



REVIEW

The Tension Between Design and Art is what Excites

Roy McMakin's A Slat-back Chair, at San Diego State University, June 2005

by Don R. Miller

The Furniture Society's presentation of Roy McMakin's *A Slat-back Chair* at the recent San Diego conference represents a significant step in broadening the organization's vision and constituency. Tina Yapelli, director of the University Art Gallery at San Diego State University, and Wendy Maruyama, head of the furniture program there, deserve congratulations for envisioning an exhibition that combines contemporary concerns in design and sculpture with the more craft-based vantage point that the Furniture Society has represented. Response to the show indicated that, as our membership embraces a wider view of the furniture world, thoughtful dialog will be a necessary alternative to factionalism. This exhibition was such an opportunity. This review

is based on several great ongoing conversations I had in San Diego—conversations that directed me through simplistic reactions to a more meaningful experience of McMakin's work.

My initial response to *A Slat-back Chair* was mixed. I recognized Roy McMakin as one of a group of "design artists" who in the past several years have become known for work that, oddly enough, concerns the boundaries between contemporary art and design. As a furniture maker, I consider myself slightly removed from this hybrid practice. Part purist, part Luddite, I thrive on work that exists on the edges of traditional hierarchies, and pondering new ideas is an important aspect of my studio and teaching experiences. I've given some



left: *Untitled*, 2001
Roy McMakin
Photo by Mark Woods

consideration to “design art” and had concluded that while conceptually interesting, it offers little of the exciting experience that I find in the rub between function and art. And yet, I continued to be interested in the tension that is central to the work of these artists.

So how did I initially respond to the exhibition? I was impatient that McMakin’s work fashionably referred to the furniture-based works of Donald Judd and Scott Burton, that it appropriated these without clear attribution. The work appeared concise, industrial in character, its surfaces a bit too perfect. Its reduction of the furniture idiom felt awkward, unbalanced but predictable. The scale of these furniture pieces, here presented as autonomous works of sculpture, seemed timid and rather arbitrary. The accompanying drawings

Don Miller makes furniture in Cranston, RI, and is adjunct faculty at Rhode Island School of Design. A catalog entitled A Slat-back Chair accompanied the exhibition (ISBN 0-937097-02-0) and is available from the University Art Gallery, San Diego State University.

above: *Untitled (Would Dining Table and Six Simple Chairs)*, 2005
Roy McMakin
Photo by Mark Woods

distracted from the work, rather than focusing it. But almost immediately I found myself questioning these initial responses and, by watching and asking, queried other responses. Evidently, this work is provocative. What lies beneath its surface?

Viewed as a continuum rather than a spread of individual objects, *A Slat-back Chair* effectively displaces the viewer’s experience of space. McMakin makes us immediately aware of the human-scale space within which we navigate and that we project upon furniture objects. He asks us to respond not to the unique character of these objects but to their familiar and essentially mundane qualities. It is in this intimate, everyday territory that we engage with the work, completing it with our own participation as viewers/users. In experiencing it, we experience ourselves.

As makers, we sometimes dismiss work that asks us to consider more than its formal qualities or technical character. We tend to be too literal, too close. Furniture, on one hand, does convey meaning to us via its purely didactic character:

it can express a clear historical style, construction technique, use of material, or representational narrative. However, furniture's character as a phenomenon, a means to experience, underlies this rational notion. Furniture's phenomenological character is inextricably linked to our navigation of the physical universe, in gravity and in space. From it springs our first and most basic sensibilities of what is real, and our metaphors for what is less so. As primary influences on the development of our conscious and subconscious beings, everyday objects come to be the real and symbolic measures of one's place in the world, the meeting of memory and moment.

Roy McMakin's work in *A Slat-back Chair* peels through the layers of meaning we perceive in and project onto furniture objects. His objects appear too familiar, too generic, to spark strong responses.

