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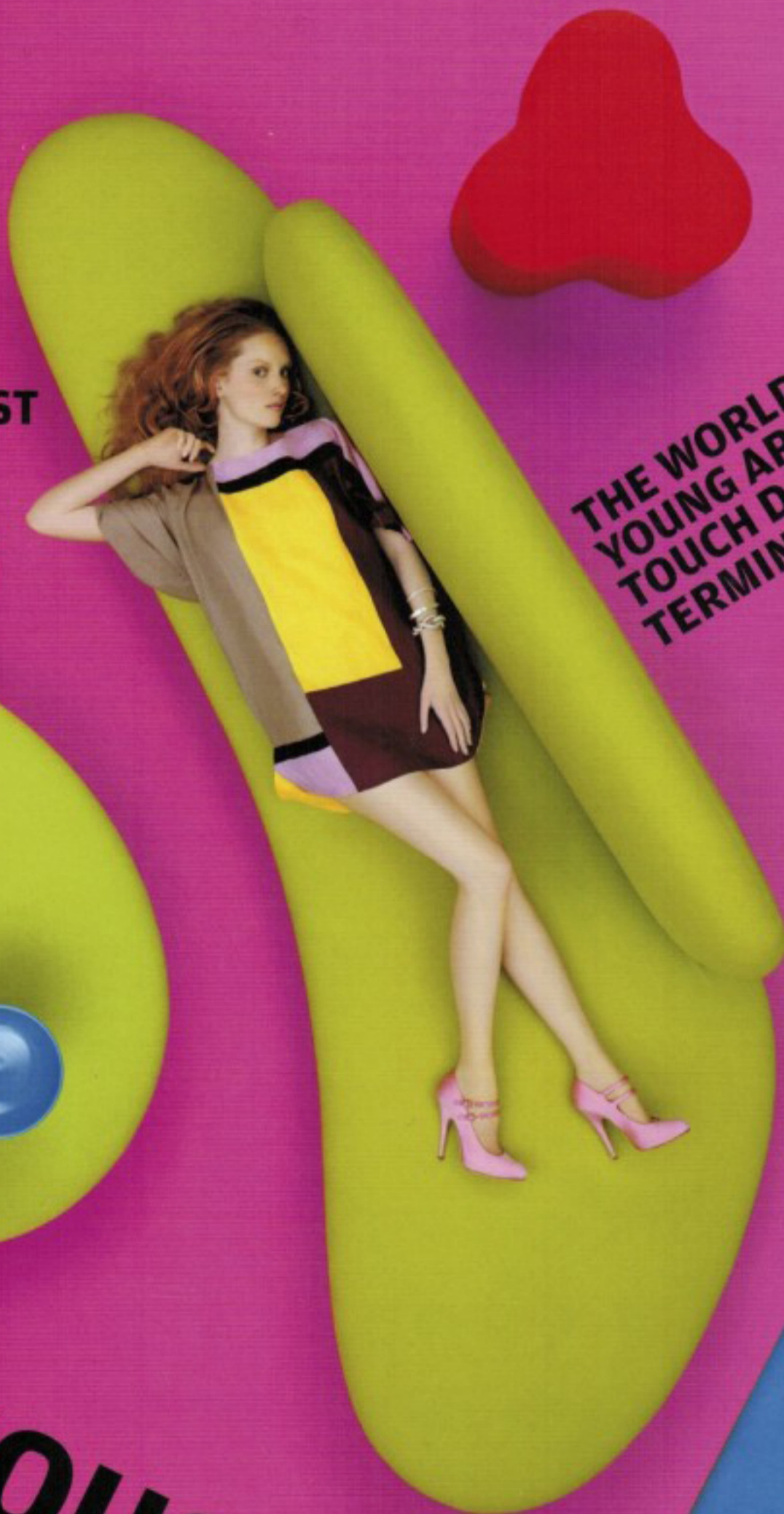
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