

TRADITION || INNOVATION

American Masterpieces of Southern Craft & Traditional Art

Richard Prisco

The following is the summary of an interview conducted by Tom Spleth on behalf of the curator in May 2007.

In general, why do you do what you do? What underlies the commitment you bring to your work?

Richard likes the creative process: problem solving, fabrication, and seeing the final product. His commitment is centered on doing this very well, from the thoroughness of

design to details of the fabrication.



*Richard Prisco- Synchronized Swimming
Photo by Joseph Byrd*

What influences your work?

Is the history of craft, or the media you use, important to your work and if so how? Does your work draw references from or have any link to the past and if so how?

He is inspired by civil structures and the material connections between two or three parts. Within an aesthetic that is very contemporary, he refers to craft traditions to solve problems. For example, he cannot imagine making a cabinet without dove-tail joinery. And he finishes aspects of his furniture that will never be seen by anyone. Polished metal connectors or completely finished panels that will always be hidden, in the back or in an interior space, is a way of honoring the craftsmanship. In terms of design, he is not making references to past furniture in any way. His connection to the past is through using tried and true processes and techniques and maintaining a high level of craftsmanship.

How is, or is, utility and function a part of your work?

Utility is important sometimes but not always. If he makes lights, he wants them to light a room. Or if he makes seating He would like it to be comfortable. But, in

his work, these things are secondary to the design and form of the piece. Unlike Sam Maloof¹, who is dedicated to making the ergonomically perfect rocking chair, such consideration is not first in his mind when designing. He would be disappointed, however if his chair were uncomfortable.

Can you describe your studio practice? Do you work in isolation, independently, in collaboration, in community?

Because he is a teacher and his studio is at school, he works within the community of students. Aesthetically or when designing, he works independently. He acknowledges the contribution of his talented and opinionated wife, who is a person he can bounce ideas off of and who he can trust to give him helpful, honest critiques.

What does “mastery” mean to you?

Mastery is being the best you can be at what you do.

Are you a native of your current home community or did you move there? How long have you lived in the South?

He is not a native but a northerner. He has been in the South thirteen years.

Talk in general about the relationship of your work to place. Do you have a particular relationship to the land or a landscape? If you do, can you talk about it?

He has a particular relationship to structures within the landscape but none in relationship to the landscape itself. Civil structures, bridges, water towers, radio towers, over passes, highway lighting bases, are a resource. He is interested in the structures of connection; how these things are supported, how they are assembled, and the details of how such structures are made. These structures are not intended to be beautiful but they are beautiful because they are so unadorned, stripped down, and so clearly revealed. Over the years, he has put together a large collection of images and details from exterior civil structures.

In your opinion, are there features, factors, or conditions that distinguish contemporary craft being made in the South from work made in other parts of the country?

There are structures in the rural Southern landscape that are particular to the South, but his references are drawn from anywhere and everywhere. It is important to him to see these things personally before they are incorporated into his work. His students are children of the internet and are completely comfortable

¹ Sam Maloof is a world renowned contemporary furniture craftsman.

taking clip art from the web and incorporating it into their work. He is constantly encouraging them to seek an authentic, real-life experience.

Do you see yourself as an innovator?

Richard: No. I see myself as an explorer.

He is on a personal exploration looking for new forms and new details. He likes to make work that is unique but not over-the-top unique. One example may be that he machines metal bars etc. that make the work uniquely his own rather than buying such things out of catalogs.

How is your work evolving?

The work is getting streamlined, simplified. His earlier work was quite complex but he is taking similar ideas and making things that are more subtle with more simplicity.

Describe your relationship to community? Are there communities of people with which you affiliate or have a common interest?

The community around the school where he teaches is an important part of his life. He also has contact with an artistic community of non-furniture artists in town. The students become community because of the constant communication about all facets of furniture. He likes being at Penland School of Crafts, in part, because the community there is different from what he has. Penland is intense, diverse, and committed.

Do you see yourself as a keeper of the culture? What does this idea mean to you?

Yes. He promotes craft and solidly built furniture. The works that are being built now by craftsmen will become the antiques of tomorrow because contemporary manufacturing is part of our throw-away culture and manufactured furniture will not last.

What would you like your legacy to be?

To make things that will last a hundred years or forever. This is why we make it.

How did you learn your craft?

He got an undergraduate degree in industrial design and worked as a designer for product display and exhibition design for trade shows, etc. which was centered on marketing. He realized that he liked the making and returned to the Rochester Institute of Technology for a Masters in Fine Arts in furniture building.

Do you share your knowledge with others—the next generation of artists?

It happens everyday when he goes into school. He teaches in a design and build program and shares ideas, technology, and experiences.

What role do you think colleges and universities have played in the development of contemporary craft in the South? What role do you think places like Penland School of Crafts, Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, etc have played in the development of contemporary craft in the South?

Craft schools like Penland have played a greater role in the development of contemporary craft than colleges and universities where ‘art furniture’ is made without giving thought to technique or how things are put together. These kinds of things are disappointing to him. The loss of craft education in universities is not all the fault of universities but is indicative of contemporary cultural attitudes that the students bring to the table. Prospective students who are touring the school these days always ask how much money can be made with this information and career. They are also looking for immediate return and there is no place in their worldview for learning a craft or spending a lifetime understanding craft. He never thought about these issues when deciding to be a furniture maker. He always recommends that the decision be based on whether one loves the craft because one will be doing it for the rest of one’s life.