Nightstand, 1999
 Roy McMakin
 Photo by Mark Woods



Untitled (Would Dining Table and Six Simple Chairs), 2005, detail
 Roy McMakin
 Photo by Mark Woods

But this formally reductive approach is what allows tensions to enter the work. This energy lies as much in the context McMakin has created for the work, and in the participation of the viewer/user, as in its objective presence as a group of simple chairs. This strategy reflects an ongoing concern with the ideals of Modernism, a desire to interrogate and transform those values rather than react against them. Throughout the 20th century, design innovation led the way in challenging the academic separation of art from everyday experience. Avant-gardes pulled art and design into the streets in rejection of the academy's grip on culture. These ideals were ultimately addressed by Minimalist sculptors whose large-scale, industrially fabricated works brought the viewer into the space of the work to determine his own point of view, her own experience. These works were as much the progeny of design and architecture as of sculpture. In the 70s and 80s artists such as Donald Judd, Scott Burton, and Richard Artschwager found the history of furniture design, particularly that of the early 20th century, a source of inspiration—Wright, Stickley, Rietveld, and Bauhaus. Their choice to make sculptures based in furniture form, scale, and materials expressed a desire to democratize the culture of art, continuing a revolution begun at the turn of the century to render the art object

The baking of preconceived notions: Another take on Roy McMakin

The McMakin gallery at San Diego State University was a passable walk from the Furniture Society conference center, and given the buzz, the hike gave conference-goers time to form and bake their preconceived responses. It was a very provocative exhibition, and any discussion, pre-, during or post-conference was well worth the effort. In fact, McMakin bashing and praising by furniture devotees is ongoing in e-mails and chat rooms.

You can read furniture maker Don Miller's reaction to the exhibit in the accompanying review. My own first reaction to the exhibition was that one had entered a stark, edgy (NY) downtown gallery—not surprising given McMakin's current Chelsea representatives—or an equally stark and edgy loft apartment just before the guests arrive for the party. White-on-white around and above; polished wood floor; cool and diffuse gallery lighting. The installation was primarily of chairs that on first impression were all, if not the same, then decidedly very similar. They were lined up in small to large groups along the walls, giving the space a curiously 17th century twist.

McMakin has taken this all-too familiar Reform School Revival chair and made it new again. He set out to explore a banal furniture form with the intent of exposing its innate design quality and giving it new and better life. But where Marcel Duchamp's ready-made urinal fountain did this with a smack to the side of the intellectual head, and Pop artists overwhelmed us with outrageous color, McMakin has chosen to make his influence as subtle and nuanced as possible. He relies on Minimalist tweaking, with each chair being pushed in a slightly different direction. As Don Miller notes, the understatement is tremendously effective and induces the viewer to dwell on each piece, to discover and savor each juicy detail. Most of chairs were not varnished, but subtly and exquisitely painted in various shades of white, and most viewers were startled to discover that it was all brush-applied, no doubt rubbed out, but meticulously beautiful nonetheless.

