

The Futile Effort of Differentiating Fine Art from Design

The Useful and the Decorative at the Landing explores the relationship between fine art and design, and how the lines blur between them.

[Daniel Gerwin](#) August 24, 2017

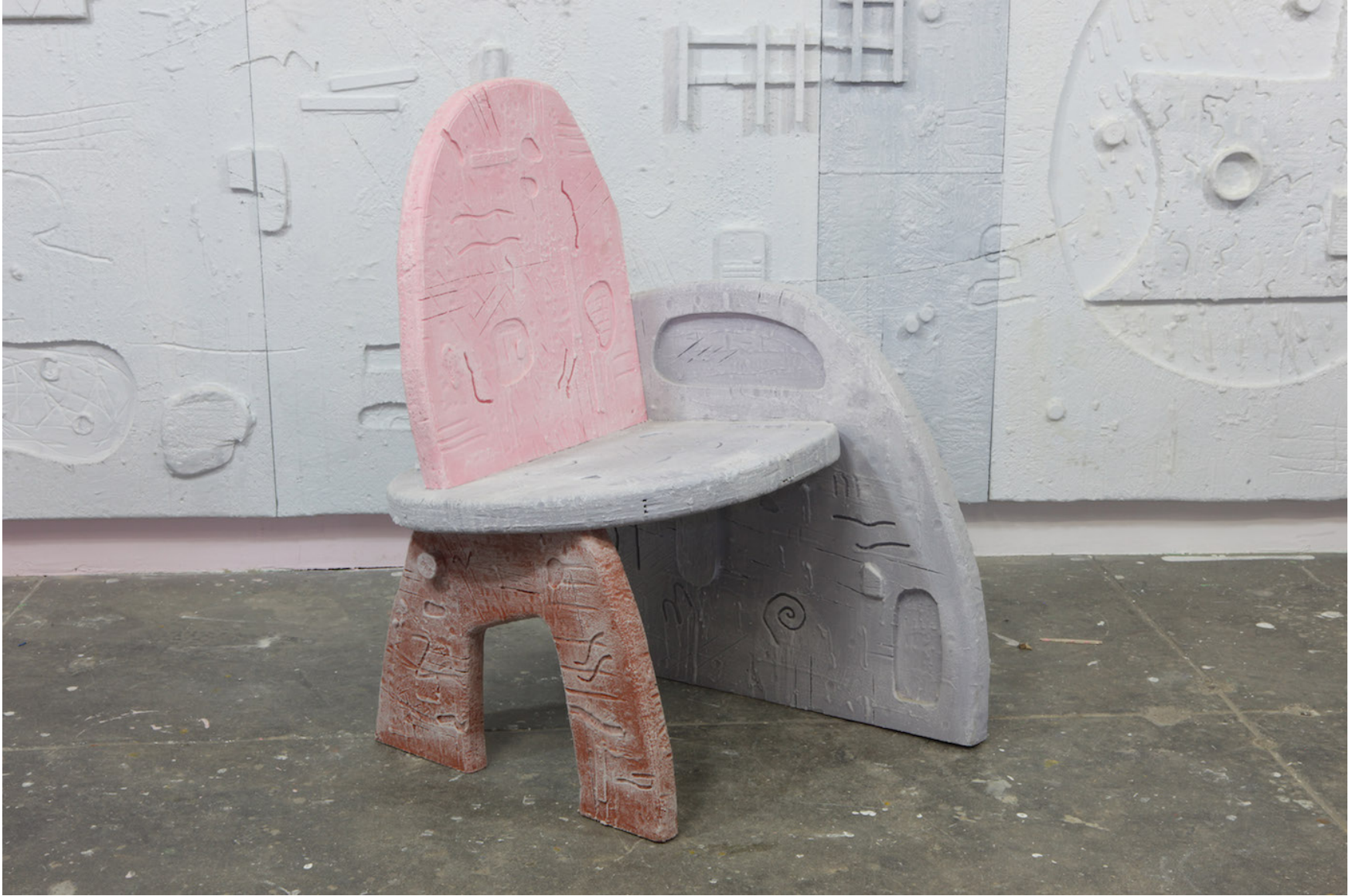


Ryan Fenchel, "Sidereal Procession, the Adept In Public" (2017), acrylic, oil, chalk, pencil on canvas, 155 x 41 inches (all images courtesy the Landing and the artists)

LOS ANGELES — If you ever admired Eero Saarinen's modernist [Tulip chair](#), a mid-20th-century industrial design icon, and thought it made for better sculpture than whatever you just saw in the art gallery down the street, you

will enjoy [*The Useful and the Decorative*](#) at the Landing. Comprising seven artists — unfortunately, only two of them women and all of them white — the group exhibition explores the relationship between fine art and design, and how the lines blur between them. Underlying this investigation is the suggestion that these two arenas are distinguished by their use-value: design is explicitly utilitarian in its reinventions of items such as silverware, furniture, lighting, etc, while artworks are made without any practical function in mind, their central utility being conceptual. This exhibit is a nice opportunity to consider whether or not you buy that argument.

