PETER SHIRE NAKED IS THE BEST DISGUISE



APRIL 22-JULY 2, 2017

MOCA PACIFIC DESIGN CENTER

Peter Shire, Working-Class Elegance

In a 2007 interview, Peter Shire remarked that the answer to the perennial question "Are you an artist, a craftsperson, or a designer?" depends on which discipline the asker is predisposed against, such that if one dislikes design, and dislikes Shire's work, then Shire will be counted as a designer, and so on.¹ This crack is instructive. First, it nods to the idiosyncrasies of Shire's prodigious Los Angeles-based career. Having studied ceramics under Ralph Bacerra and Adrian Saxe at the Chouinard Art Institute, where he earned a BFA in 1970, Shire set out to become a potter. Already by 1981, he began designing furniture, when-at the invitation of Ettore Sottsass, who spotted Shire's ceramic teapots in a 1977 issue of the new-wave bible WET magazine-he became a founding member of the quintessentially postmodernist, Milan-based design collective Memphis. And he has since worked in glass and metal and expanded to large-scale outdoor public sculpture.²

Clay, however, remains Shire's most tried and true medium (the love of his life, he has professed); and through clay, Shire has sustained a decades-long manipulation of the categories of art and craft, meaning that the impossibility of his classification as either artist, craftsperson, or designer is not only apposite, but intentional. This is the second lesson of the introductory quotation. Take Scorpion Pan Pipe (1983), an early example of Shire's signature form, the teapot. A handle of pink segmented wedges, flexed like a scorpion's tail, adjoins a conical yellow body, the lid to which is topped with an oversized black donut knob; meanwhile, a tidy row of gray tubes recalling a panpipe perches precariously on the teal spout. Exuberant colors, absurd proportions, improbable angles, and outlandish appendages stretch and squeeze the requirements of utility. For centuries in art historical discourse, utility has stood as the irreducible quality of craft, and purposelessness as the precondition of art. First established in the early modern period, when craft was defined as technical knowledge and art as aesthetic or conceptual knowledge, this distinction was consecrated by the modernist imperative of the autonomy of art, about which philosopher Immanuel Kant produced the most indelible statements, to say nothing of critics Clement Greenberg and Theodor Adorno.³ Characterized by the artist as "referentially functional"⁴ and by one critic as a "condescending nod to function," ⁵ Shire's hand built teapots, from Turtle Rebar (1981) to Can Opener, 01 (2016), bring ceramics to the brink of sculpture—that is, to the brink of art as such.

By the time Shire emerged from art school in the 1970s, clay's sculptural turn had already been effected by the new California





ceramicists. John Mason, Ken Price, and Peter Voulkos, among others, in the 1950s and 1960s, created a new category of art: fired-clay sculpture. They were credited with liberating the medium from the constraints of practical use, ennobling ceramics by setting it in dialogue with abstract expressionism, art informel, Gutai, and pop.⁶ Yet Shire remained—then as now—dedicated to the teapot as a vessel, and one conceived for daily, shared use, to boot.

Further, Shire's artistic maturation in the 1970s coincided with the stirrings of Pattern and Decoration (familiarly known as P&D), an under-recognized movement concentrated on both west and east coasts that enjoyed a prominent reception from about 1975 to 1985. P&D saw artists (Valerie Jaudon, Joyce Kozloff, Robert Kushner, Kim MacConnel, and Miriam Schapiro, to name a few) culling materials, compositional techniques, and surface patterns from the decorative and folk arts traditions, renegotiating received terms according to feminist values. Both Shire and P&D figures abnegated modernist purity and minimalist austerity, elevated domestic handicrafts, and generally thrilled to all that had been denigrated as lowly (craft, the feminine, kitsch). But whereas the P&D embrace of wallpaper, Islamic architectural ornamentation, American guilts, Persian miniatures, Indian carpets, and domestic embroideries was a reclamation or corruption from within, for Shire, the teapot or table that flirts with sculpture is an affirmation of his trade.