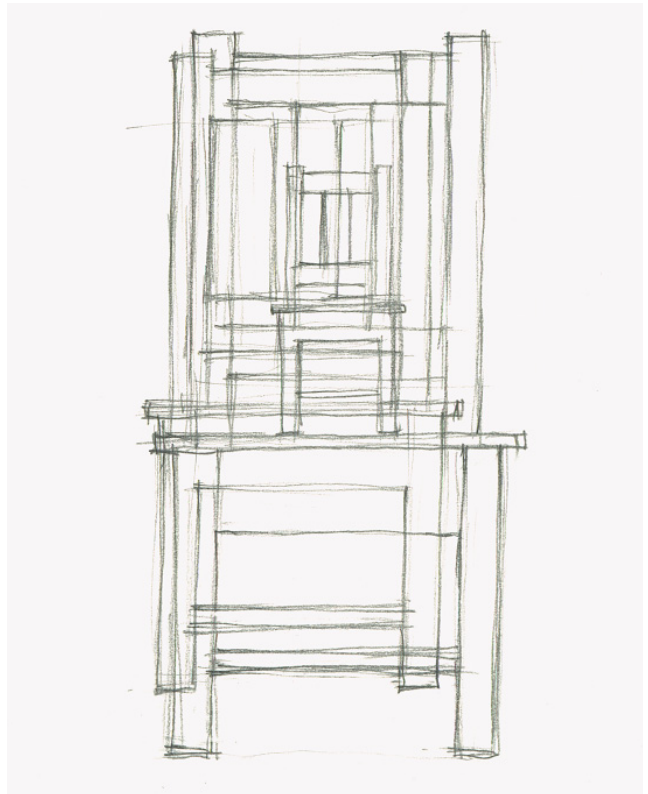
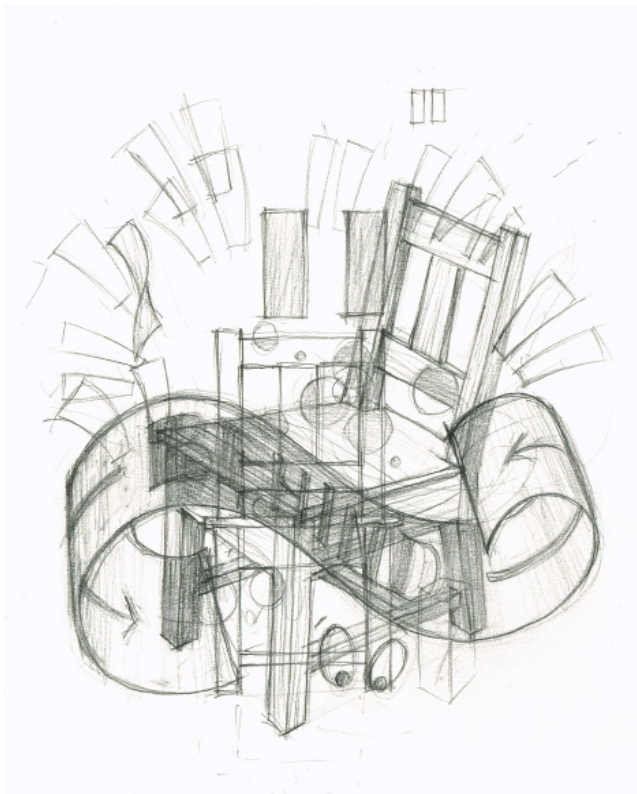
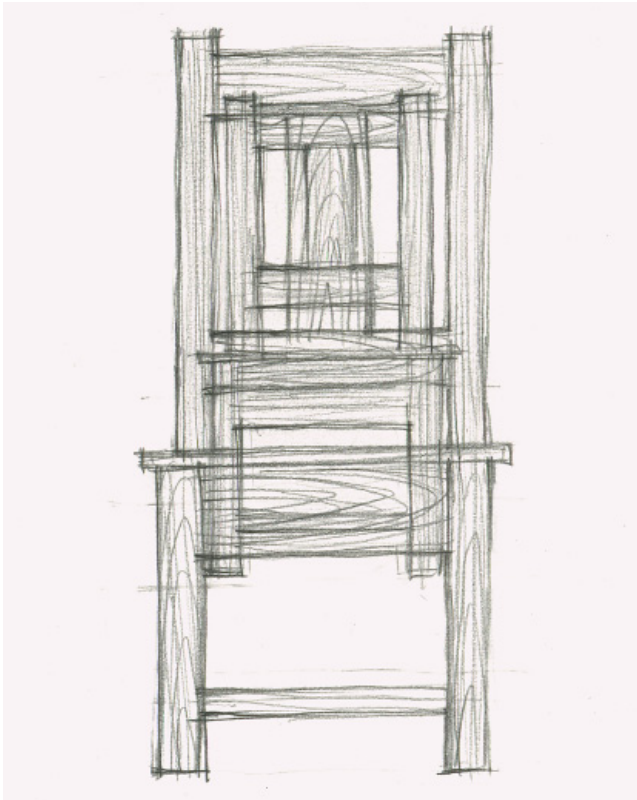
The chairs aside, a favorite piece for viewing and discussing was a matte-varnished, dark oak dining table accompanied by six of what McMakin calls "simple

chairs." Upon close inspection, one became aware of long, rectangular filler pieces—dutchmen—inlaid over rusty nail holes, knots and other visual defects, allowing for visual play on the surface. This is not a new idea, but since it is a signature technique it is worth noting that examination of later tables, some in walnut and other, more carefully selected woods, reveals an evolution and refinement of the vocabulary well beyond arbitrary table-top decoration in recycled material. In McMakin's hands it is a playful, deliberate maneuver to catch the eye just as it was wondering about joint interfaces that have been artificially rotated or moved from one orientation to another by skillful application of inlay. It is a wonderful effect.

