

■ Materialism: Parts 1 and 2
by Kayla Guthrie

■ Materialism: Part 1

During my first semester of art school, attendance was mandatory at a weekly lunch-time artist talk held in the main amphitheatre. Every week, a person who worked in the creative fields was invited to speak, like an animator, a curator at a local museum, or someone who ran a small art press. The purpose of these talks was to expose us to some possible future careers and lifestyles.

One of the first talks I saw was by an 80's alumnus of the school, a minimalist-sculptor-turned-childrens'-furniture-designer. I don't actually know his name anymore, but it was something wacky sounding, like "Donald Friendly"; and I remember him maybe having gravity-defying hair like Fido Dido, the guy from the old 7Up commercials.

Donald had a story to tell of how he had come to his career, starting from the same place where we were now, as students at this school. He introduced himself by explaining that, in the early days, when he started out in the sculpture program here, his creations were constantly being misunderstood.

While he talked, he showed slides of his work from this period. He had been ambitious as a student. One of the first slides depicted a deep purple sculpture made of some industrial sheeting, forming a low square shape close the ground in a barren room. He explained that the work he was doing at this time had been inspired by images of sculptures by '60s artists like Donald Judd, Robert Morris, and Carl Andre.

Though he expressed these first inclinations with fondness, he made it sound like his youthful ambitions had been a little foolish, and maybe not even really fully sincere.

In the early 80's, when he was approaching graduation, he said, he began to show his work around town, and had studio visits from local collectors and others in the art community. He continued to flip past images of works from these first few years out of school: geometric monochrome forms displayed on stark concrete floors in empty rooms.

He explained that there had been a lot of research involved in coming to the idea for each individual piece, and complicated techniques to learn in order to finally execute them. Most of his time in school had been spent finessing his fabrication skills. He had been curious about historical artists and searched for affinities with them.

He told us that back then it had been important for him to develop a story that would help viewers interpret the sculptures he was making. I don't know if he actually called it a "rap"; but he spoke about it as something standard and repetitive

to say when it came time to discuss his work. I think he told us that the concept he tried to get across in studio visits back then was that he was interested in simple, polished forms, and was researching instances in the past when these forms had dominated art. He was attracted to what he saw in the old pictures and felt satisfied when he was able to achieve just the right surface finish in his own creations. He was becoming an expert who could imagine something and see it completed.

Eventually I realized that what he was telling us now was another, updated rap, working up to a punchline. As a slide that pictured a deep indigo cube in the center of a white room appeared onscreen, Donald paused to reveal that, in spite of his intentions, his creations were often mistaken for furniture in unclear circumstances like group exhibitions. If I remember correctly, he said that more than once, pieces were happily purchased and then used as furniture by their new owners. Oh brother.

It was a classic art gag scenario. Instead of being impressed by the strange plainness of his forms, his audience had recognized them as comfortable, non-art objects. In an Archie comic, it would go like this: Betty makes an amorphous sculpture in art class and the delighted art teacher declares it a “chef-d’oeuvre!” She proudly brings it home and leaves it on the coffee table for her dad to see when he gets in from work. She comes downstairs after finishing some homework and is dismayed to find him calmly drinking coffee out of it: he thinks it’s a mug from one of those “new-fangled contemporary design stores!” Betty groans.

I think there was laughter at this point. Donald wanted us to know that he was the kind of person who could take this in stride. He smiled a lot and I got the impression that he was kind of a goofball, that this was his thing. He was advertising this early flop of his, encouraging us to laugh.

He continued: after some hassling from interested furniture buyers, he began to tippy-toe into the world of high end furniture design. It was a challenge to serve the adventurous taste of his new patrons, and they were aggressively molding his product to their preferences. He showed a slide of his first commission: a set of narrow wooden dresser drawers, carved out of wood in a natural matte finish, fairly nondescript except for a wavelike deformation that created a dramatic funhouse undulation throughout the otherwise normal-looking design.

At the time, he explained, he was still telling himself that this was work on the side, and that these jobs were a means of earning extra money to allow him to live while continuing to create his less-useful works. Through his sculpture experiments he had gained a mastery with wood and synthetics that allowed him to accomplish most of these challenging new commercial requests with ease.

Word of mouth led to more commissions and he began to be known for his wonky aesthetic. He was doing well with this other direction. The gag effects of the furniture pieces were strikingly different from the starkness of his “real fine art.” Maybe

it was important for the separation to be extreme because it helped him distinguish for sure between the two activities and their products as separate worlds. He moved from one to the other but would not allow them to combine.

