

# McMakin



## **Roy McMakin: Middle**

January 29 to June 10, 2012

The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum

## Roy McMakin: Middle

Walk into a room and in a matter of seconds (on a subconscious level) your mind identifies and categorizes every major thing that is visible: there's a person on the right (female, white, forty years old); there's a group of geometric wood objects (furniture: table, chairs, bookcase); there's a spherical object on the table (vase: ceramic); and a hole in the wall with an overhanging section (architectural features: fireplace, mantle). This reaction is not only the way in which we orient ourselves to the world, but also a fundamental human survival skill, ingrained into our consciousness by millions of years of evolution. When something unusual, outside of simple categorization, is thrown into our field of view, we pause, look, and consider. These anomalies are usually figured out rather quickly, but the man-made ones that we continue to come back to with questions—sometimes for centuries—fall into another category: art.

For over thirty years Roy McMakin has been asking simple, but profound questions about the categorization and hierarchy of objects and our relationship with them. In the 1980s McMakin founded Domestic Furniture<sup>1</sup> in Los Angeles, a company that manufactured and sold functional furniture that was at first glance reductive in design, but on careful examination strangely full of arresting details. For instance, McMakin would do things like introduce slight asymmetry into the seat of a chair that was otherwise rigorously geometric. This type of stealthy detail planted a notion in the mind of the viewer: *something is wrong, I need to look*. The everyday world of the easily categorizable creates the opposite reaction: *everything is as it should be, so there's no need to pay attention*.

Besides furniture, the artist's practice from the beginning has embraced sculpture, architecture, painting (something he has pursued since childhood), design, and photography, among other things—all distinctions that are in some way secondary to McMakin's main concern of being what he considers a "philosopher of visual experience."<sup>2</sup> In addition to being a maker of objects, McMakin has been a lifelong collector of furniture, purchasing his first piece at the age of thirteen. As an adult, McMakin has frequently incorporated used furniture into his work, or altered found pieces in ways that amplify their qualities.

For this exhibition, *Middle*, McMakin is plumbing both emotional and aesthetic territory, altering eight pieces of furniture that he lived with while he was growing up. The title of the exhibition not only refers to McMakin being the middle of three children (he has a brother two years older and a sister who is five years younger), but also the unifying strategy that tempered his approach to working with each piece. The primary motivation, however, in creating this group of works was not a proscribed formal exercise, but rather the artist's emotional, subjective experience, which was focused on preserving (and heightening) many of his complicated personal associations. It might seem counterintuitive that radically altering something could act to preserve it, but what's being preserved in this case is not each piece of furniture's outward form, but rather its emotional reality in the context of a human life.

McMakin's mother passed away in 2005, followed by his father in 2009, which led to the situation where he was purposely severed from his family's legacy. This state of affairs included the difficult process of the artist extricating his early furniture collection from his remaining relatives. Initially unsure of the pieces' future, McMakin decided in early 2011 that utilizing the handful of objects in



some manner would both engage the deep nostalgia he felt for them and ensure their continued existence. Rather than having them disappear into the world of flea markets or estate sales, their transformation in the studio would help to shepherd them into the outside world while acknowledging the reality of both past and present circumstances. The result, *Middle*, is a body of work that speaks of disconnection through acts of violent, yet precision craftsmanship: every piece of furniture (except one) has been surgically trisected, resulting in a group of objects that exhibit a spectrum from total disability to complete functionality. McMakin has engaged the timeless process of creating art that is based in wrenching emotional trauma—work which must be disturbing while requiring (as does all good art) formal resolution.

The unusual decision was made to include in this exhibition two paintings done by McMakin as a teenager. These paintings—of houses—are remarkably accomplished, but their inclusion has more to do with their specific history and relationship with the artist's deep aesthetic influences. McMakin would sell his paintings (sometimes for as much as several hundred dollars) and then turn around and purchase furniture with the funds that were generated. While most teenagers were spending money on things like records or cars, McMakin was beginning his life of being both an artist and a collector (and by extension a businessman) by weighing the relative aesthetic merits of objects discovered at garage sales and flea markets. McMakin's early paintings,

The first piece of furniture I designed (and made in seventh grade shop class) which my father crudely sanded down and stained a mottled brown, 2011  
Courtesy of the artist



together with pieces such as *The first piece of furniture I bought (which was painted red when I found it)* reveal another early predilection, a love for the Arts and Crafts movement,<sup>3</sup> a preference that continues to inform the artist's work to this day. The painting *Untitled* (1973) pictures an Arts and Crafts-style bungalow, while *The first piece of furniture I bought* is an oak Stickley<sup>4</sup> desk. The ideals of the Arts and Crafts movement evolved into the utopianism of the Bauhaus, and McMakin's philosophical stance echoes these movements' belief in art, craft, design, and architecture being coequal.