Because of the neo-banality of the furniture, many viewers needed a little nudge-nudge, wink-wink in order to take notice and begin to make these discoveries. The furniture benefits from a sympathetic interior, and even better, the deliberate context of a gallery installation like the SDSU gallery, or better yet a trendy loft like the one in New York City where I saw a newer version of the table. The wood was walnut, and the two-piece top included some subtle wisps of sapwood book-matched along the glue line. The oily finish of the first table had shifted to a soft sheen, and the rectangular inlays were perfectly executed and carefully placed. The table was in a dining area visible from the living area but two steps down, affording a side-on view that revealed such intricate delicacies as a slight dado between the top and the apron, and a weightlessness-inducing float due to small spacers under the heavy square legs.

McMakin has produced some silly pieces, such as *Nightstand* (page 00) or a chest of drawers laid on its back with its glass "top" sitting on the drawer faces, but when he gets serious, he delivers cutting-edge freshness and excitement. The buzz is for real, and we're delighted to explore it in the pages of Furniture Studio.

—Michael Podmaniczny,
chair, Furniture Studio Editorial Advisory Board



top: *Untitled*, 2005
Drawing by Roy McMakin
bottom: *Untitled*, 2005
Drawing by Roy McMakin

top: *Untitled*, 2005
Drawing by Roy McMakin
bottom: *Untitled*, 2005
Drawing by Roy McMakin

ubiquitous, available in everyday experience and contingent upon the viewers participation and understanding.

McMakin, along with such artists as Andrea Zittel (page 00), Clay Ketter, Jorge Pardo, and Joe Scanlon, has carried on this investigation of the rub between everyday objects, our personal lives, and our culture. Contemporary “design artists” create conceptual frameworks for their work that are self-consciously distinct from those of their Modernist predecessors and are integral with, rather than supplemental to, their work. Zittel, for example established AZ Industries as her first artwork, a fictitious corporate backdrop against which to present her one-off “products.” At heart these artists’ ideas respond to, react against, and reinterpret the questions that Modernism posed regarding the autonomy of the artwork, the immutability of artistic intent, and the distinctions between high and low culture. Often as theoretically rigorous as it is humorously ironic, this loose confederation of artists values popular culture over high culture, the marketplace over the

Simple Chair, 1995
Roy McMakin
Photo by Mark Woods



Plain Chair, 1988 (built 1998)
Roy McMakin
Photo by Mark Woods

museum, relativity over absolutism, experience over ideology. The fetish objects of high Modernism, say an Eames LCW chair or a Noguchi coffee table, are simultaneously revered as icons and debunked as the remnants of a self-contradicting ideology, as both art and as anthropological artifact. “Design art” reflects the values of today’s post-industrial global consumer culture back on itself, hoping for a glint of recognition in the paradox revealed by its nostalgia for the simpler, more stable cultural identity of the 1950s. This self-critique suggests we are what we buy, and regards commodities as inseparable from the context of their manufacture, advertising, and purchase. Design artists appear to revel in this reality, seizing it as an opportunity to make artworks from a new cultural perspective. As artist Joe Scanlon writes, “...design art hopes to democratize [cultural] authority by providing mood lighting and comfortable chairs. Institutional critique is based on argumentation; design art on salesmanship.”

Design art raises some interesting questions from within its own back yard. Scanlon sums up a basic concern when he writes, “...invoking design and



Untitled (Chair with Hole in Wall), 2005 (computer rendering)
Roy McMakin
Rendering by Scott Graczyk

function as a foil for making art betrays a troubling lack of nerve.” He goes on to criticize those artists “...whose need for art to appear useful—without the risk of being so—strikes us as timid and sad.” At its most effective, “design art” inspires the viewer to think carefully about art, design, and craft, and about their constantly shifting relationships to consumer culture. It recognizes the cultural eloquence of functional objects and is intent on employing that quality in ever more subtle ways by emphasizing shifting contexts and meanings. On the down side, some design art flattens the milieu of everyday objects into abstractions, divorced from provenance and use—aesthetic commodities

ready for appropriation and consumption. Scanlon describes an attitude that views art objects first of all as commodities. Function becomes a transient fashion, an entertainment, rather than a core experience. But perhaps that’s exactly the point.

