

INNER LIFE

Power of the palette

At his Echo Park home, artist Peter Shire indulges his visual curiosity to create a riot of colors and shapes.

November 08, 2007 | David A. Keeps | Times Staff Writer

A chair, Peter Shire says, is "more than just where we put our butts."

For the 59-year-old artist, born and still living and working in Echo Park, a chair is also a dialogue between human anatomy and industrial architecture.

"It is as individual as a table is communal," he says. "A chair is a symbol of economic stature that goes back to when kings sat on thrones and common folk sat on the ground."

Shire himself is perched on a polished concrete floor in the newly refurbished lower level of his 1937 home, which he describes as "California bungalow gone wrong." Surrounding him, like a swarm of Mondrian-colored Tinkertoy constructions, are the sculptural seats he designed for "Chairs," a new exhibition at the Frank Lloyd Gallery in Santa Monica.

Upstairs, the 1,400-square-foot space where Shire and his wife, Donna, have lived for more than two decades is a similar riot of color and texture. This is what the home of a working -- some would say obsessively prodigious -- artist looks like.

The original stone fireplace with weeping mortar is painted lavender, complemented with a mint mantle set against a crimson wall. Bookcases hold volumes on art and the ceramic teapots that Shire has made since his days at Chouinard, the famed and now-defunct Los Angeles art school. Cats sprawl on the kitchen floor, a crazy quilt of 1950s-flavored green, gray and pink linoleum tile. Shire's hand-built furniture -- Douglas fir cabinets with vibrant teal-painted details from the 1980s, and more recent steel and glass tables -- are layered with paintings and drawings.

"Organized chaos is the artist's inevitability," Shire says.

His spouse puts it another way.

"The house is overrun with art," she says with an indulgent smile. "There are even sketchbooks in the bathroom."

Shire, whose nearby studio is nearly five times the size of his home, just grins.

"Donna says we can't have people over for dinner," he says before taking over his wife's part in the dialogue. "All our friends are designers. What will they think of the way we live?"

"It's a comfortable, lived-in space," says Adrian Saxe, Shire's former classmate and now a professor of art at UCLA. "There are some artists' houses that are so tricked out, God knows where they sit down and enjoy themselves."

Shire's younger brother, who owns the Billy Shire Fine Arts gallery in Culver City and the Soap Plant/Wacko in Silver Lake, says the house is something of a design laboratory.

"Peter has mastered so many materials and industrial processes and used them in his home in a way that feels warm and organic," Billy Shire says. "It strikes a balance between looking crazy and being functional."

Much of Shire's decor is a bit of both. He splattered paint on old medical lamps and dressed a "funked-up sofa that we bought at a garage sale" with a slipcover that resembles Joseph's amazing Technicolor dreamcoat. He devised a bookshelf with steel wheels that rolls away from the wall so that he can access his furnace room. He even cut and welded his own curtain rods, which are powder-coated in fire-engine red.

These creative touches are not immediately evident; it takes time to pick them out in the presence of so many shapes, patterns and colors. Though he is a designer, the artist in residence is clearly more interested in exploring his restless visual curiosity than creating tasteful interior tableaux.

"My wife is Japanese, and I share her cultural belief that there is no separation between art and craft. They are all one, and a daily living experience is worthy of aesthetic consideration," Shire says. "But the reason that certain aspects of my life, such as my house, are not caressed is that I am totally focused on my work."

IN a career that has spanned five decades, Peter Shire has become well known as a potter, furniture designer and site-specific sculptor whose civic work includes installations in Elysian Park and Union Station.

"His work is very informed by craft, which is problematic for people who want artists to bare their souls and weird everybody out," Saxe says. "And as a designer, he is more influenced by Miro and Calder than Eames."

Fascinated with clay at an early age, Shire started taking ceramic lessons from a bohemian instructor who lived in a downtown Victorian house with Asian bridges, African artifacts and Mexican Day of the Dead figures in the fern garden. After high school, Shire attended Chouinard.

"I can draw well, but I am not a natural draftsman or a painter," he says. "I am a maker of things, a hand-skills guy. So ceramics was my romantic vision. I wanted to be a potter wearing funky sandals and an apron."

He spent much of the 1970s following in the tradition of Gertrud Natzler, making elegant, footed compotes with rich organic glazes. Even then, he was obsessed with bright solid colors. He found that expression in furniture, constructing a group of deck chairs made out of canvas and wooden frames that looked like giant Popsicle sticks.

In the late 1970s, young artists in the fashion and design industries were galvanized by the pop music phenomenon known as New Wave. The genre traded in the safety-pinned garbage bags and angry guitars of punk rock for fluorescent architectural clothes and futuristic synthesizers.

It also sparked a visual language that was used in marketing, advertising and product packaging. In Los Angeles, the bible of that look was the short-lived *Wet* magazine, which often featured Shire's work.

The graphic elements of the style were a collage of design-driven art movements including Bauhaus, Deco, Dada and Constructivism jazzed up with the retro-cool of Jet Age advertising and the newly emerging industrial style known as High Tech. Architects and interior designers led by the Milan-based Ettore Sottsass deployed this vocabulary of shapes, materials and colors into an international movement known as the Memphis Group.

