

# Peter Shire: *Naked is the Best Disguise*

The very best of Los Angeles's bad taste, says Andrew

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By Andrew Berardini

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A massive, heavy-bottomed ceramic coffee mug splattered with primary colours on a banana-yellow field sits on my desk. It could probably hold a freighty, sloshy litre of coffee, though since I purchased it some years ago, it does primary duty as a mug for broken pencils, pens with just a sneeze of ink left and the odd screwdriver. I found it at ceramicist Peter Shire's annual Christmas sale, among the glazed shards and impossible teapots of his studio's steady output, alongside jungle-gym sculptures and squiggly, geometric furniture, ungainly pots with hot-rod colours and drawings of versions of all the above. Situated along Echo Park Ave under the purple blossoms of jacaranda trees, Shire's studio building sports funky colours and quirky metalwork. It's just one more bit of output in a career that found an engaged audience in design enthusiasts, though Shire clearly doesn't care too much what kind of creator you might call him. With the cool glaze of this ungainly mug in hand, I prefer 'artist'.

Shire's oeuvre crowns the very best of Los Angeles bad taste. Beginning in the art-punk underground during the late-1970s, Shire got his start when he was spotted by Milanese designer Ettore Sottsass in 1977 in LA's *WET*, the only magazine devoted to 'gourmet bathing' (along with punk and art). This bad-taste aesthetic (often identified as 'postmodern', though it doesn't wear it well) informed Kenny Scharf's sets for *Pee-wee's Playhouse* (1986–91) and Matt Groening's column 'Life in Hell' in *LA Weekly*. In the 1986 black comedy *Ruthless People*, Danny DeVito stalks an upscale LA house looking for his hated wife, her interior decor a cool mess of bright hues, hard shapes, shimmying lines and lots of turquoise. Brash and glitzy, the furniture is all knock-offs of the Memphis Group (founded by Sottsass in 1981) and most particularly its sole LA member: Peter Shire. Like the character of DeVito's on-camera wife, Bette Midler (whom Danny's planning to murder), the work is meant to be read as the worst kind of garish: magically looking both expensive and cheap.

And it is, in the best way. In this current survey show (his first in an LA museum), Shire shows us chairs with tomato-red shark fin backs, legs like beach balls filled with orange Fanta and lime green and salmon pink arms of wildly different shapes. Each of the dozens of teapots on display – stacks of spheres and pyramids and cubes, armed with handles that might serve as toys for space insects – altogether look like they might require special choreography just to pour. By taking on all of its downbeat beachy modernism and superficially flamboyant style, Shire's work celebrates, embodies and amplifies a Los Angeles that has made more than a few sophisticated outsiders sniff at John Fante's 'sad flower in the sand'.

In one corner, a rainbow polygon of a chair, *Right Weld Chair* (2017), bears a couple of tubular pool railings in brushed aluminium hanging off its back, both dangling baroque tassels from your grandmother's curtains. It is a mix of colourful hypermodern excess and a previous generation's overwrought extravagance. Like the rest of Shire's oeuvre, it is either awfully beautiful or beautifully awful, but certainly and unselfconsciously fun.