McMakin’s work fits uneasily into this genre. His practice exhibits a synthesis of art making, collaboration and entrepreneurship that has identified design/art fusions since the early 20th century. McMakin self-consciously refers to himself as a “concept generator” rather than claiming any of the many hats he wears—that of artist, designer, woodworker, painter, illustrator, architect, businessman. But in this sense he resembles a



above, left: *Untitled (Painting Chair)* 2003
Roy McMakin
Photo by Mark Woods

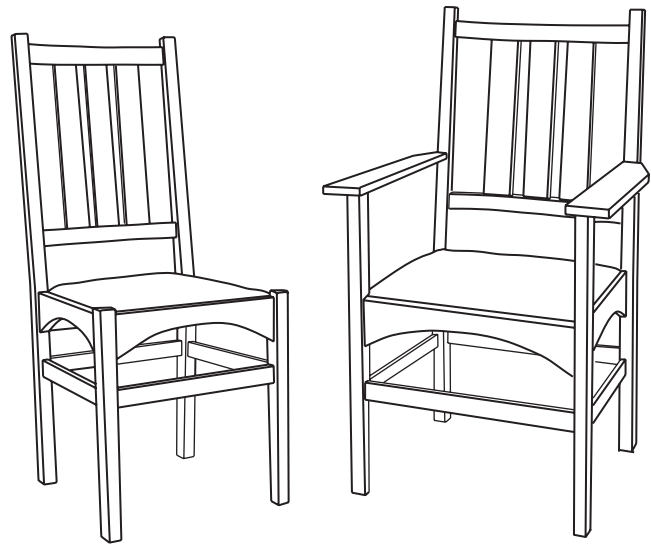
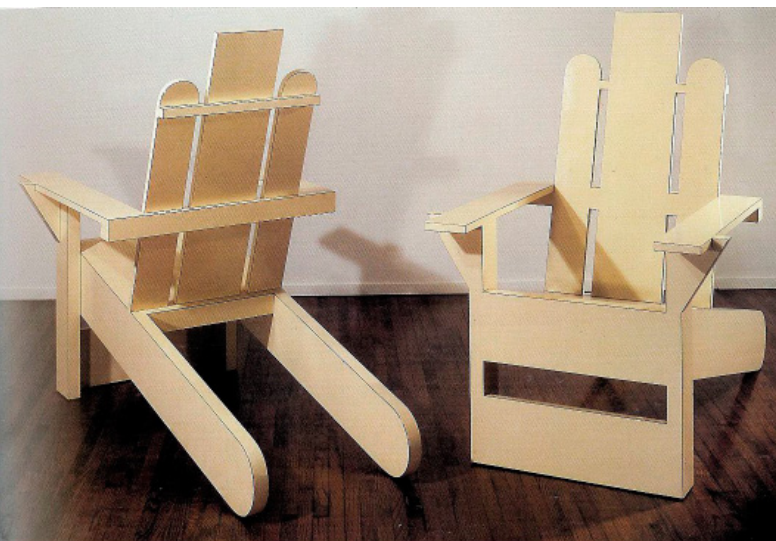
above, right: *Untitled (Sculpture Chair)* 2005
Roy McMakin
Photo by Mark Woods



left: *Untitled Chair Set*, 2005
(computer rendering)
Roy McMakin
Rendering by Scott Graczyk

Renaissance polyglot more than a Postmodern impresario. The breadth of McMakin's furniture-related experience enhances the richness of his work's context. While his most basic visual vocabulary refers to an esthetic of industrial production, the work denies such easy categorization. There are plenty of slippages in what the context of production and distribution actually is, but these lend a subtle solidity to the work rather than any backhanded irony. Its minimal character becomes a pallet for a broader viewer experience. This potential fills out the work as one looks closer and gleans more about its understated presence and provenance. Its formal simplicity and meticulously executed, almost industrial, workmanship leave little evidence of the subjective hand of the maker. As such the work becomes an abstraction of the handmade. When subjective marks are evident, they read even more strongly (and strangely!) by being framed as such by the surrounding minimal context. This highly self-conscious, conceptual evidence of craft parallels a similar and more subtle historicism that reveals itself to the viewer via a deep (yet strange!) familiarity of form. This experience and resulting conceptual framework emerges through the senses rather than through didactic catalog entries or placards on the gallery wall.

