1947, the apex of the post-war Baby Boom, and there were intense sociological factors in my generation's upbringing which still resonate today. The Depression formed our parents' fears and the advent of a war that nailed down the end of the Depression provided them a sense of security. So instead of social programs, the government wanted to continue investing in war manufacturing.

Finding Your Inner Skateboarder, 2007

In the '40s, Avery Brundage, an ambassador to somewhere, came back to Washington after several years abroad, and he couldn't recognize it because there were no social programs. Everything was military. This is part of the foundation of our current economic strategy involving all these pocket wars. It's not just about oil; it's about manufacturing and jobs. One of my friends who is about ten years older than me, said, "You'll never have what we have." We expected to buy a house, change our car every year, and send our kids to college. Now we consider moving out of the house as a career move or life achievement.

AK: Is that why your generation rebelled in the '60s—expectations?

PS: Expectations are oppressive. You were talking about William S. Burroughs. You know, the Hell's Angels became known when Irving Penn did a story on them for Life Magazine. They were mostly average, working class guys. I had two big Hell's Angels experiences: the first was in '55 when my family was driving to Yosemite. Cars were much different then. You could see around the motor—you had to, to be able to look at it and work on it. Now we can go 90 miles per hour in a Toyota Carola and it's smooth and fabulous, and they drive indefinitely. Back then, you had to work on your car at over 100,000 miles. People did what you call top-end jobs, short blocks, and long blocks. Do you know what a short block is? Basically, a short block is when you buy a rebuilt motor and put your own top on. You took your car to the mechanic, and that's what he did. There were services, and there still are, especially for Toyotas because they're so immense, but now you change your valves at 300,000 miles.

So there we are, going through the Mohave Desert with no air conditioning—nobody had air conditioning, unless you had a Cadillac with those swamp coolers. Have you seen those? They look like big old tubes on the outside of the cars. Now they're what Cholos like to have on their low-riders. They're an accessory. It's really weird, that sort of reverse working class elegance. You see it in low-riders and hot rods. It's a sort of uselessness.

The hippies became known almost overnight during the Summer of Love, when they got their big write up in the New York Times. They really only lasted a year, because their publicity killed them, didn't it? Originally, they were a bunch of slackers—university drop outs or middle class kids we'd now call trustafarians—a little bit entitled, a little bit ironic. They only entered into politics when the economy

Hollywood Table designed for Memphis, 1983

generated that freedom. Industrialism provided for new types of jobs. So here we were as a group of kids that A. expected people to be honest and B. to be able to say, “You’re lying,” and not be assassinated,whichis what we forget about the ’50s—the character assassination via red-baiting and other methods. It was awful.

AK: Can you go back to your Hell’s Angels stories? I’m still wondering what happened in Yosemite.

PS: Right, so there we were going through the desert, and there’s group of thirty or forty Hell’s Angels—really quite something, kind of Gaga with their jackets, and the guy who was clearly the leader was wearing some kind of Nazi or Kaiser helmet with a spike—there’s your social signifier. Every time we’d go through a small desert town, like Lone Pine, he would stand up on his motorcycle. They were in-your-face tough guys, bad boys. One of the great comments about hoodlums of any kind is, “If you don’t have any possibilities in life, what could be better than scaring some middle class guy who’s walking towards you on the street?” It was funny because their bikes were so terrible, they’d have to get off at every little town and have a beer just to recover from the vibration of the previous thirty miles. So we would keep passing them, and we’d keep seeing this guy doing this maneuver on his bike.

Then, there was meeting a guy at a little shop around the corner from here, a guy named Dean Lanza who used to paint motorcycles, some of which became props in movies. Everything goes into this protraction of uselessness. They were clearly dangerous if nothing else. Why would you make the geometry of a motorcycle intractable by extended forks and so forth? All of it continually was about absurdity.
So we came along after Mario Savio and Haight Ashbury in San Francisco, when hippies had sort of morphed into Willie Nelson—working class, red neck guys who carried buck knives on their belts. What a weird cross-up! But long hair was still a signifier that got you pulled over by the police.