Indeed, if the California ceramicists and P&D artists claimed the fine arts/applied arts hierarchy as an error, then Shire preserves it as a site of social struggle. This is the third valence of Shire's quip about his position as an artist, craftsperson, or designer: Shire traffics knowingly in the realm of likes and dislikes, that is, of taste. The provocation of Shire's work is its headlong rush towards bad taste. Here, Shire's Bel Air Chair (1981) is instructive. Exhibited in Memphis's second annual collection, the chair quickly became an icon of the Memphis effort to inject levity into calcified, reductivist modernist designs, snipe at the dictum "form follows function," and approach furniture as domestically scaled sculpture. With its Luis Barragánvia-Echo Park palette of peaches, lime greens, and pale blues, its outrageous Malibu beach ball "leg," its asymmetrical shark fin back (based in part on John Lautner's 1968 Stevens House), and its hot-rodding-cum-Googie architecture curves, the chair plays with the cone, the cube, the sphere, and the cylinder with the same irreverence that it toys with the taboos of fine art, from ornament to commercial colors and "low" culture predilections. Obstreperous, flippant, and, perhaps most grievous of all, excessive, Bel Air Chair and the versions that followed, Belle Aire Chair (2010) and Brentwood Chair (2017), tell a story about how liking and disliking, desiring and being repelled by, are late 20th-century exercises in defining a sense of one's place, carried out even and especially by the objects of daily, domestic life.7



Above: Peter Shire with Bone Air Chair, 1985. Image courtesy of the artist

Right: Peter Shire, *Belle Aire Chair*, 2010, steel and enamel, 56 × 40 × 45 1/2 in. (142.24 × 101.6 × 115.57 cm). Image courtesy of the artist, photo by Joshua White

Far left: Peter Shire, *Hourglass Teapot*, 1984, ceramic, 23 × 16 × 6 in. (58.42 × 40.64 × 15.24 cm). Image courtesy of the artist

Left: Peter Shire, *Can Opener*, *01*, 2016, ceramic, 9 3/4 × 15 × 7 in. (24.77 × 38.1 × 17.78 cm). Image courtesy of the artist



Shire's work negotiates the values of art, craft, and industrial design with the home, not the museum, in mind. So it was for the early-20th century European avant-gardes. Projecting a new citizen-consumer, they tasked the applied arts with meeting the utopian call to integrate art and life. It's why in a 1920 photo of the UNOVIS group (Utverditeli novogo iskusstva, the affirmers of the new art) setting off by train to a conference of teachers and art students in Moscow, Russian suprematist Kazimir Malevich clutches a porcelain plate in one hand and makes a clenched-fist salute with the other. It's why Bauhaus architect Marcel Breuer's fluid, logical, and minimal "Wassily" club chair (1925) capitalizes on the flexibility, light weight, strength, and mass producibility of tubular steel, as well as easy-to-clean leather or canvas seat, back, and armrests, all the better to allow the free unfolding of modern life. It's why de Stijl designer Gerrit Rietveld's Red Blue Chair (c. 1923) aims for simplicity in construction, utilizing wood in standard, readily available lumber sizes.

But Shire does not mistake function for utility: "A chair is a symbol of economic stature that goes back to when kings sat on thrones and common folk sat on the ground."⁸ Thus, when Shire takes on Rietveld with his *Right Weld Chair* (2007), he pays homage to the mandate of planarity (it refers to Rietveld's armless, legless, cantilevered seat *Zig-Zag Chair* [1934]) and to the emphasis on primary colors. Then he throws in more, too much, actually: a gradient spatter-painted finish evoking auto

body styling and luxurious, if gaudy, ornamental tassels dangling from utterly inexplicable swimming pool handrails. By way of distortion, extravagance, superfluity, and exaggeration, Shire crystallizes the fantasies of the consumer and the purpose of the object in buttressing those fantasies for ourselves and towards others.⁹

Shire's work reckons with the acknowledgment that craft and design's integration of art and life concerns not only the means of production-durability, affordability, and practicality, as prioritized by his constructivist, Bauhaus, and de Stijl forebearsbut also the "ends" of reception. Art and cultural consumption are tied to a social function of legitimating social differences, so argues Pierre Bourdieu in his landmark 1979 text Distinction.¹⁰ And taste, in the Bourdieuan sense, operates as a marker of class (the chestnut goes: "taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier"11). Shire's work confronts our cultural knowledge and tastes—our snobberies, our ways of making aesthetic choices in opposition to those made by other social classes in order to distinguish ourselves. He assaults us with bad taste-what is tacky, what is trendy, what is vulgar—and asks us to witness ourselves mastering those temptations. Of the humor and whimsy in his work, Shire has commented that what is funny is often what is insulting.¹² Insulting to our tastes, I take this to mean. Insulting because it betrays our pretensions, and thus our social positions.





