

Over coffee and the hand-built omelettes of Donna Shire, Peter Shire, Ryan Conder, and I talk shop, LA history, and we daydream of a Malibu with a more romantic crowd in the water. Breakfast is in the courtyard at Peter's studio, a colourful, garden-lined outdoor space with funky vessels of cacti and colour-coated stairs and handrails. What's outside the studio is as considered as what's inside the studio, it's a complete universe. Indoors, brightly speckled hand-painted toolboxes sit alongside newly polished stainless steel geometric trees – both of which are tucked between utilitarian Shire-core shop tables and a small dining bar where Peter hosts guests for espresso or tea. Over the last 30 plus years, Peter has pioneered a funky,

# PETER SHIRE

## The mayor of Los Angeles

INTERVIEW BY MATT PAWESKI AND RYAN CONDER  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY YE RIN MOK

technical, visionary path for furniture and functional objects. His rigorous sculpture studio has produced some of the most iconic works of the last three decades. His community works have shaped the visual language of Los Angeles through public projects, both big and small, all the while proliferating domestic wares under the name of EXP Pottery to coveted homes worldwide. Built from an array of interests from the common to the niche, the ugly to the hot, these likely contradictions have produced a refreshingly unique body of work. Peter is an icon for the city in which he was born and raised. A crazy cultural mash-up, full of do-it-yourself professionalism, glitzy high-enders, and a near perfect climate. You can see all of these elements in the work he makes, they are as woven into his material as his multi-stripped wardrobe.







Frankie Urenia and my brother Billy invented the Echo Park Ducks. They were a football team made up of the local Echo Park guys and the cholos, who played in Elysian Park every Thanksgiving. They called it the 'Turkey Bowl'. In 1973 I made athletic shirts with typical athletic block lettering.

**Ryan Conder:** Did you play too?

I was their mascot. I spent my time in the studio.

**Matt Paweski:** So you would have been 26? Were you done with school by then?

25. And yes. I shared a studio with Adrian Saxe for a year, and I worked at Franciscan Pottery as a design lab go-pher. They always said 'go-phor-it'... So I left and started my own studio, that puts me at 25.

**Ryan:** Did it all start with clay?

Yes, it was clay in the beginning. Starting at 15. Seriously. I did furniture right after I graduated art school, but it didn't have the immediacy of clay.

**Ryan:** When did you first go to Italy?

Late 1979, I think.

**Ryan:** Was that with Ettore Sottsass?

Yes, I had met him in LA.

**Ryan:** How did he find your work?

Through *Wet* magazine. He loved wacky magazines. When I went to Italy the first time we did a show in his office. I took a bunch of teapots. The show turned out to be on his filing cabinets. Lots of people saw it oddly enough... I was supposed to work with Alchimia, and they sent me down to Naples to stay with a friend of theirs, Ugo Murano, who was just wonderful and I always think of him. The ceramics factory was run by this guy who looked like a miniature Mussolini, although I don't know how big Mussolini was. Alchimia was just too disorganised, and Barbara called me up about six months later and said as follows: 'Peter, we are leaving Alchimia, will you join us?'

**Matt:** Barbara?

Barbara Radice. She and Ettore saw a lamp I did at my house, so they knew I was interested in furniture also.

**Matt:** Was it the column lamp in the shop?

That's the very one! That piece seems so odd to me now.

**Matt:** It has a roughness to it, a simplicity. It's far less polished than your other works. It reminds me of Donald Judd's early work, when he was still hand building and painting with a brush. It's much more intimate I think.

**Ryan:** So when you were in Italy, were you building prototypes? What was your working process?

At the time I was in Italy refining and perhaps adjusting the colours, that was what I did there. Of course the memorable part was meeting everyone and having lunch at the Bar Jamaica. I would draw a thumbnail sketch on a piece I was proposing and we'd borrow a blueprint machine from Donna's brother. I'd send blueprints with 20 to 30 pieces per page, all numbered. When the pieces were selected, I'd make my funky scale drawings and then one of the guys over there would shepherd the project and make my drawings work. The first year I was asked to do a vanity, which I did, although when I had been in Italy, I had had a vision of a ridiculous table held up by cables. So I sent a drawing of that also. Perhaps something about that idea having been pulled out of the Italian air made them respond and choose it over the vanity. That was the Brazil Table.

**Matt:** Did it turn out as you expected?

Just after that Ettore and Barbara came to dinner at my house (with Leonard Koren), and Ettore was in one of his moods and kept telling me that I had made a mistake, and that because of the way the point of the wedge rested on the base, the piece would fall over. I kept telling him the tension wires would hold it up. And he kept saying it would parallelogram even with the wires. Before he got to the house I made a quick model of the rear end using three pieces of firewood and some wires, which I tightened by sticking pencils through them and twisting. It worked! When he got to the house we started drinking wine and we all got in such a good mood I forgot to show him... Well the table base got made by actually burying the point in the base to create a structural connection. Ettore was very funny that night. As we sat in my garden, where I had planted nine types of melon, he said, 'Memphis is like this garden. It's a garden but not a garden.' Then a little Piper Cub plane flew over the house with



its red, white, and green night flying lights on. He looked up and said, 'Look, it has the colours of the Italian flag, just for me!'