AK: When you came out of school what were you producing?

PS: I was intrigued by what would now be called conceptual. The teapots morphed into sculptural vehicles that talked about the possibility not the actuality. A lot of that was the furniture with George Sowden and Ettore Sottsass.

AK: Were you aware of what they were doing while you were in school?

PS: I was aware of them in school but didn’t know it. I was enamored with Domus magazine, which didn’t have an ad in it and every photograph was immaculate, though I couldn’t read any of it. I didn’t know what the devil it was about. Then I went to Italy and hung out at Ettore’s office, and he had this little area behind an accordion door, his archive, and I saw all this stuff that I had seen in the magazine! It was like this mother fucker imagined me.

AK: I was wondering what initially attracted you to Italian design. Did you see it as an alternative to American design? Somehow more sophisticated?

PS: Americans are coming from a different landmass, with a much different history. I’ll refer back to something my dad said to me once, “Industry and commerciality have no power and no soul and they are

looking to things that do." When they find it, they vampire-ize it. Ettore was counter culture, as well, and an absurdist in his own way. Overall, Memphis was a reaction to Bauhaus design. The Italian bourgeoisie was not immune to shooting itself in the foot. The chrome and leather thing had gotten out of hand, too.

AK: In the way that American design was getting out of get out of hand, would you say that had already happened in Italy?

PS: I wouldn't say it happened here until now. We've got the Eameses, but there are a whole lot of other people we don't know because they never became name brand. Something happens that continues to ask the question I think you asked: what are things worth, and why am I making this? I am constantly asking, what is this thing, and what is its worth in the spectrum of the world? There is this drive to create absurd things. When I was 20-something and 30-something, we were talking to people in this group, these people in Venice, and I mean Venice here in LA, and the idea was we should make really practical things. It's like the difference in car design and production. You see the prototype and you go, wow! Then you see the product, and you go, what happened? Sometimes I try to make exciting things, and then I think, maybe I'll just put a new top on the engine. Sometimes you have to go with what you know.

AK: It's worth it to create the absurd, and it's worth it to make the everyday. I'm sure it could get frustrating just working on teapots.

PS: We are interested in the exceptional. We are not interested in the mundane. It's hard to say if there are more people interested or there are more people in general. If Eames is the name brand, maybe that's a good thing. It's a question I constantly fight with.

I was reading Juxtapose magazine which started as a counter culture magazine. Do you know my brother, Billy, runs a gallery called La Luz de Jesus in Silver Lake? It was considered the primary purveyor of low-brow or folk art, but Billy basically ran out of artists. What happened to that old guy making windmills in the middle of nowhere that are just so cool you can't stand it? Juxtapose has changed—they ran out of people making stuff. The article I read was on this woman making cakes, so crafting has become a substitute for art and political action.

AK: This goes back to the hippies becoming politically active. What are the politics of the handmade?

PS: Some of them were just total slackers.

AK: It seems that now if someone is politically aware, their knowledge is still just niche. They might read aggressively about a particular social issue, health care reform, for example, but that's all one person can manage.

PS: It's hard to read about everything. We are inundated with minutia. There's no big picture. How does it interlock? It does not *not* interlock. Our ideas about military manufacturing are symptomatic of the situation.

AK: It's hard to piece the news together, so we lack an integrated world view, and maybe it's impossible to create or operate a system without one.

PS: The real problem is probably dealt by the handful of people running corporations. The truth is more fantastic. We saw the oligarchy in the '50s slander people. So people pulled back and took their political activity into other realms—food, for example. The trouble is that we have this vision of America as told by Jimmy Stewart, Frank Kapan, and Gary Cooper that everyone comes around, instead these CEOs and politicians are actually horrible people, but what are you going to do?

AK: Do you feel that you are representing an ideal way of life as a working artist? The model of your life, designing and building by hand, seems so important right now. In the midst of all this information that exists in giant servers, you're able to focus on making real things, and you open your doors to your community as an employer and to sell your work directly.

PS: With in this orbit, there's control. Some part of that goes out as a message about a way to live which may be felt by the community. There's also a frustration for me, these things are about quality, but basically, we are a bunch of hedonists.