Peter Shire, *Right Weld Chair*, 2007, steel, enamel, and tassels, 63 × 16 × 43 in. (160.02 × 40.64 × 109.22 cm). Image courtesy of the artist, photo by Josh White

Peter Shire, Brentwood Chair, 2017, gouache on paper, 11 \times 8 1/2 in. (27.94 \times 21.59 cm). Image courtesy of the artist

The "excess" in Shire's work—all that exceeds the stringency of utility—is the realm of the social. Playing out the social in the theater of our domestic lives and through the vocabulary of taste is of no less import and function than the relationship of an armrest to its support or than the pot's ability to pour water from the bottom and not drip. Here is something else we recognize of ourselves in the remarkably anthropomorphic forms of Shire's furniture and ceramics: sofas puff up their chests, tables cock their hips, teapots strut. Like us, they take stances and they display themselves. A teetering arrangement is striking a pose; a postmodernist pastiche of styles is a self-aware performance. If these positions are sometimes crude, it is because by skirting fine art, they—and we—are free to be unrefined; it is because this is the social position of the "mass," of the working class.

Anna Katz

Wendy Stark Curatorial Fellow

- 1 Oral history interview with Peter Shire, Sept. 18–19, 2007, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
- 2 Since his commission for the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics, Shire has completed more than two dozen public art commissions in the Greater Los Angeles area, Phoenix, Arizona, Las Vegas, Nevada, and Hokkaido, Japan. For locations of selected public artworks by Shire in Los Angeles, see the map featured in this brochure.
- 3 Craft has also been distinguished from art on the basis of material (e.g., clay, wood, and fiber); application (craft is associated with surface decoration); and modality (i.e., craft's appeal to the haptic versus fine art's optic or cognitive appeals). Going by other names—the primitive, ornament, the grotesque—these criteria have also served as alibi for the art-institutionalization of racist and sexist values.
- 4 Jo Lauria, "Flash-Points in the Life and Career of Artist Peter Shire," in L.A. to LA: Peter Shire at LSU, January 21–April 14, 2013 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013), 6.
- 5 See Patricia Leigh Brown, "Currents; Teapots as Meditations on Free-Form Freeways," The New York Times (Aug. 4, 1988), accessed Feb. 10, 2017, http://www.nytimes.com/1988/08/04/garden/ currents-teapots-as-meditations-on-free-form-freeways.html.
- 6 This is Mary Davis MacNaughton's considered argument in "Unexpected Connections: Clay Sculpture in LA and the Avant-Garde," in Clay's Tectonic Shift: John Mason, Ken Price, Peter Voulkos, 1956–1968, exh. cat., ed. MacNaughton (Claremont, CA: Ruth Chandler Williamson Gallery, Scripps College, with J. Paul Getty Museum, 2012).
- 7 Shire's Brentwood Chair (2017) was specially commissioned by MOCA for Peter Shire: Naked Is the Best Disguise.
- 8 Shire as quoted in David A. Keeps, "Power of the Palette," Los Angeles Times (Nov. 8, 2007), accessed Feb. 10, 2017, http://articles.latimes.com/2007/nov/08/home/hm-shire8.
- 9 In a remarkable 1991 essay, Norman M. Klein imagines Shire's teapots as "invaded artworks, standing in for the invasion of private life." In Klein's telling, markets are like armies, fighting for recognition on the surface of a ceramic object, and the battle takes place in "the private world of the consumer—the home, household objects, knickknacks, crossover art/design items." See Klein, "Tempest in a Teapot: The Social History of Peter Shire's Ceramics," in Tempest in a Teapot: The Ceramic Art of Peter Shire (New York: Rizzoli, 1991), 32.
- Pierre Bourdieu, Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste, trans. Richard Nice (1979; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).
- 11 Ibid., 6.
- 12 Conversation with the author, October 2016.



Installation view of Peter Shire exhibition at Janus Gallery, Los Angeles, 1982. Image courtesy of the artist

Peter Shire (b. 1947, Los Angeles; lives in Los Angeles)

Unless otherwise noted, all works are courtesy of the artist.

