Our Hiding Places

Rashaid Farida Al

Virginia Commonwealth University

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OUR HIDING PLACES

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

FARIDA AL RASHAID
Master of Fine Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, Kuwait, 2007
Bachelor of Science, Bowling Green State University, Kuwait, 2002

Director: Bill Hammersley
Professor, Craft Material Studies, School of the Arts

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
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# Table of Contents

| Acknowledgements | i |
| List of Figures | ii |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 History of my work</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Process Into Illusion</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Our Hiding Places</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Influences</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### List of Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Bent wood lamination</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Bent wood lamination</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Figure 3 under the Rug</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Figure 4 under the Rug</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Give me back my keys</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Give me back my keys</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Untitled Chair</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>M&amp;Ms</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>M&amp;Ms detail</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Wendy Maruyama lipstick cabinet</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Andy Buck Broom Cabinet.1992</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abstract

OUR HIDING PLACES

By Farida Al Rashaid, Master of Fine Arts

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2007

Major Director: Bill Hammersley
Professor, Craft Material Studies, School of the Arts

I am creating this body of work based on how we as a society interact and utilize our every day valuable possessions. These would consist of personal items such as our keys, wallets and purses, As well as how well we are able to hide them from strangers, insofar as to where we personally choose to place them. It’s interesting how many of us can be lackadaisical in this regard and as a result, many times don’t carefully think about
where we choose to place our valuable objects, until we lose them or worse, have them stolen.

I am exploring the more thoughtful placement of these personal type possessions in our every day life, and how we have heretofore attempted to conceal them.
History of my work:

When I first came to Virginia Commonwealth University, I had no idea what to expect or what I was really getting myself into. Nevertheless, I was completely sure of one thing: I wanted to design furniture. My background is in interior design, and so it is vitally important for me to know how to build and construct my designs.

The laws of physics dictate designing and building furniture and creating a 3D object is a lot different than a 2D object. For example you can draw a functional chair with one thin leg but in reality, it’s a lot harder to make a functional chair with one thin leg. Understanding function and creating functional objects is harder because you have to understand the medium and its limitation, and at the same time, create an artistic and visually interesting piece.

I want to educate the viewer and one day I hope to teach and pass my knowledge onto my students. Therefore, I want to learn how to become the best artist I can be and in doing so, my students will become better artists. There is a personal pride in knowing that I played a positive role in their success, for teaching is truly a learning experience. These are the primary reasons why it is important to me to build and construct my own designs and thus why I decided to pursue my graduate studies in furniture design and woodworking.
As an interior designer, I worked with a lot of small models that were focused on design and aesthetic principles. These models were my only experience with woodworking. As a result, when I started my graduate studies, I felt that I needed to learn everything I could about wood and furniture making.

When I first started, I had a completely different perspective on wood and furniture making, because I did not know my medium or how things were made. This hindered my ability to think about designing a piece because I did not know how to make it; and that was truly terrifying. I soon realized that I needed to first understand, and then learn, how things were made in order to become a better designer and artist in time. This was a real challenge that instilled in me a great respect for my medium and inspired me to work even harder.

I loved the challenge my work presented. This was because my work’s successful completion brought about a rewarding sense of accomplishment in being able to create, from my mind, something physical that was not only aesthetically appreciated, but in addition, functional. I also loved the process of seeing my inspirations become reality in the finished pieces that I alone created using my hands, which has always been truly satisfying to me.

My satisfaction emanates from my personal love of object making, as well as the aesthetic ecstasy generated from the creation itself.

During my time spent here at VCU, I have overcome a number of obstacles, the biggest being the technical execution of the original idea. At first, I felt overwhelmed with everything. I wanted to prove myself and excel in my field. To
accomplish my aspirations, I diligently spent my first and second year in graduate school focused mostly on learning the technical issues of woodworking.

In my second year, I started making jewelry pieces in wood, Figure 1-2 using a technique called bent lamination. I enjoyed working on the jewelry pieces, and although I felt comfortable in that scale, I decided to get out of my comfort zone and truly experiment with different projects such as functional and sculptural work. Some of the projects produced total failures and some surprisingly inspiring achievements. I found that, through trial and error, I truly sharpened my skills and thought processes.

In the summer of 2006, I started working on a body of work that was designed for a foyers and entryways. These architectural spaces appealed to me because they are the key places for one to make a first impression. The foyer is an area that everyone (the pizza boy, the FedEx guy, guests etc.) sees first and most importantly, it is the room that we pass through a number of times each and every day.