AK: Maybe true. Down the street, there's a new cafe selling great five dollar coffee, but I think you're really doing something different here.

PS: It is bizarre how, despite all of these subtractions from quality of life, we live longer, maybe not better, but longer. We as middle class kids—I'm assuming you're middle class—have some discernment, and we have to look critically at whatever we are consuming and how it's delivered. When you think about the diner in the '20s and '30s... people didn't have a lot. You didn't expect to die with anything. It was an even exchange: you took this to live and gave this to live. There wasn't the industrial infrastructure we have today, which leads to so much error. We might be paying for delivery more than anything.

Purple Mexican Bauhaus Biscuit on a Raft, 1977

When I finished school, people had a different kind of leisure time. Everybody was renting those little places in Venice as studios. Everybody being twenty people or so. I looked around there, and Adrian Saxe let me rent a studio in Westlake near 1st Street and Beverly Boulevard, then he helped me get a job at a pottery shop called Franciscan. Part of the initial fantasy was being a working potter. Stoneware was in fashion. Being a form of studio potter was romantic, but it didn't look like it was the future. It wasn't where the high-end was.

AK: Would you say the interest in pottery during the '60s and '70s faded out at any point? Right now, Artnews is coming out with an article on the rise of ceramics. There have been several retrospective exhibitions at the major museums this year—Ken Price at the Met, for example, and Arlene Shechet at Sikkema Jenkins.

PS: What you're talking about is snobbery. Besides the finish-fetish stuff, the one thing New York didn't have that California did was ceramics and that gave us a certain authenticity.

AK: People want unique objects, and it's affordable sculpture.

PS: It's got a lot of atavistic qualities—earth, wind, fire.

AK: It's also gaining some prestige in contemporary art because some painters have been using it profusely. It's becoming associated with painting, or it's a medium painters love.

PS: Visitors to clay.

AK: Throwing a pot is a very wonderful, soothing experience, but there has been a flood of art pottery that sells for $200 to $300 in stores.

PS: Well, I've been doing that for thirty years! Are we talking about dilettantes? We're talking about price structure. In the '60s, Peter Voulkos was showing that, if it's art, it's a thousand dollars, but if it's a cup, it's fifty cents. We went through a period of what was called the Middle Ages or the Dark Ages, and it was

step backward, it had a lot to do with the nature of landmass and the feudal economy… talk about minutia. Why can't this be easy?

AK: I know I'm not making it easy. We don't have to go back to the beginning of time.

PS: Do you know about the guild structure? You had your substrates of apprentice, journey men, and maestro. That was the fortress, the studio. Now the art world is broken down to such a degree that qualification isn't clear. We have artists that make ceramics by punching a slab of clay. You know, babies like to look at their shit. So we need to bring in the ideas of the craft movement of the '60s, which was the biggest step backwards since the Middle Ages.
I've learned one thing and that's anything worth making will cut you to the chase. Anything people have always needed is worth making industrially—furniture, clothing, food—and the things they now really need like cars, phones, with the designer maker. Anything industrially made can be made inexpensively. Production cost is a tiny fragment of retail. Dealer prep is a racquet and look at the degree of advertising. It's all built into the price so the guys at the top are making record profits.

AK: So your fantasy is that people can buy necessities at a fair price?

PS: No, but that's a nice one! My fantasy is that people are trying to say, what's left for me? Because we've already decided that economics is the exchange of goods and services, which means that you and I have a relationship. I milked a cow, and you bought the milk, and in return you wove a blanket that keeps me warm and so on. You don't need pots—plastic works better, sorry! And if you don't like plastic, you can get an industrial made pot from Ikea. Jesus, their pasta bowls are very chic and only three dollars, and they're real clay—and not only are they real clay, they've been on a boat. How much did that cost to make, three cents? That's what we're up against. We could go on and complain about bureaucratic structures. I look at homeless people, and I think to myself, "I understand. You've eliminated a lot of paperwork for yourself."