Fortune Cookie Teapot, 1974 Ceramic approx. 5 × 15 × 7 1/2 in. (12.7 × 38.1 × 19.05 cm)

Early Bauhaus Teapot, 1975 Ceramic 5 1/2 × 12 1/4 × 7 in. (13.97 × 31.12 × 17.78 cm)

Extruder Teapot, 1976 Ceramic approx. 5 × 15 × 7 1/2 in. (12.7 × 38.1 × 19.05 cm) Collection of Mandy and Cliff Einstein

Ostrich Teapot, 1976 Ceramic approx. 12 × 18 × 6 in. (30.48 × 45.72 × 15.24 cm)

Potemkin Teapot, 1977 Ceramic 11 × 24 × 10 in. (27.94 × 60.96 × 25.4 cm)

Kipper Tea Pot, 1978–1979 Gouache on paper 22 × 30 in. (55.88 × 76.2 cm)

To Be Desired, 1978 Gouache on paper 22 1/2 × 30 1/8 in. (57.15 × 76.52 cm)

Guitar Teapot, 1979 Ceramic and wire 7 × 14 1/2 × 1 1/2 in. (17.78 × 36.83 × 3.81 cm)

Fleetline Teapot, 1980 Ceramic 5 × 16 1/2 × 4 3/8 in. (12.7 × 41.91 × 11.11 cm)

Parallelogram Teapot, 1980 Ceramic 7 3/4 × 13 × 6 in. (19.69 × 33.02 × 15.24 cm)

Peach Teapot, 1980 Ceramic 8 3/4 × 10 × 5 1/4 in. (22.23 × 25.4 × 13.34 cm) Bel Air Chair, 1981 Wood, steel, enamel, and upholstery fabric 48 1/2 × 43 × 48 1/2 in. (123.19 × 109.22 × 123.19 cm)

Obelisk Cabinet, 1981 Wood, steel, chrome, and enamel 69 × 40 1/2 × 16 1/2 in. (175.26 × 102.87 × 41.91 cm)

Saki Negri Sake Pot, 1981 Ceramic 6 × 8 1/2 × 3/4 in. (15.24 × 21.59 × 1.91 cm)

Saki Rosa Sake Pot, 1981 Ceramic 6 3/4 × 9 × 1 3/4 in. (17.15 × 22.86 × 4.45 cm)

Turtle Rebar Teapot, 1981 Ceramic and steel 16 × 10 × 8 3/4 in. (40.64 × 25.4 × 22.23 cm)

Two-tone Cone Teapot, 1981 Ceramic 6 1/4 × 17 × 12 in. (15.88 × 43.18 × 30.48 cm)

Anchorage Teapot, 1982 Silver, wood, and enamel 15 × 12 3/4 × 5 3/4 in. (38.1 × 32.39 × 14.61 cm)

Van Nuys, 1982 Gouache on paper 30 × 22 3/16 in. (76.2 × 56.36 cm)

Bauhaus Derrick Teapot, 1983 Ceramic 10 7/8 × 12 1/2 × 10 1/2 in. (27.62 × 31.75 × 26.67 cm)

Harlequin Table, 1983 Steel, wood, and enamel 28 1/2 × 76 × 45 in. (72.39 × 193.04 × 114.3 cm)

Hollywood Table, 1983 Wood, steel, laminate, and enamel 20 × 24 × 24 in. (50.8 × 60.96 × 60.96 cm)

Hourglass Teapot, 1984 Ceramic 23 × 16 × 6 in. (58.42 × 40.64 × 15.24 cm)

Cahuenga Lamp, 1985 Steel, chrome, and enamel 39 3/4 × 18 1/2 × 19 in. (100.97 × 46.99 × 48.26 cm) Microflex, 1985 Gouache on paper 9 × 12 1/8 in. (22.86 × 30.8 cm)

Olympic Torchiere, 1985 Steel, anodized aluminum, and enamel 120 × 24 × 24 in. (304.8 × 60.96 × 60.96 cm) Collection of Michelle Harvey - Huttas Family Collection

Olympic Torchiere, 1985 Steel, anodized aluminum, and enamel 96 × 24 × 24 in. (243.84 × 60.96 × 60.96 cm) Collection of Billy Shire, Los Angeles

Olympic Torchiere, 1985 Steel, anodized alumnium, and enamel 72 × 24 × 24 in. (182.88 × 60.96 × 60.96 cm) Collection of Butch and Carol Okeya, Los Angeles

Olympic Torchiere, 1985 Steel, anodized aluminum, and enamel 96 × 24 × 24 in. (243.84 × 60.96 × 60.96 cm)