**Matt:** Before you went to Italy, were you making furniture for yourself, or for your house?

The first piece of furniture I made was a credenza, which Ricky Swallow has now. Then there were a couple of tables that I made that were modelled after what my dad had built. I always made furniture with my father. We made case goods for components and stuff like that.

**Ryan:** So you started making furniture with your dad?

It's hard to remember when I started helping him. Now, in my memory, it seems like there was never a time that the patio or the carport wasn't converted into a workshop. I know the first time I went out to a job with him was when I was nine or ten.

**Ryan:** Your father built the house you live in, right? Were you around when he was building it?

The house was finished in 1950. Perhaps I was two or three years old. I'm sure I would have been around during the construction, but I have no memory of it.

**Ryan:** Did you like growing up here?

The question should be, did I like growing up! Or did I grow up? Memories of that era in Los Angeles are great. LA was so different then. On my street there were no cars. There were lots of us kids, and we would play ball after dinner out in the street until it got dark. In the summer we'd get pieces of cardboard and sled on the dry, weedy hillside and all that other stuff kids do in the summer. No play dates.

**Ryan:** Do you think growing up in a modernist house and living with the formality and restraint of mid-century modernism contributed to your work?

This is constantly on my mind, especially because Donna and I are living in the same house now. This could probably be the subject of a complete thesis paper...

**Matt:** Was your grandfather a carpenter?

Both of my grandfathers were cabinet-makers. On my mum's side my grandfather ran a cabinet shop and store outfitter named L&E Emmanuel in San Francisco. And my dad's father was trained through the guild system in England.

**Ryan:** Your father was an artist right?

Yes, he was a natural artist. He graduated from Pratt in 1932.

**Ryan:** Did he work throughout his whole life?

Although his day job was carpentry, with his natural ability he could simply do something when he had a real need to, and when he had something to say. The works he left behind were all important moments for him. He didn't have the need to create products or work in series. Did you ever see his pictures of surfers in Malibu?

**Ryan:** No, but I'd like to. There were probably only five guys out in the water! It was probably just Billy Al Bengston and Ken Price out there paddling around...

You can always wish, Mickey Dora was there.

**Ryan:** I met him when he was older, he is definitely the best Malibu surfer ever.



**Matt:** What were you into when you were in high school?

In junior high school I was the foreman of my handicrafts class, busy making gearshift and dashboard knobs for all my friends' parents' cars. They were made of clear plastic with coloured glue. By the time I got to high school, through a series of manipulations with my ceramics teacher Anthony Scaccia, I managed to do eight hours a day, five and a half days a week.

**Ryan:** The car culture was a big influence on your work right?

Cars are the love object of Southern California. There was a whole group of young hot rod guys all around. But it was Bob Hayes in particular, he lived two houses up the street. He was a real

working class hero. He was a pro bowler. He was a metal specialist at Lockheed who worked on all the super-classified stuff. He loved his wife and kids and never swore. He had a litany of cars and they all had to be fast – his special order Dodge Hemi Challenger was so fast he raced the Lockheed helicopter from Burbank and won! He often took me aside to show me how to finish paint and how the motors in the cars worked.

**Matt:** When did you start working with metal? Really it was in 1980, when I did a show and needed metal parts. I was going to make the Brazil Table with the cables. My friend Larry Garcia introduced me to his brother-in-law Dan McGinley, and his three brothers and cousins. They were all radical metal guys in Burbank who grew up with metal shavings in their diapers. They taught me a lot of techniques and proper metal procedure. I had already had an introduction to metal work; years before when I was into motorcycles I had met Greg Duvall and his father George, and I had helped them in their shop.



**Matt:** Are your paint jobs and the finishes all industrially based techniques? I'm thinking about the dots and all the speckles, they're like automotive undercoating...

The metal work got made in Burbank and I needed to finish the parts. At that time Burbank was packed with shops that did work for the aircraft industry. They all advertised 'military-spec' in their phone book listings. I wanted to do hammer tone, and wrinkle and all that crazy stuff. Instead the painters showed me this coating they did for durability. It was a controlled spatter, but the spatter they did was the same colour: blue on blue or grey on grey. When I asked if they could do red, yellow and orange together, they said, 'No, it won't work, it just won't.' And I told them, 'You make me a sample, I will pay for it.' And I came back a couple of days later, and they said, 'Oh, it looks really good!' Maybe it's a bit like pointillism. I thought of it as those extra large half tone

dots in the Sunday funnies. It blends the colour optically...