He brought the story up to the present in a cheerful, imagine-that tone of voice: in the end, at some point in the late 80's, he eventually gave up on showing in galleries and formed a design firm. He had had a happy ending: his failure as an artist had opened the door to a comfortable living as a designer of high-end children's bedroom environments. As his talk drew to a close, he flipped through slides of free-form Beetlejuice-esque side tables, Barbie theme rooms, and anthropomorphic car-shaped beds with eyes and faces like Herbie the Humbuggy. He was a designer now. His occupation forced his expression to take silly forms, but it gave him dignity and a professional title.

Donald had been invited to speak that day as a real-life example of the general serendipitousness of life. His hard work and seriousness early on had been met with condescension from the audience he had tried so hard to please. When he made adjustments to please them better, by giving his clients what they wanted, he was rewarded. Even his own name, he went on, was so weirdly suitable to his field that he was constantly being asked if it was something he made up. Today, his creations inhabit the bedrooms of a few lucky kids locally and abroad. He is coloring our world with his contentment. It turns out that life can be fair after all. He beamed and began taking q and a from the audience.

I left that day's lecture feeling troubled. I could not shake the sense that in exchange for his sense of purpose and satisfaction, he had left something behind. He had been compensated, but like many forms of compensation, it would not replace what had been lost.

I was kind of skeptical of the way Donald had presented his story—that an art audience in the 80's, even in this then-smaller-and-less-sophisticated Canadian city, wouldn't be able to distinguish a minimalist sculpture from a piece of furniture. His story was like a moral tale, childishly simple, and I think it was the lack of complexity in the emotions his story conveyed that made me the most suspicious.

Maybe it was true that Donald Friendly was happy in what seemed like his true calling. That, as he seemed to be saying, his real reasons for and experience of making the objects—sculpture or furniture—had never changed, from his first to second career.

The way he told it, by making sculptures he had been seeking to satisfy his desires, and that these desires were more successfully satisfied under his new circumstances.

I thought there might be some part of him that still wonders how the story could have ended if he had not been given the opportunity to escape from his dilemma as an artist.

It must have hurt when he found out someone was interested in a piece of his, only to discover that they liked it for completely different reasons than the ones which had led him to create it. It must have made him angry that his will as an artist was so weak that his audience could approach his work with confidence and decide what to do with it themselves. Donald's hard work was rewarded with embarrassment and misunderstanding.

I couldn't possibly ask the question out loud. What was really going on with him when he was struggling to make those first sculptures? When he left sculpture, a path broke off and darkened. Could it still be back there somewhere?

At some point during his talk, Donald mentioned that he was still close with a fellow student from sculpture program, now a famous author. It was him who had encouraged Donald to give furniture design a serious try, in light of all of the interest his work was generating. Shortly afterwards, the author would publish an iconic early-90's bestseller, followed by a succession of novels that generated a lot of publicity and approval during that decade.

A few years after Donald's talk, I read an interview with this author where he advised young people to "think twice about doing something just for money, because once you start, you can never go back." I tried to guess who he might be talking about. Was it an old classmate of his, maybe one of the city's flash-in-the-pan neo-Expressionists from the 80's, or somebody who dropped out and moved to New York, did some shows and got reviewed in Artforum, and now sells just enough versions of virtually the same painting to avoid having to teach full-time?

Maybe he was just talking about someone like himself or Donald Friendly. Someone who is now happy and successful and self-actualized, but who once chose to leave their most urgent ideas behind. Maybe it happened one day when they were feeling discouraged, and an alternative path opened up: something (like commercial design) that had first seemed like a diminished cousin of their original pursuit (contemporary art), began to take on a hopefulness and promise in contrast to the repeated disappointments of following an apparently unreciprocated passion. Later on, when they realized that disappointments are normal and inevitable, no matter what path you choose, it was too late. Not only did they now have to cope with the everyday disappointments in their current life, but they must also feel the regret of having set their hopes aside.

■ Materialism: Part 2

Years later, on a bright day in late summer, after I had graduated and moved to New York, I was walking around in the sun when a window on Bleecker Street attracted my attention. It was a high-end antique dealer's display of tables, chairs, lamps, and dressers, in unrestrained combinations of bronze, wood, and glass. I guessed that some of these pieces would have been produced around the same time that important designer-artists like Frederick Keisler and Marianne Brandt were making work, and that these objects might have been created in response to their influence. But some guiding intelligence that should have given a similar historical value to the pieces here was missing. Their forms seemed too flamboyant for the authentic opulence of their materials. Their wrongness was alluring to me: technically sophisticated, but somehow unbalanced.

In a fateful mood, I entered the dark showroom through an open door. The lobby had high ceilings and was lit by dim chandeliers. I remember wide wood panels in a rich coal, and walls that were tiled in shiny black marble. Later that year at the Met I saw a room of Art Deco jewelry with a similar Citizen Kane vibe: the jewels were displayed in transparent cubes in a dark marble room with a giant metallic mosaic depicting a Hellenistic motif, spotlit from an invisible fixture high above.