In addition, the foyer is a small entrance place in which one situates one’s self (i.e. takes off a hat, coat, etc.), before entering the main living room of the home. Foyers are “…transitional spaces that serve as bridges between your ‘real’ rooms. “(Landis 1). Although the foyer presents a design challenge, in that it is usually small and narrow, designers often ignore and/or overlook it.

However, I personally loved the challenges that the foyer presented. This is because the foyer gives people an idea of what the rest of the house might look
Consequently, with the right piece of furniture as well as a well thought out design, the foyer can make a great impression. All of these reasons led me to explore the many unique possibilities of the entrance hall’s small dimensions, and in so doing, the quest of designing unique furniture pieces that would be ideally intended for it.

When I was researching the foyer and entryway, I came across a book written by Dylan Landis entitled “Foyers, Halls, and Stairs.” One of the interesting things in this book is a list of items that we normally tend to keep and/or store in those spaces (i.e. keys, wallets, purses, hats, overcoats, boots, umbrellas, books, newspapers etc.).

It occurred to me that even though these are mundane items, they are still very important belongings and therefore uniquely valuable to us in our everyday life. So much so, that if they are lost and/or stolen a great inconvenience is experienced by the owner.

It’s interesting how many of us can be lackadaisical in not carefully thinking about where we choose to place our valuable objects, until we lose them, or worse, have them stolen. This made me think about the many hiding places we use to conceal these personal items, and why we choose these hiding spaces, such as hiding the spare keys under the rug.
Process Into Illusion

In my second year, I started making jewelry pieces in wood, Figure 1-2 using a technique called bent lamination. This process consists of slicing wood into thin strips, coating it with glue and clamping it to a form until the glue dries.

I also experimented with the process of vacuum forming veneers. One of the hardest things about this process is that wood can only bend in a certain direction, making it somewhat limiting. A piece of wood can only do what a piece of paper can do, and I have found that using two-ply veneers can give you a better result, Using this process I was able to create an illusion of a soft surface being formed over an object. There is a long history of bent lamination and veneer forming in furniture. The successes of my experiments led to a unique application; one of illusion or trompe l’oeil. The ability to create illusions through this process led to my thesis work.
OUR HIDING PLACES

One of the most interesting things my mother owned was a fake stone in which a spare key is stored. That stone was so fake that anyone could easily recognize it for what it was. Nevertheless, for years and years this stone sat on the ground in front of our house, interestingly enough right next to real stones, flowers and other decoys.

I used to make fun of my mom for keeping and using it because our house keys were actually bigger than the opening in that fake stone key holder, so they visibly dangled out from its opening. It doesn’t take a genius to see that our house keys were visibly right out in the open for anyone to take, and still my mother loved that key holder and would not part with it. I look back and realized that my mom’s beloved fake stone key holder, that I made fun of, actually became the inspiration for this body of work.

This body of work is based upon how we as society interact with, utilize, handle and safeguard our every day valuable possessions, such as; our keys, wallets, purses, etc. It is also based on the ways we hide them from strangers, for example, putting the spare keys under the rug, or purses under the tables or desks.

The furniture pieces I created have very specific, as well as unique, functions. For example, there is a foyer table in which a set of keys could be stored. With this I am
exploring the more thoughtful placement of these personal possessions and how we have attempted to conceal them. By creating hiding spaces within the furniture and highlighting the placement of one’s personal possessions, the furniture takes on very obvious and suggestive clues, which I refer to simply as ‘teasers.’ This is because you will not immediately know what exactly is hidden under the surface of my work. As a result, the ‘teasers’ attract the viewer to explore the work further, in order to find out more about the piece itself and what it is concealing.

The ‘teasers’ are very suggestive but at the same time demonstrate a very specific problem-solving function, which is providing a memorable hiding place for our everyday valuables. This body of work consists of innovative applications highlighting viable places where people can safely hide their possessions. At the same time, the possessions are close by and readily available to use. In this body of work, I am not creating secret compartments, but I am creating hiding places that reference the hiding places we already use. I am exposing these silly foibles and in so doing, examining this behavior. I am exploring innovative design ideas implementing the principles of exaggeration, limitation and humor.

In figures 3-4 I created a series of tables that were based on hiding spare keys under the doormat or under the rug. The humor behind this idea is how we can be very trusting that no one else knows where to look for the spare keys, but in reality our hiding place is very cliché. As a result, we often go to the extreme in making sure that no one is watching us when we attempt to retrieve the hidden item.
This amusingly reminds me of how dogs hide their bones or when and where squirrels hide nuts. There is something intriguing about people’s need to have secret hiding places. We seem obsessed with hiding things from others beginning in childhood. We keep secret diaries, letters, pictures etc. We even love keeping secrets that we have sworn to others never to reveal. In general, people love to secretly harbor personal items, information and knowledge. We revel in knowing something others do not.