Truck Plate, 1999

AK: And updating, in terms of technology, which is put upon us. Money is almost completely abstract. It's certainly invisible. I haven't felt very comfortable with that since 2008. Who isn't one step away from losing their home?

PS: The minute I got out high school, I grew a beard because the administration wouldn't allow us to grow beards in my era. I really did get harassed. I rode a motorcycle and got over fifty tickets by the time I was 20, because I got pulled over all the time. The upshot of it was, one day when I started doing metalwork—in the 80s when I started doing it, most of the industry was in Burbank—it was early and the factory wasn't open so I went to a little coffee shop with a counter to wait, and there was a guy sitting there, a real archetype redneck, and he turns to me, clearly wanting to talk, and I thought, here it comes, expecting an angry declamation pointed at me, but he said all he needed was one financial blow, and he would be on the streets. It was the complete opposite from what I expected. That's what I'm talking about. You go, wait

a minute, this whole thing could unravel. Our comfortable lives can go up in smoke. But that's the difference between this recession and the last, and I think it's the computer.

AK: I read a lot of Heidegger in architecture school so sometimes I feel like a Luddite, but my take on technology is that some is great, some is bad. Sometimes you the feeling you're making, when you can observe the transfer of energy from your body through the tool to the design.

PS: It asks the question, "What qualifies as handmade?" How do we define handmade? How involved to we need to be? Tools are part of production. Do you know what a mill is?

AK: I used a CNC mill as an architecture student.
PS: Calder is great because he talked about how his sculptures were influenced by what he saw as a kid growing up in Connecticut—the early industrial machines running off water power. Factories had a shaft with pulleys in the center that ran all of the machines of the water wheel. One of those machines was a mill, the key piece in the Industrial Revolution, which is what you saw in school although yours probably just looked like a box. It's basically a motor that holds a tool with an x,y coordinate. A computer now controls the coordinates and changes the tools for you if you want.

AK: Do you think you could get into working with plastics and 3D printing?

PS: Why not? One of the reasons why I started and stuck to ceramics was the ease of prototyping. At one point I had three garages full of rejected parts that I loved but couldn't use because they weren't exactly right for the project.

AK: Do you prototype your metals?

PS: They are unique in that sense. We got into a debate with the French tax export because they had to classify me, and either they were going to tax me on everything I'd ever made or we could call it all prototypes. In sculpture, technically anything under an edition of seven is a one-off. You could make arguments all over the place. Even for cars, sometimes one is a lemon…. unless it's a Ferrari.

AK: So you were working on motorcycles when you started working with metal?

PS: The motorcycles were key in visualizing metal. We were working on them, because we had to, to make them run. One of the guys I worked with was a Cockney who had moved to Sunland, which is where all the meth houses were. Anyway, Doug Stead was his name. He was fantastic.

We were rebuilding the motor on a Norton that I had, and he said we need a gauge, which was called "top-dead-center"—that means when the piston is top, dead, and center, you set the points. Then he said he didn't know where the tool was and started rummaging around the garage. Then he said… we'll get a nail and the cellophane from a cigarette package. So he set the darn thing with a nail.

AK: That's one definition of an artist. The artist makes his tools.

PS: That's what we used to say in school: The master doesn't choose his brush. He's master of any brush. But anyway, it started on the first kick. Unbelievable.

PETER SHIRE has exhibited his work in numerous solo shows in galleries and museums nationally and internationally in New York, Los Angeles, Milan, Paris, and Tokyo. Recent solo exhibitions include: Peter Shire: Tea for Two Hundred at the Santa Monica Museum of Art (2013); Practically Absurd: Art & Design by Peter Shire at the Louisiana State University Museum of Art (2013); and Peter Shire: Chairs at Frank Lloyd Gallery, Santa Monica (2007). In 2013, Shire's work was also included in Made in Space at Gavin Brown's Enterprise in New York and David Kordansky Gallery's Grapevine in Los Angeles. His work belongs to the permanent collections of the Art Institute of Chicago, the Brooklyn Museum of Art, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Museum of Arts and Design, New York, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and the Seattle Museum of Art, among others.