The strongest works are by Ryan Fenchel and [*Don Edler*](#). But while the former identifies himself as a painter, and the latter as straddling between fine art and design, these considerations had no impact on my experience of their work. Fenchel paints vessels from his imagination, including vases, amphoras, jugs, and the like, taking liberties with their shapes and surfaces. His best piece in the gallery is “Sidereal Procession, the Adept In Public” (2017), a 12-foot-long frieze of 10 vessels set in vivid chroma. The connection between the image and its title is far from clear, but there is richness and delight in the orchestration of shapes and hues, some anthropomorphic, some like human organs, some resembling antique Chinese porcelain.



Don Edler, "Anthropocentric Tablet and Chablet Tair" (2017), plywood, OSB, hydrocal, styrofoam, iphone, calculator, pingpong paddle, credit card, sunglasses, liquid nails, paint roller, latex, and surf wax, 120 x 110 x 2 inches and 30 x 24 x 20 inches

Don Edler presents cartoonishly chunky chairs in pastels muted by an application of surf wax, but the piece that held my attention was "Anthropocentric Tablet and Chablet Tair" (2017), involving one of his curious seats placed beside a nearly 10-foot-square, gray tablet hanging on a wall and covered with markings reminiscent of the Rosetta Stone; a desultory collection of objects is embedded in its surface, including an iphone, ping pong paddle, credit card, and sunglasses. We are to imagine ourselves encountering this thing in the distant future, when the attached items might be as inscrutable as the glyphs alongside. Even without this conceit, the color and surface are seductive, and the inscribed shapes suggest something primal and strange.



Installation view of *The Useful and the Decorative* at the Landing, featuring furniture by Garry Knox Bennett

The remaining works in this exhibit don't pack much of a punch, and the curatorial framework is not enough to redeem them. They suffer from lack of vision, or heavy debts to canonical creators before them. [Gabrielle Garland](#) paints domestic interiors that include artworks or celebrated furniture, such as an Eames Lounge Chair. Her paintings recall the photographs of [Louise Lawler](#), but lack Lawler's elegance or critical bite. If anything, Garland's portrayals seem reverential, leavened by distortions that occasionally make an overstuffed chair resemble the 80-year-old grandmother you would imagine sitting in it.

A number of works in the show focus on domestic items, using furniture both as imagery and in functional ways, including plates and chairs. [Alexandra Hedison](#) presents two photographs of domestic items wrapped in plastic (furniture and a chandelier), both of which come off as melodramatic. The exhibition also features a series of ceramic plates made by Myrton Purkiss in

1948, presenting them as wall-based art, highlighting their pattern of concentric circles that dimly recall [Marcel Duchamp's *Rotoreliefs*](#) but fail to impress. [Garry Knox Bennett's](#) contribution to the exhibit is a mixed bag, with some unimaginative pieces in which famous designs such as Eames chairs are bisected and mounted to protrude from the canvas, which is then painted with faux cast shadows. When Bennett makes furniture, however, he can be charmingly inventive, as in his toy-like handcrafted side table (2006), the very first thing one sees entering the gallery, and one of the better things in the show.



Alexandra Hedison, "Shroud II" (2005/2012), Inkjet print, 31 x 41 inches, framed

Which brings us back to the question of utility: How helpful is it as a lens through which to think about art or design? Broad categories are cognitive shortcuts that help us navigate the world efficiently, but upon close

inspection they tend to disintegrate. The Greek vases and African masks we admire in museums had both daily and ritual uses. Duchamp placed a urinal on a pedestal in 1917, arguing that what really matters is not the object, but the gallery or museum context that frames it as an artwork. Isamu Noguchi was a giant of 20th-century-sculpture who designed furniture, lighting, and ceramics, any of which give stiff competition to the art of his time. And I would be remiss if I failed to mention [Maurizio Cattelan's "America"](#) (2016), an 18-karat solid gold toilet that does everything a toilet is supposed to do, with the added bonus of being a succinct visualization of the shit hole Americans find ourselves in since Donald Trump's election, shortly after the golden loo was installed at the Guggenheim museum. What concerns me more than categories or the overlapping spaces between them is an object's ability to stop me in my tracks, generating a powerful aesthetic encounter that provides something to consider long after the work exists only as an experience in memory. If a Noguchi coffee table can do that (and it can), you can call it whatever you want.

[The Useful and the Decorative](#) *continues at the Landing through September 2.*