**Matt:** What drew you to the hammer tone and the wrinkle, those kind of odd, 'off' finishes? First of all, they are all sort of grotesque. Also we were always looking for some kind of edge, some kind of weird material that nobody else had got. Some really hot stuff, nylon that glows in the dark and sneaks up and kisses you when you are not looking. It seems that I am constantly dealing with things that offend me, and that I'm embarrassed to admit that I love. That's sort of an ongoing story for me. Part of that story is to take those things and bend them around until they are really beautiful.

**Matt:** What kind of sculpture did you tend to look at? We've been talking about furniture quite a bit, but many of your works are not furniture at all. They deal with legs, and certain heights, and a flat plain with a perpendicular plain, but they are more than furniture. You're using functional elements as a working format...

The '60s was an amazing decade within the whole 20th century. I was at the Chouinard Art Institute between 1966 and 1969, and we were gaga for Plexiglass. Larry Bell did those coated glass boxes. They seem to encapsulate it all. A stupefyingly simple shape that you could see through, and that had encapsulated nothing but itself.

I saw the Ken Price show at Mizuno Gallery when I was still in high school, and the cups where so important. The thing that impressed, inspired me the most and became a real model for me were his drawings. He could draw! There was a lot of [Jean] Arp, [Josef] Albers, Bauhaus, Marianne Brandt; the first time in Italy I found Fortunato Depero to be a profound hero for me. As said in *Casablanca*, 'Round up all the usual suspects!'

There are so many things that we see everyday driving around or looking at magazines that find their way into our work. One might say everything is an influence... The artist's art-





ist is another great factor, someone who's not necessarily famous, yet they have as big of an influence as the more emblematic guys. Doug Edge is one for me. Among the things that he did was a Plexiglass chair with a high-resolution silkscreen of an atomic bomb going off. That brought it all together for me...

**Matt:** I'm going to dig up Doug Edge, he's got the best name.

**Ryan:** I want to see this guy too! What about Ron Nagle?

Ron Nagle first came into view in late 1969 in a book called *Objects USA*. The work they showed phenomena-ised me. It was so great. What topped it off and totally kicked my ass was this weird photo where his portrait was supposed to be. The picture was of this guy that looked like he had been run over by a bus, with knocked out teeth and a lopsided grin. To have the nerve to do that showed me that he was totally cazzo. I have been radically inspired by his work ever since. Ongoing.

**Ryan:** Tell us about how you got all these materials, these nose cones, and all these bits of things that are sitting out here in the yard?

It's the disintegration of the American industrial infrastructure. It's all unused scrap.

**Ryan:** You've been working with scrap throughout your career, even the Italian laminate? That's because I'm frugal.

**Matt:** So you've always been building based on the bits you can get? That must have a huge amount to do with how things go together. The fragments determine how things are made?

Look at the scrap closely and you will see that it is new material. Even the Abet Laminati that was broken and tossed out was new, and I could use small pieces that would have cost a fortune if I had to buy a whole sheet for a small part. It's about imagining things that weren't there before (in this case things that people no longer valued) and transmuting them: imagination over bean-counting. Besides we must recycle.

**Ryan:** LA is an even more important centre right now, what artists and designers do you notice?

John Mason, he was amazing to us. He is a legend in the flesh. Ron Nagle, even Frank Gehry knows my name when I see him. There are so many young men and women that are

eager to do something important that it's a really heady time. One of the things that makes it heady is that the money is so crazy. Some of these guys are making millions of dollars and driving Rolls Royces. Well it's like the old t-shirt that said, 'Line them up against the wall and shoot 'em'. A lot of what is worthwhile will get sorted out in time.

**Matt:** Did you have mentors?

I stayed in Echo Park to be true to where I came from, and where I come from, and for my studio to be my sanctuary. My competition is with myself, and with actually doing things. My real mentors were my high school teacher Anthony Scaccia and my dad, and very often Adrian Saxe. Those guys were really there for me. A perverse, perhaps reverse mentor was my mother's good taste.

**Matt:** It's probably your mother's good taste that steered you mostly.

It's because if she said something, then I knew that I had to do the opposite. We all have our demons. It seems that it's worked quite well. Haha. My wife has very good taste, also we have a working relationship.

**Matt:** That's a rule I think.

**Ryan:** I thought that was really nice to hear because there is so much talk about good taste, and I feel like especially in our world right now, there is way too much good taste.

Sacrificing everything for good taste, except good taste... Makes someone pretty dry toast. That's what we've been talking about all through this, of rebelling, shoving things that don't go together onto the same plane... And generally transforming the profanity all around us into something sacred and even exciting... Something that not only infuses life into the work, but brings the work to life. Well... That's Memphis in a nutshell, the quest for feeling and not empty manners. You have to be true to what you believe. Where you came from. To what turns you on. To what excites you. Even if it's running into a wall head on, I just keep on...