"They were the people that defined postmodernism as it applies to decorative arts," says Peter Loughrey, owner of Los Angeles Modern Auctions. "And Peter Shire was one of the only American members of the group."

According to Lois Boardman, the former director of the California Design exhibitions, Shire's distinctive work "vibrates with the colors of Los Angeles." If Sottsass were the acknowledged master of Italian refinement, Shire, who worked with the group in Milan, was the "robust American."

"Peter is to L.A. design and sculpture what Ed Ruscha is to painting," says architect Marco Zanini, a member of the Memphis Group who also worked at Shire's Echo Park studio. "And Peter's house is the image of him."

Memphis took its greatest inspiration from early Modernist design, overlaid with unlikely, absurd combinations of color and materials once considered tacky, such as Formica.

"The Bauhaus notion was that design that is honest to the materials and the process will cause people to have honest and better lives," Shire says.

He tells a story that illustrates why his house is such an honest reflection of who he is and what he does: "Ettore Sottsass built a famous bookshelf with slanted shelves. Sottsass always said he designed it because the books fall over anyway. Just suppose you're sitting at home smoking your pipe looking at your perfectly stacked books in the wall unit and your wife is out having an affair. What good does it do being that organized?"

Sottsass and the Memphis Group were adamant that theirs was design for the people, Shire says.

But its cost -- and the sophistication required to digest it -- made it fashionable largely for the upper class. The amusing, often cartoon style burned brightly but briefly in the Reagan years, fading in the early '90s.

SHIRE'S artistic sensibility was forged in the heat of post-World War II Modernism.

"I was a red-diaper baby," he says, referring to his Jewish parents' Communist views. His father, Henry, was a talented illustrator who worked as a carpenter, "the kind of guy who could go into the Van Keppel and Green showroom, look at a table, go outside and make a drawing and come home and build it."

In 1949, Shire's father commissioned Modernist architect Joseph Van Der Kar to design a modest wood and glass, indoor-outdoor home for a hillside lot in an underdeveloped area of Echo Park not far from where Shire lives today. At that time, a house between 900 and 1,800 square feet for two adults and two children was, Shire says, "a moral imperative -- part of the American dream." Growing up in a Modernist homestead did not allow for sentimentality.

"It was a machine for living with a very specific spatial arrangement," he says. "And my parents' aesthetic decisions had a sense of snobbery. There was no question that a lot of what was out there at the time, like Eichler homes, were kitsch to them. My dad's great comment was, "Don't mistake quaint for quality."

Shire and his younger brother watched their father build clothes-drying cabinets and tool sheds. The kids learned to swing a hammer at an early age.

"We had a woodpile in the garage, and I built a De Stijl birdhouse with a sloped roof and a red stripe on the side," he says, referring to the 1920s design movement.

Like most kids of the '50s, he was obsessed with comics, Mad magazine, soap box derbies, pinstriped motorcycles and hot rods with tuck-and-roll upholstery, all of which would later surface in his streamlined shapes and candy-colored palette.

"Peter is a California boy," Saxe says. "There is no way in hell he would do the work he does if he grew up in Pittsburgh or Paris."

--

It is apparent in the way that he has furnished his home -- "a mix between ranch and New England, if it had gables," Shire says.

"My parents would say that it's a carpenter's house -- the original small-time developers -- and there are all sorts of things that are goofy."

Take the view: The corner living room window, which should have a killer view, overlooks the street, while the kitchen has an enviable panorama of hills and downtown. Shire added a deck with a stairway down to a garden filled with fruit trees, sculptures and Memphis-style storage sheds for his ceramics.

The type of man who can turn life's lemons into pink lemonade, Shire relies more on his imagination than his checkbook. Over the years, the house has become furnished with his prototypes and other people's castoffs.

"There was such great stuff in the trash that is now collectible," he says. "And when you didn't have anything, how cool were they? We'd bring them home and because of the sparseness of the house, they took on a meaning, they started to glow and throb in the room."

Enamored of juxtaposition, he placed his in-laws' old upright piano near a rainbow sherbet-colored TV cabinet he built in the '80s. In the bedroom, where breezes flutter the sheer panels of red, orange and purple, the ceiling fan has painted blades, and a post-revolutionary American dresser sits beside an off-

the-shelf Waterloo metal tool chest, commonly found in machine shops, except this one is sprayed with blue, orange and yellow flecks.

Paint, Shire says, "is the wonder child, all you need to change stuff and give it a completely different identity." Though the colors are uncommonly bold, he insists that the shades inside and out his house aren't that radical.

"They're very East Coast," he says. " I was in Washington, D.C., this year and we were walking around, and I could look in people's windows and see forest green and deep, rich red colors with white trim. I use that technique with hard white trim and ceilings, but my colors are cleaner."

His bedroom, for instance, is "my version of an Hermes scarf -- orangy gold, maroon and chartreuse," Shire says. "I'm not a minimal guy."