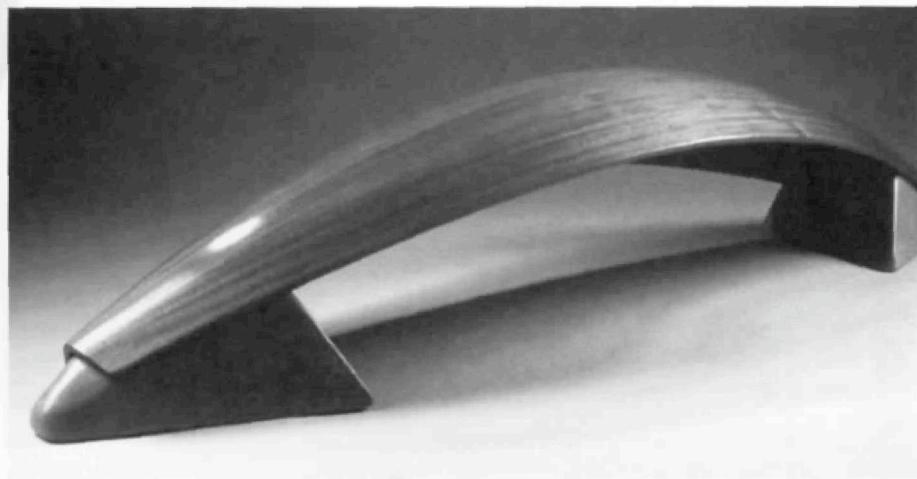


Photos courtesy Houston Center for Contemporary Craft

Jennifer Anderson, *Chaise*, 2004Matthias Pliessnig, *Shell*, 2003

## When Opposites Attract: The Houston Center for Contemporary Craft

### *Curv-iture*

The Houston Center for Contemporary Craft  
June 17 – September 4, 2005

Reviewed by Thomas Rusnak

The Houston Center for Contemporary Craft poses a challenge to anyone who would want to argue that “contemporary” and “craft” exist as two different and mutually exclusive worlds. The label “contemporary” in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is more often than not related to mass consumption or mass customization, or a self-conscious style built around product lust—anything other than “craft.” With few exceptions in our Manchurian consumer culture, new knowledge equals 24-hour news, hunger equals fast food, depression equals Prozac. But craft takes time and expresses the singularity of the individual.

*Contemporary* carries with it much modernist baggage, engendering visions of the inorganic and the machine-made, while *craft* still evokes themes of honesty, authenticity, grace, and resonance—the human elements of design. The Houston Center for Contemporary Craft (HCCC) has adopted this interdenominational frolicking between life and art as its mission, manifesting the hybrid zone where art, execution, and process go together and are displayed in a qualitative unity. I would suspect that fellow travelers from Ruskin to Rauschenberg would appreciate and endorse the unorthodoxy that makes the HCCC, in my view, one of the most important educational and exhibition spaces in Houston.

In the HCCC any and all preconceived concerns about a split between life and art are made inconsequential. One is invited

to simply embrace the humanity of form through a combination of imaginative design, technical proficiency, and the unlikely juxtaposition of materials. The HCCC refers to itself as a “contemporary living museum...where loom and laser, anvil and lathe, computer and kiln ignite the imagination and bring new vision to life.” Given this kind of mission, contemporary craft has the potential to transcend the mere translation of our culture and to actually transform our cultural values. The attraction here is the demonstration of the pleasurable journey from raw material and idea to refined art and resonance, the creation of a cultural non-fiction.

A case in point, “Curv-iture,” on view at the center from June 17 to September 4, 2005, features a stunning collection of furniture that “celebrates the curve.” Sponsored by the Furniture Society, the exhibit features 35 original pieces selected from a field of 476 that were submitted from eight countries. “Curv-iture” was the theme exhibit for the 8<sup>th</sup> annual Furniture Society Conference held at Savannah College of Art in 2004.

Pleasingly out of phase, the passion in the exhibited work resides far from the preconceived or mass-consumed. There are two distinct qualitative divisions of work in the show: the beautiful, representing classically crafted objects that demonstrate a mastery of the hand (and that might be better suited for the Bayou Bend Collection); and the sublime, spiritually rich examples that challenge the imagination and cultivate the soul. Industrial felt, glass, forged steel, waxed twine, neoprene, concrete, digital imagery, milk paint, and cottonwood branches seem an unlikely list of building materials for the creation of fine art furniture,

yet this odd lot combines courageously in essays on the curve that achieve exactly that end.

Matthias Pliessnig’s *Shell* is an extraordinary piece made from concrete, mahogany, and a phenomenal curve; the fusion of these three ingredients creates a sense that one is not simply an observer, but a participant who is viscerally, tactilely, and emotionally engaged. For me it was like the first time I heard music over a set of headphones: A chill ran down my back, and I felt the hair stand up on my arms and the back of my neck. That was what happened when I walked into the Asher Gallery and saw Pliessnig’s work. The elegance with which these discordant materials work together is extraordinarily subtle for such a large work, which is united in a sublime curve that unifies and balances the entire composition.

Several other pieces in this exhibit affected me in a similar way. Jennifer Anderson’s magnificently simple *Chaise* made of industrial felt, Baltic birch plywood, and steel cables—a comfortable great-great grandchild of Le Corbusier’s classic from the 1920s—was crafted with awe-inspiring elegance. Equally interesting but more whimsical is Jake Antonelli’s *Daydream*, a wildly organic lounge constructed of ash and yellowheart, tied together with waxed twine using a surgeon’s care. The piece had me thinking of what might happen if Frank Gehry’s bent wood furniture were to meet up with Charles Eames’s leg splint in one of those synergies where  $1+1=3$ . Any of these pieces could serve as a poster child for this exhibit, with their resonant curves melding disparate and unlikely materials to create furniture fusion.

Most of us, from designers with

academic credentials to designers of the everyday, have been mistakenly taught that creative ideas equate to risks rather than advancements. The artists in the “Curv-iture” exhibition were fortuitously absent for that lesson. The work in this exhibit does not represent problem-solving in the traditional sense, as an essentially conservative undertaking that accepts given parameters and proceeds in a linear fashion until a solution is reached or time has run out. PROBLEM: Who is God...God is love...love is blind...therefore God is blind...time’s up! The work presented in “Curv-iture” by contrast is affirmed by a non-linear process in which familiar definitions—chair = four legged thing we sit on, or chair = place of repose—are deliberately de-familiarized; opportunities are exposed, transformed, translated, and reified, resulting in a change of heart about what was previously considered a fixed text. The entire “Curv-iture” exhibition communicates, and we should feel fortunate the work lets us participate in the conversation.

The Houston Center for Contemporary Craft provides a forum for the exhibition, education, and communication about the how and the why: How in the world did the artist/craftsperson do that and why in the world do I feel so compelled to embrace it? Just as craft eventually found its place in response to the industrial revolution, contemporary craft is finding its place in our rapidly changing, information-driven consumer culture. Houston has a “living museum” to promote the cultural legacy of craft, while at the same time providing a forum for the equal exchange of ideas between the public and the artist, between life and art. ■