Lawn Chairs, 1982
 Scott Burton
 Photo credit tk



No. 353 Side Chair, Gustav Stickley

McMakin describes his collaboration with the furniture makers at Bigleaf Manufacturing as “...an almost Utopian quest to make perfect things in an imperfect world.” His choices to focus on the quality and provenance of materials, and his and one-off/batch approach to production, are noteworthy. The work's surprising handmade character relates more to the values of contemporary studio furniture than to those of contemporary design/art. Without employing the formal vocabulary of a more craft-based ideology, he is able to reflect that value system in forms that are unfamiliar. He's not a maker, but he acknowledges and employs the eloquence of the handmade object over the mass-produced. McMakin benefits from working at the distance of a designer, but he recognizes the empathetic power of the handmade—the dynamic that sparks between making and using. He channels this empathy from a distance that allows the work both its handmade nature and a more conceptual character at the same time. It is this quality of an object held in tension that also holds my interest.

David Pye, in *The Nature and Art of Workmanship*, emphasizes the importance of definition and distinction when discussing the relationship between design and workmanship. Pye differentiates, “Design is what, for practical purposes, can be conveyed in words and drawing:



Chair (1963), Formica on wood
 Richard Artschwager
 Photo credit tk

workmanship is what, for practical purposes, can not.” For practical purposes. He notes that the qualities of “good” workmanship are often misattributed to “good” design. Similarly, he suggests that there is no such thing as inherently “good material” but rather material that has been made good by the investment of workmanship. Quality, or rather a diverse range of qualities, is the outcome of a symbiosis between appropriate design and appropriate workmanship. Pye limits himself to a practical treatment of these concerns to describe a critical language with which to discuss

Untitled Chairs (1987)
 Donald Judd
 Photo credit TK



workmanship and its contemporary context. But Pye, in a more abstract sense, is also describing the balance of distance and empathy that is essential to any creative act or aesthetic experience.

The practical symbiotic relationship that Pye describes is of great importance to the success of McMakin’s work. His collaboration with Bigleaf yields more than the sum of its parts. On one hand, the relationship lends its products a specific character of quality, through the sensitive use of renewable materials, one-off manufacture, and small-scale distribution. The McMakin/Bigleaf partnership has clearly benefited from the practical relationship that Pye discusses. But the dialectic that exists between design and making benefits this work on a deeper level. It focuses the potential of well-designed, well-made objects to express ideas and experiences, concepts and phenomena, the quantifiable and the inexpressible. McMakin’s work balances the distance from which design conceptualizes against the empathy that quality workmanship elicits. This balance of distance with empathy is at the core an individual’s esthetic experience, and it is the lens through which I found myself experiencing much of this work.

The exhibition is accompanied by dozens of drawings that depict not only the formal, linear nature of design process, but drawing as repetition, as meditation. McMakin’s drawings become responses and addenda to the pieces, as well as documents of their development. They serve a range of purposes from practical to humorous, lending the work a broadly ironic character. They



Something (2005)
Jorge Pardo

are concepts, designs, half of Pye's equation for a well-met object.

As for the work, much of the exhibition consists of variations on a single generic Slat-backed chair reminiscent of the simple turn-of-the-century Stickley designs found in every school principal's anteroom. A reductive approach to structure, simplicity and consistency of proportions and use of materials, and straightforward choices of traditional construction methods all refer to this iconic form. As an object of material culture, the Slat-backed chair speaks in simple detail about the cultural upheaval that accompanied the passage of the 19th century—industrialization, Utopianism, commodification, and the aesthetic of the machine.

The exhibition begins with a set of simple formal variations. The basic chair is sequentially altered via changes in proportion, color, texture, and mass/volume—each with a title, name, and identity. Variations of simple structural details become a formal language, a means of documenting the viewer's evolving experience. The setting is at once sensually charged and mundane, an uneasy hybrid of art and life. McMakin presents this essential paradox in a variety of guises throughout the exhibition. Immediately one is frustrated

by the physical inaccessibility of the work. These are chairs after all—one wants to touch and sit. But the presentation emphasizes the hands-off nature of the gallery setting, turning apparently functional objects into “useless” art objects. By way of introduction, our presumptions, assumptions regarding what we see, how we look, and how we use, are being challenged. By focusing the viewer's attention, these chairs also displace it.

