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Gord Peteran

Furniture Meets Its Maker

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BY DAVID BALZER October 14, 2009 21:10

EDITORIAL RATING:

To Dec 5, Tue-Fri noon-5pm; Sat noon-4pm. University of Toronto Art Centre, 15 King's College. 416-978-1838. www.utac.utoronto.ca.

Marry Dada with craft and you get something like the work of Gord Peteran. Logically, then, University of Toronto Art Centre's current mid-career retrospective comes across as a sort of cabinet of curiosities. Peteran specializes in making furniture, much of it found or composed of found objects, into something more conceptual than we think furniture, with its strict style- and function-bound definition, can or perhaps should be.

This whimsical experimentation – Peteran calls his work “furnitural,” suggesting its self-referential qualities as well as its inert, monumental ones, à la “sculptural” or even “funereal” – can charm as well as irritate. And while it is, in part, meant to do both, it need not do the latter so much. Peteran is far too present in the exhibit as a guide, via wall-text quotes in which he appears to fancy himself a riddler from Lewis Carroll. (Samples: “That’s a piece where I did almost nothing” and “It quickly asks the question – the only question – what are we doing?” and “I look around, and all the evidence points to: you’re a furniture maker. How did I get here? It’s a conundrum.”) Here is yet another case for removing the artist from the presentation of his or her work: revealing too much, at least in terms of intentionality, destroys ambiguity, making valid aesthetic inquiries seem trite, phony or arrogant. (It’s the art-world equivalent of watching a movie for the first time with the director’s commentary on.)

Despite this, Peteran’s objects remain delightfully provocative. Two highlights are A Table Made of Wood (pictured), a demilune table composed entirely of sweepings from Peteran’s studio, and Prosthetic, a cast-off Shaker-style chair with a split seat that the artist “fixed” by attaching braces and a series of fused-together brass bits to make a weird, new elevated seat above the destroyed one. These fascinate especially because they could be used, although none of the objects, including the ones meant to be interactive, can be touched in this exhibit. However frustrating, it’s for the best: looking hard is the only way to appreciate Peteran’s fine craftsmanship anyway – and imagining hard is the only way to extract the coy, funny, philosophical questions he so carefully embeds within it.

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