Olympic Torchiere, 1985 Steel, anodized aluminum, and enamel 96 × 24 × 24 in. (243.84 × 60.96 × 60.96 cm) Collection of Janice Jerde, Los Angeles

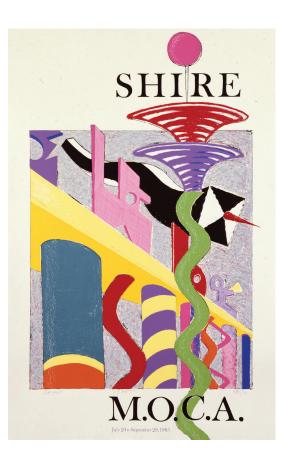
Olympic Torchiere, 1985 Steel, anodized aluminum, and enamel 108 × 24 × 24 in. (274.32 × 60.96 × 60.96 cm) Collection of Janice Jerde, Los Angeles

Olympic Torchiere, 1985 Steel, anodized aluminum, and enamel 96 × 24 × 24 in. (243.84 × 60.96 × 60.96 cm) Collection of Sussman/Prejza & Co., Inc., Los Angeles

Peach Wedge-G, 1985 Gouache on paper 9 x 12 1/8 in. (22.86 x 30.8 cm)

Baby Boom, 1986 Gouache on paper 14 × 11 in. (35.56 × 27.94 cm)

Sail and Cone Lamp, 1986 Steel, chrome, anodized aluminum, and enamel approx. 71 1/2 × 40 × 27 1/2 in. (181.61 × 101.6 × 69.85 cm)



Rocket Bookcase, 1987 Wood and laminate 58 × 10 × 18 in. (147.32 × 25.4 × 45.72 cm)

Cupola Lamp, 1988 Stainless steel, aluminum, and enamel 14 × 12 × 8 in. (35.56 × 30.48 × 20.32 cm)

Las Vegas 1 Chair, 1989 Wood, upholstery fabric, and steel 32 1/2 × 34 1/4 × 30 1/4 in. (82.55 × 87 × 76.84 cm)

Scorpion, 1996 Gouache on paper 12 5/8 × 10 in. (32.07 × 25.4 cm)

Scorpion (Black) Teapot, 1996–2013 Ceramic and steel 12 3/4 × 31 1/2 × 12 in. (32.39 × 80.01 × 30.48 cm) Collection of Alan Mandell, Los Angeles

Benigno Dreams of Meringue, 2000 Ceramic approx. 18 × 18 × 6 in. (45.72 × 45.72 × 15.24 cm)

Stacked Peaches Teapot, 2005 Ceramic and steel approx. 35 × 13 1/2 × 6 1/4 in. (88.9 × 34.29 × 15.88 cm) Nouveau Mexican Bauhaus Teapot, 2006 Ceramic and stainless steel approx. 24 × 18 × 6 in. (60.96 × 45.72 × 15.24 cm)

Limited-edition exhibition poster

Entertainment Center with Animals, July 29–September 29, 1985

at The Temporary Contemporary

Los Angeles

The Museum of Contemporary Art,

for Peter Shire: Olympic Village/UCLA

Sewer Pipe Teapot, 2006 Ceramic approx. 16 1/4 × 14 × 11 1/2 in. (41.28 × 35.56 × 29.21 cm)

Bete Blanc, 2007 Steel, enamel, and wood 27 × 16 × 19 in. (68.58 × 40.64 × 48.26 cm) Collection of Mandy and Cliff Einstein

Bete Long, 2007 Gouache on paper 29 7/8 × 22 3/8 in. (75.88 × 56.83 cm)

Bete Noir, 2007 Steel, enamel, and wood 27 × 16 × 19 in. (68.58 × 40.64 × 48.26 cm) Collection of Mandy and Cliff Einstein

Right Weld Chair, 2007 Steel, enamel, and tassels 63 × 16 × 43 in. (160.02 × 40.64 × 109.22 cm)

Vespiti, 2007 Gouache on paper 30 × 22 in. (76.2 × 55.88 cm) Belle Aire Chair, 2010 Steel and enamel 56 × 40 × 45 1/2 in. (142.24 × 101.6 × 115.57 cm)

Bottle Caps (inspired by vintage barber shop cushions), 2010 Gouche on paper 11 7/8 × 9 in. (30.16 × 22.86 cm)

Pecker Chair, 2010 Steel, stainless steel, and enamel 29 × 18 × 30 in. (73.66 × 45.72 × 76.2 cm)