We as humans have always been fascinated in exposing and unraveling hidden secrets.

In Figure 5-6 I started to look at what other eccentricities that people have when hiding objects. These observations led to the next piece, which is a hall table that has a life of its own. Instead of the viewer hiding their own keys, the hall table hides the keys from the viewer. I was reading a very amusing book entitled “Why Men Don’t Listen and Women Can’t Read Maps.” The author conveyed that most men generally can’t see what’s right in front of them. For example, how they can’t find the milk right in front of them in the refrigerator etc. In reading this book I gained some insightful inspiration that aided me in designing a table that curls up and covers a set of keys, why is it that some times we can’t see what’s right in front of us? I still can’t find an answer to that question.

I was watching the Cosby Show one night and in this episode the son, Theo, was searching for loose change that could have been lost within the sofa. Of course, Mr. Huxtable, the father, comes into the room and takes the money that
Theo found because he was the one who took naps on that sofa, and that meant the money in the sofa was his.

Nevertheless, this episode of the Cosby Show made me think about all the things people purposely hide or unexpectedly lose within their sofas or chairs (i.e. money, candy, keys, remote controls, magazines etc. etc.). Hence I created a chair, in figure 7, which has an opening down the center of the seats with a sliding dish beneath. Here the user can hide coins or other items and then slide it back out of sight. This is also the purpose of the chair in Figure 8-9. This is a chair that has a bottom tray for all the M&M candy that usually falls in between its cushions.

I am very interested in working with mundane items that are yet important to people (i.e. keys, hand bags, wallets, etc), that many of us take for granted and don’t miss until we’ve misplaced them. In creating these pieces of furniture, I feel that I am helping the viewer understand, more profoundly, the intrinsic value of everyday, mundane objects.

Elevating the mundane in an everyday object can be done through creatively making the ordinary or mundane come alive by engaging aesthetically ones’s attention, imagination, and intelligence. Thus to elevate an everyday object is to be able to arouse human feelings by bring a bout pleasurable sensory experiences that can relate to the natural world or to the object of artistic creation. Thus to elevate everyday objects is to create extra-ordinary versions of ordinary everyday objects.
Influences

“The Nature of Order” by Christopher Alexander

Fifteen Fundamental Properties:

Alexander conveys to the reader that about 20 years ago he came to the realization, through analyzing and observation, that objects such as flowers, paths, seats, furniture, streets, paintings, fountains, doorways, arches, friezes and buildings have a life. He identifies the characteristics of this life through fifteen fundamental properties. That he found were repeated over and over. I use these principles as a guide when viewing my work. These characteristics are:

1. LEVELS OF SCALE,
2. STRONG CENTERS,
3. BOUNDARIES,
4. ALTERNATING REPETITION,
5. POSITIVE SPACE,
6. GOOD SHAPE,
7. LOCAL SYMMETRIES,
8. DEEP INTERLOCK AND AMBIGUITY,
9. CONTRAST,
10. GRADIENTS,
11. ROUGHNESS,
12. ECHOES,
13. THE VOID,
14. SIMPLICITY AND INNER CALM,
15. NON-SEPARATENESS.
I think it is important to look at other artists work such as Wendy Maruyama Figure10 and Andy Buck figure 11, who I admire and who have greatly influenced me. But there is a fine line between copying someone else’s design and being influenced by them. We as artists have to be very aware of this in order to produce a successful body of work. Personally I feel that my work does not necessarily belong in a certain era or style, because my designs are combination of a myriad of things. For example, the simplicity of the Shakers, the powerful lines of formalism and a little bit of humor all are things that makes up a style that’s uniquely mine.
Literature Cited


Figure 1-2 Bent wood lamination 2004

Figure 3 Under the Rug, 2007

Figure 4 Under the Rug, 2007

Figure 5 Give me back my keys 2007
Figure 6 Give me back my keys 2007

Figure 7 Untitled Chair 2007

Figure 8 M&Ms 2007

Figure 9 M&Ms detail. 2007

Figure 10 Wendy Maruyama
Lipstick cabinet.

Figure 11 Andy Buck.
Broom Cabinet. 1992
VITA

Farida Al Rashaid

Biography
Born on March 09, 1981.

Education
Master of Fine Art, Craft Material Studies 2007
Virginia Commonwealth University - Richmond Virginia.

Bachelor of Science, journalism 2002
Bowling Green State University - Bowling Green, Ohio.

Exhibitions
2007
MFA thesis Show
Anderson Gallery, Richmond, VA

2006
Candidacy Show
Gallery 5, Richmond, VA

2005
First Year Show
FAB Gallery, Richmond, VA