In *The first piece of furniture I bought*, McMakin has taken his Stickley desk and cut it perfectly, removing a thin, one-inch thick slice. The remaining two pieces—a front and back section—have their cut surfaces painted a white that contrasts sharply with the desk's natural oak finish. When put tightly together, the two sections form a desk that is still potentially functional, but as their alignment grows more separate the familiar desk form is transformed into two delicately balanced cross-section diagrams that resemble architectural plans. The organizational and structural plan of the desk, which is usually eclipsed by its outward form, is powerfully made manifest by the gesture of trisection, and the viewer can alternate between looking at the desk as a desk, or as a geometric abstraction. Rather than being a complete negation of the desk (and by extension its past associations) the cut has somehow reinvented it as a purer and more expansive object.



With works that have titles such as *The first piece of furniture I designed (and made in seventh grade shop class) which my father crudely sanded down and stained a mottled brown* any interpretation seems redundant. The act of naming the piece is not only a condensed history, but also a stinging indictment of McMakin's father's indifference to his son's interests. This work (made from a magazine rack that McMakin built when he was twelve) is singular, however, in that it is the only object in the exhibition that has not been physically cut: its "middle" nature has been determined by the artist's construction of two new, identical units that have been painted white, embracing (and protecting) the original rack. When put together so they are touching, the work strangely resembles a crib, while the repetitive and modular form has associations with certain Minimal sculpture, such as the work of Donald Judd. McMakin's work often exhibits qualities of being both emotionally "hot" and "cold" and *The first piece of furniture I designed* is a good example of the artist's predilection for entertaining these opposites in a single work.

As a maker of objects, McMakin is unusual in that he is a colorist, and his studio, Big Leaf Mfg. in Seattle, has developed a palette of iconic paint colors that are frequently used throughout his various practices (McMakin's furniture can be either natural or painted). The piece *A rocking chair (that never had a seat) I painted blue when I was sixteen* involves the juxtaposition of two periods of McMakin's life onto one object. A slat-back rocking chair that McMakin purchased as an adolescent and painted blue has had the middle third removed and a new middle section, based on one of his own designs for a basic slat-back chair,<sup>5</sup> has been grafted into the void. The old and new are obvious from the differences in finish and color, but more importantly, the chair's anthropomorphic nature has been subtly amplified. Chairs are the most human pieces of furniture in that they directly relate to the size and shape of the



*A rocking chair (that never had a seat) I painted blue when I was sixteen, 2011*  
Courtesy of the artist

human body, with corresponding parts aptly named “legs,” “arms,” and “backs.” The work’s most arresting human detail, however, is incorporated into the new seat section: the carving of the “saddle” that includes a raised line that reflects the space between one’s legs. The chair has been sexualized by the frisson between the perfection and location of this line and the rough, surrounding nature of the old chair.

It should come as no surprise that McMakin possesses a vast store of knowledge concerning the history of American furniture. Given his interest in both Arts and Crafts and Modernism, it would seem that the Colonial revival of the 1920s would be at odds with his general tastes, but as with much in the artist’s career the situation is not so simple. The piece *The bed I bought when I was a teenager that was later put in the creepy (maybe haunted) room in my parents’ basement where I had to sleep until Mike refused* is made from a bed that was made in the 1920s, probably in the upper Midwest. Places like Lansing and Grand Rapids, Michigan, were the centers of American furniture manufacturing until World War I, when they were gradually eclipsed by North Carolina. Much of the Colonial revival ended up being a pastiche of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Neoclassical design, and the bed that McMakin bought circa 1970 shows the influences of the Federal, Sheraton, and Regency styles. The artist slept in this bed not just as a teenager, but as an adult, and its continued, though irregular use over a forty-year period (McMakin used the bed with his partner, Mike, when he visited his parents) added emotional baggage to the already somewhat-overwrought historicity of the piece. So, what to do with a piece of furniture that contains such complex associations? McMakin’s solution was to cleanly insert two pieces of mirror, back to back, which divide the bed like a bundling board.<sup>6</sup> One thing that was definitely *not* part of the Colonial revival of the 1920s was the bundling board, and McMakin’s gesture, although seeming at first glance like something a Puritan would do, has a decidedly disorienting spin: looking into the piece’s mirrored reflection one can only see one’s body from the knees to the hips. Instead of simply bisecting the bed, the mirrors act to compound the piece’s bilateral symmetry, making the bed more akin to the sleepers it once held in its embrace.

