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Talking with Wendell Castle, Art Furniture Icon



Dan Cappellazzo for The New York Times

By RIMA SUQI
Published: July 21, 2010

Forty years ago, Wendell Castle, a designer who is known for his art furniture, introduced a collection of lamps. They were plastic, they were colorful and they bombed — he didn't sell one. Last month, at the Design Miami/Basel fair in Switzerland, the collection was reintroduced. R 20th Century gallery presented five designs in editions of eight, made from the same molds that the designer — still going strong at 77 — created in 1969 (at right, Mr. Castle with his Benny lamp). Several have already sold.

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What's the history of these lamps?

I had this idea — it probably started in 1968 — that I wanted to do floor lamps and take that term literally, that they were on the floor. At the same time, I was interested in exploring the qualities of fiberglass, and being able to come up with these bright, 1960s hot-rod colors.

The shapes remind me of your Molar furniture.

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The vocabulary wasn't so different than the ones I had used with the Molars. They were kind of mixed together in a sense. The earliest Molar came first, but then some of the Molar coffee tables came after these lamps. Anyway, there was something that attracted me to an arch shape — these were based on a voluptuous arch with a waist and things like that.

You named one (lower right) after Raquel Welch.

Yes, Raquel Welch was popular at the time. I also named one Fat Albert, after the cartoon character, and another one Sluggo, also after a cartoon character.

How were they received?

They were first exhibited at Lee Nordness Gallery on Madison Avenue in 1973. The show seemed to attract some interest but no buyers, and I didn't sell a single one. I don't remember how much they were, probably \$300.

But wouldn't the work have been very much in fashion?

It should have been, but it wasn't embraced at that time. That was not a time when artists did editions, and my reputation previous to this was for carved wooden pieces. So the people who liked that work thought I had abandoned what I should be doing and thought it was a bad idea I was making anything with plastic. Some thought it was a nasty material and if you were an artist you wouldn't use it.

What was your reaction?

I was actually prepared for it. I studied sculpture, and it was expected that selling sculpture was going to be very tough. I thought of the work as sculpture, not furniture. The fact that it was useful didn't add anything to it, for me.

I'd almost be afraid of too much acceptance.

Really, why?

I'd think I was doing something wrong if everybody loved it — that it must be commercial. There's a certain snobbishness in making things that people are a bit baffled by.

What happened to the lamps?

I took the lamps all back — I only made one of each, never made the edition. I put the molds in storage, put the lamps in the attic and some in the basement of my studio.

And now they're back.

There began to be more and more interest. We had never made an edition of the lamps, and it seemed like maybe now was the time to do it.

Why do you think people are responding more positively?

There are people who collect design now. At that time, there was no field thought of as "design." There was craft and there was fine art, and they were far apart in those days. While I wanted my work to have the art audience, the craft audience was much more interested in my woodwork.

Art galleries used to not show work that they thought could have any sort of use. There's quite a few people whose work 30 years ago might have been in a craft category who are showing in prestigious galleries now.

How do you feel about the lamps now?

I was in Basel and saw them displayed there, in the context of lots of contemporary work, and I



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think if you hadn't known the story or asked about them, you would assume they were contemporary.

I'm guessing they're a bit more than \$300.

The price has gone up a little. They're in the \$30,000 range.

Information: (212) 343-7979 or r20thcentury.com.

A version of this article appeared in print on July 22, 2010, on page D2 of the New York edition.

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