A second group of Slat-backed chairs eliminates most formal variation. These untitled pieces serve instead as generic vehicles for perceptual improvisations in the surrounding space, the space we navigate. By emphasizing this negative space around each neutral grey/white form, the voids between back slats, stretchers, and rails are reduced to primary delineations of the surrounding space—a Constructivist abstraction. Mirrors fill some of the spaces between chair elements, further displacing the viewer's gaze. As the center of one's experience shifts from the object to the space around it, the familiarity of perception and consciousness becomes mutable, relative. The work subtly leaves the domain of furniture, of everyday events, and is sublimated like a solid instantly becoming a gas. This is the sculpture of the Minimalists—geometric abstractions that maximize the viewer's evolving experience of space, translated back into the forms of everyday life. Essential objects for the domestic environment, if not its very essence.

Earlier I remarked on the effective hint at the presence of the maker's hand via some small, self-consciously placed details. A walnut dining set that dominates the center of the gallery employs these marks in an interesting way. The detail is a patch, or dutchman, that in the work-a-day world would be used to fill a natural imperfection or a mistake. McMakin's choice to include these perfectly crafted but apparently unnecessary marks as evidence of “craftsmanship” is at once beautiful and bewildering. His “explanation” for these patches is the sustainable use of materials, but they also refer to the prime directive of Modernism—truth to materials—and bring to mind a Modernist reverence for wood as expressed in the work of, say, George Nakashima. To me this is clearly a

diversionary tactic, a linguistic distraction that suggests a subversive pun on Modernist craft values and ideology. Beneath the surface lies a more interesting historical allusion. In his hilarious *Knotty Pine Box* from 1966, H.C. Westermann carefully inlaid imperfections into a clear pine box, undermining assumptions of the preciousness of nature and the values of craftsmanship. It is nice to find a little humor in *A Slat-back Chair* But these marks serve a deeper purpose in further blurring the boundaries between the realm of the designer and that of the workman. The resulting experience, particularly for one conversant in the history, materials and techniques that are furniture's language, is circuitous and confounding but one that engages me on a delightful variety of unexpected levels. The dining set is perhaps the piece most alienated from its role in the gallery setting and this dialogue serves to effectively address that distance for the viewer/user.

The exhibition returns to more purely formal concerns with a series of individually presented objects loosely abstracted from the Slat-backed chair form. These pieces attempt a more complex conceptual leap with mixed success. A “negative” chair grows from the wall, subverting the solidity of its partner sitting in “normal” space. Two chairs nested, mirrored, create a Siamese hybrid, *Nightstand*. These pieces differ from others in that they rely on linguistic and formal conceits. While clever in concept, each lacks the power to elicit a response via the viewers imagining of the physical experience of use. In the first case the chair forms have been too dematerialized, and have become too abstract. In becoming the “idea of a chair” they lose their familiar iconic identity. “Conceptual” furniture often labors under its detachment from the physical imagination. We carry this imagining with us and bring it to the work, completing it, participating in its effectiveness and meaning. This is the potential that McMakin's most successful work possesses. *Nightstand*, however, is less successful due to its reliance on a purely visual idea of “chairness.” It engages the viewer from a distance as a visual pun, ignoring the vital experiential depth of the haptic and tactile parallels to visual



Something (2005)
Joe Scanlon
Photo credit tk

imagination. Pye's delicate balance of distance and empathy is lost.

A final piece succeeds, however, in this regard. A low excavation through the drywall and studs of the gallery wall ends in a small opening through which one sees the legs of chairs and of passing gallery visitors. My imagination attempts to recreate the opposing view, remembering a simple chair, a mirrored space between its back slats, in conversation with its partners. But the mirrored space I remember turns out to be the void I'm looking through. No punch line, not even a title (*Untitled*). I'm left with an image of a chair sitting against a wall. Mundane. Not even a memorable chair! But the image in my mind is irreconcilable in space and time. I feel my grounding slip. I'm nowhere and everywhere.

Roy McMakin has shown us a chair and stated, “This is not a chair.” Not that long ago, another artist said the same thing about a pipe, challenging the notion that everyday objects belong to objective reality—that they mean what we see. *A Slat-back Chair* is that kind of experience. Who'd have guessed that furniture could do that? 🪑