In considering these works one is apt to ask whether the artist’s specific personal history would be at all apparent without explanation. Probably not, but what is clear is that these objects have been transported from the world of general, objective experience into one that exhibits a disarming emotional subjectivity, and that this condition connects the viewer with the artist through a sense of shared dislocation. Although McMakin’s family situation is extreme and specific, most people deal with the complex and conflicting emotions surrounding the relationship with their parents and siblings, and these feelings can be unexpectedly triggered by experiences as simple as sleeping in the old bed, or hearing the chime of the clock that stood for years at the top of the stairs. The works that constitute *Middle* don’t clearly fall into the category of heirlooms, but perhaps yet another act of division can bring us closer to their real meaning: an heir is a person who inherits the property of another following the latter’s death, and a loom is a device that weaves material into a whole.

-Richard Klein, exhibitions director

The bed I bought when I was a teenager that was later put in the creepy (maybe haunted) room in my parents' basement where I had to sleep until Mike refused (detail), 2011  
Courtesy of the artist



1 Domestic Furniture still exists and is run by McMakin out of his studio in Seattle.  
([www.domesticfurniture.com](http://www.domesticfurniture.com))

2 From McMakin's essay "What Do I Do," published in the monograph *Roy McMakin: When is a chair not a chair?* (New York: Skira Rizzoli and Matthew Marks Gallery, 2010), p. 113.

3 The Arts and Crafts movement was a design philosophy that originated in England and spanned the years from 1860 to 1910. Initiated by the work of artist and writer William Morris and influenced by the writings of cultural critic John Ruskin, the movement emphasized honesty, simplicity, and truth to materials, while advocating for progressive social and political reforms and a rejection of industrialization.

4 Gustav Stickley (1858–1942), a furniture designer and manufacturer, was the major proponent of the Arts and Crafts movement in America

5 McMakin has been making variations of this chair since 1983, when he started Domestic Furniture.

6 A bundling board was a piece of wood placed down the center of a bed that prevented the individuals on each side from having physical contact with each other. Used as an aid to courtship, it allowed intimacy without sex and was popular between 1750 and 1780, gradually falling out of favor by the nineteenth century. For further information, see the article on colonial courtship in the *Colonial Williamsburg Journal*: [www.history.org/foundation/journal/holiday07/court.cfm](http://www.history.org/foundation/journal/holiday07/court.cfm)

look. look again.

## The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum

258 Main Street, Ridgefield, CT 06877  
Tel 203.438.4519, Fax 203.438.0198, [aldrichart.org](http://aldrichart.org)

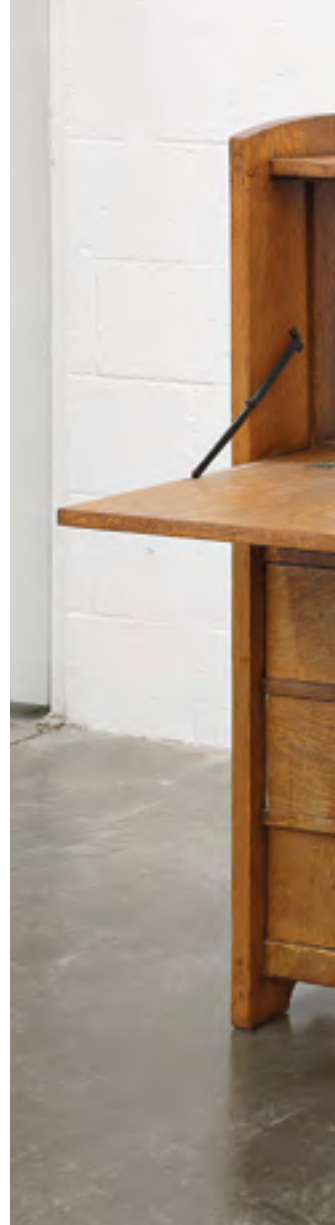
The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum advances creative thinking by connecting today's artists with individuals and communities in unexpected and stimulating ways.

### Board of Trustees

Mark L. Goldstein, *Chairman*; Eric G. Diefenbach, *Vice-Chairman*; John Tremaine, *Treasurer/Secretary*; Annadurai Amirthalingam; Richard Anderson; William Burback; Chris Doyle; Linda M. Dugan; Georganne Aldrich Heller, *Honorary Trustee*; Neil Marcus; Kathleen O'Grady; Donald Opatrny; Gregory Peterson; Peter Robbins; Martin Sosnoff, *Trustee Emeritus*

Larry Aldrich (1906–2001), Founder

The first piece of furniture I bought (which was painted red when I found it), 2011  
Courtesy of the artist



INSTITUTE of  
Museum and Library  
SERVICES



Connecticut Commission  
on Culture & Tourism