There was a dining table and chair set constructed of thin, finely carved wooden bars, and a living room chair cast in translucent orange resin. A pair of kidney-shaped sofas in dusty grey velvet with cylindrical brass columns for legs stood before a miniature coffee table of circular wood with a chunky ornamental base. Beneath lay an oversized area rug made of long white fur. There were tastefully small notecards next to each piece noting the date of manufacture and name of the designer. It was an elegant and seductive mix. On the cabinet drawers of a dresser, smooth panels framed a natural wood centre with the knots and cut off stub of a branch carved in relief. Its door handles were little griffon heads. A pair of narrow arched mirrors with Art Deco ornamentation hung above a heavy brushed-steel dresser with intricate botanical etchings. Many things I saw were in perfect condition: cared-for and aged into a pleasing touchability.

I was greeted by a tall, attractive man in his thirties with an athletic glow and a generous manner. He patiently answered my questions: this was a display of furniture from a loosely-defined group of 20th century "studio artisans," who each produced a distinctive style of handmade furniture, and were often collected by connoisseurs, celebrity patrons, and other enthusiasts. Their styles varied from art nouveau psychedelia in smooth curved wood to neo-classical motifs and weird

reproductions of Matisse figures in bronze relief. But they had in common an attention to detail and a reverence for quality.

These designers were not unsuccessful or unpopular, but most of their reputations do not transcend their particular era: their work is not only dated but peculiarly deviant looking. Philip and Kelvin Laverne, for example, often carved miniature scenes into metal tabletops and dresser drawers, and antiqued the bronze and pewter with powders to give it a rusted, mildewy look, or a faux-wood finish. The detailed images I saw were inspired by scenes from Greek pottery. Many of these works have been bought at auction for high prices and are valued by collectors who specialize in design from that era. But as authors the Laverne's choices seem weirdly naive.

Though I was clearly inside a store, the scene I had just walked through was being billed as an "exhibition," and there was an accompanying coffee table book published by Rizzoli, an expensive hardcover one, which a strange impulse moved me to buy without hesitation. Later that day I showed the book to a friend. He gestured at a portrait of one of the designers—a guy with funky-shaped glasses and a mini goatee—and commented that maybe the objects looked creepy because they seemed to express the sexual hang-ups of their makers.

At first I thought these designers had screwed up. By creating their own worlds of style, they had relinquished the chance at self-reflection offered by other forms of art, in exchange for a mistaken idea of "creative freedom" that only seemed to amount to a kind of lack of mental discipline. As a result, their works were defective as art because they only flaunted the likes and pleasures of their makers. These designers were using form too liberally, trying to express themselves. I had the sense that they were trying very strongly and felt very deeply. The exhibition catalogue called their work "functional art"—decorative objects for the home, for sitting and gathering around, and living—but to me, it seemed profoundly dysfunctional.

I did notice that in spite of their low status in comparison with avant-garde design movements like the Bauhaus, the care with which the furniture here had been made meant that the pieces had been durable enough to age. Maybe, in their time, they had only been an ersatz mutation of a more cohesive and dignified history. But seeing them displayed in this dim, museum-like setting seemed to soften the misguidedness of their creators' will. I imagined their flaws of taste fading, and the lasting materials of their components—the specially-chosen block of wood, the hand-finished bronze—beginning to emanate a twisted sense of wisdom through their stupid formations. If they had once been loud formal expressions of the psychological faults of their creators, they had now somehow healed themselves of their dysfunctional origins, without changing their shape. I almost began to feel that some of these objects were as sublime as a work of really good art, that they had moved beyond the struggles of their makers.

Though they had started out as fantastical objects that worked against a sense of realism, in the years since they had been made, these objects had been forced to exist: kept by owners in homes and workplaces, among other objects. I never thought about art or design objects as having a life. I always evaluated them when they were brand new, or as if they were, and judged them as innovations: so the more innovative the better, and the less innovative, the loser. And I assumed that things could not change.

These items should have been losers. I remember calling them “low iq” in a conversation later that day: they were “original” and “quality” but didn’t have the same value as historically acknowledged work. By lasting as long as they had, though, they had an advantage: they were still attractive the way their makers had wanted them to be, but now they were also attractive to someone picky like me. Maybe any object that stayed around long enough could continue to increase its iq over time. No matter how inadequate a work might have seemed when it was made, it had a chance to escape its unhappy early life by growing further apart from its creator through distance and age. By outliving him, the work might eventually achieve the dignity that its creator always hoped it would have.