Pecker Chair, 2010 Steel, stainless steel, and enamel 29 × 18 × 30 in. (73.66 × 45.72 × 76.2 cm)

Pecker Chair, 2010 Steel, stainless steel, and enamel 29 × 18 × 30 in. (73.66 × 45.72 × 76.2 cm)

Saki Poto Sake Pot, 2010 Ceramic approx. 6 3/4 × 9 × 1 3/4 in. (17.15 × 22.86 × 4.45 cm)

Peachy Bel Air, 2011 Gouche on paper 11 × 8 1/2 in. (27.94 × 21.59 cm)

Can Opener, 01, 2016 Ceramic 9 3/4 × 15 × 7 in. (24.77 × 38.1 × 17.78 cm)

Brentwood Chair, 2017 Steel, stainless steel, enamel, upholstery fabric, and wood 62 × 49 × 42 in. (157.48 × 124.46 × 106.68 cm)

Brentwood Chair, 2017 Goache on paper 11 × 8 1/2 in. (27.94 × 21.59 cm)

Candy Dish Teapot, 2017 Ceramic 9 × 14 × 11 1/2 in. (22.86 × 35.56 × 29.21 cm)

Folder Table, 2017 Steel, wood, and enamel Dimensions variable

Related programs:

Members' Opening: Peter Shire: Naked Is the Best Disguise

Friday, April 21, 2017 MOCA Pacific Design Center INFO 213/621-1794 or membership@moca.org FREE for MOCA members; no reservations necessary

Lecture: Peter Shire and Anna Katz in Conversation

Sunday, June 25, 2017, 3pm West Hollywood Council Chambers 625 North San Vicente Boulevard West Hollywood, CA 90069 INFO 213/621-1741 or visitorservices@moca.org FREE; priority entry for MOCA members

Please check moca.org for updates on related programs.

Peter Shire: Naked Is the Best Disguise is organized by Anna Katz, Wendy Stark Curatorial Fellow. The Museum of Contemporary Art. Los Angeles.

Lead support for MOCA Pacific Design Center is provided by Charles S. Cohen.



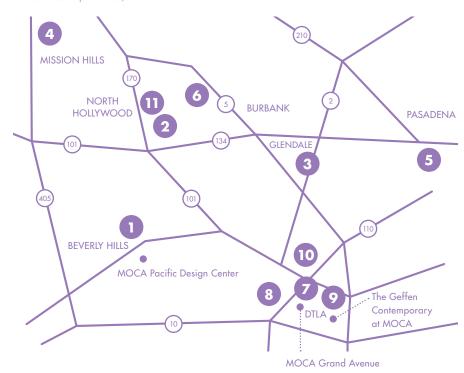
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Cover image: Peter Shire, Bel Air Chair, 1981, wood, steel, and upholstery fabric, 48 1/2 × 43 × 48 1/2 in. (123.19 × 109.22 × 123.19 cm). Image courtesy of the artist, photo by Joshua White

A Guide to Peter Shire's Public Art in Los Angeles

- 1. Murano and Rockin' Angel, 2009 Santa Monica Boulevard traffic median, near 8585 Santa Monica Boulevard, West Hollywood
- NoHo Gateway, 2009 Lankershim Boulevard and Huston Street, North Hollywood
- 3. Los Angeles Regional Traffic Management Center, 2007 2901 West Broadway, Glendale
- 4. Mission Community Police Station, 2007
- 11121 Sepulveda Boulevard, Mission Hills . Malevich's Pick-Up Sticks, 2005 5.
- 159 West Green Street, Pasadena 6. Tlki Tower, Empire Man, and Leaning Tower, Burbank Empire Center, 2002 1800 West Empire Avenue, Burbank

- 7. Acrobat Freeway, 1999 Ahmanson Theater, The Music Center 135 North Grand Avenue, Los Angeles
- Los Angeles Seen, Wilshire/Vermont Station, Los Angeles Metro, 1996
- 3191 Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles 9. Paseo Cesar Chavez, Union Station Gateway, 1995 (with Elsa Flores and Roberto Gil de Montes) 800 North Alameda Street, Los Angeles
- 10. City on the Hill, Glass-Simons Memorial, Angel's Point, Elysian Park, 1994 Angel's Point Road, Los Angeles
- 11. Academy Village Apartments, 1990 West Magnolia Boulevard and Lankershim Boulevard, North Hollywood



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