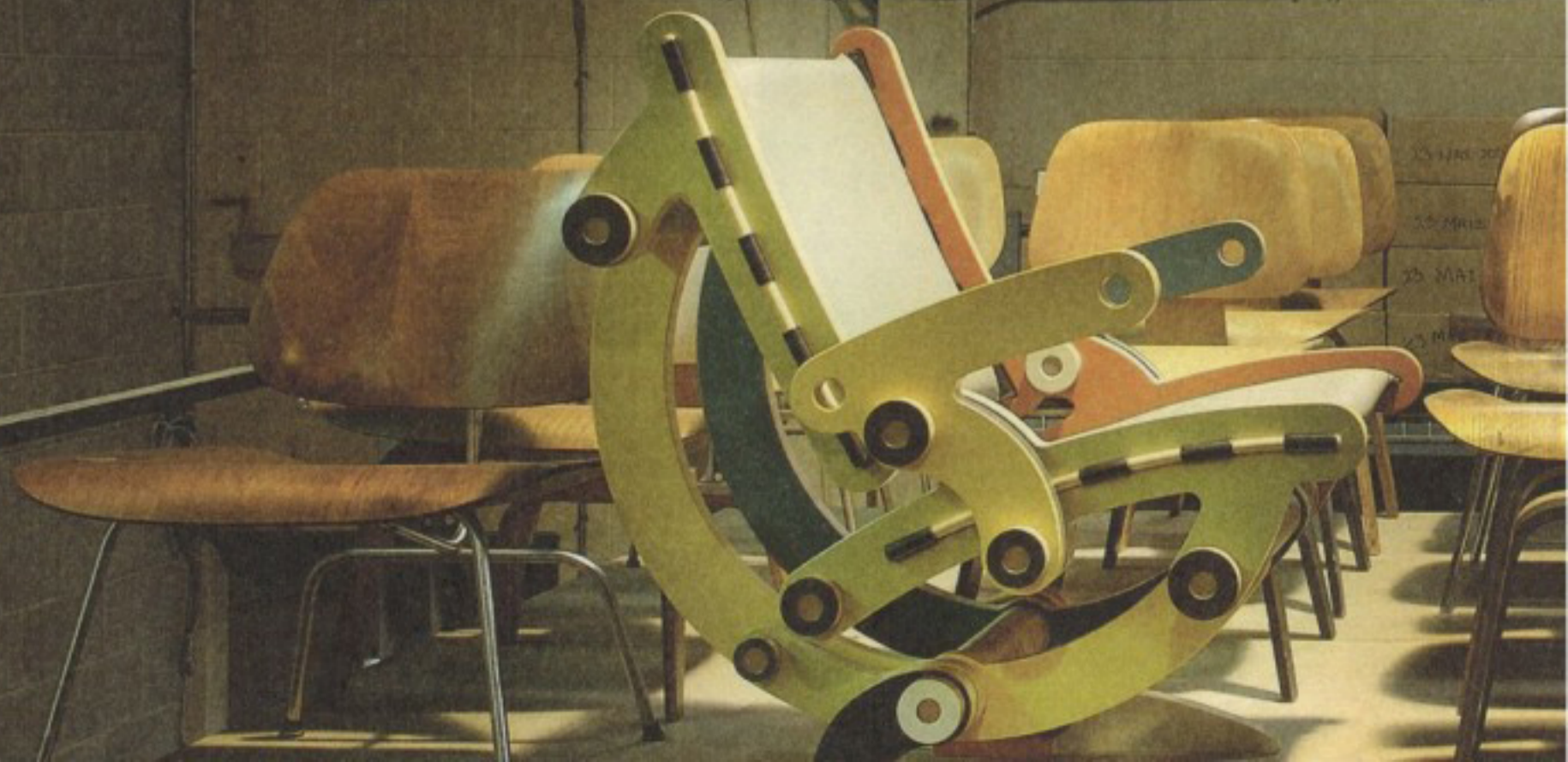




# The outsider

Kenneth Smythe has spent the last 30 years developing a unique design code of angles, colour and geometry and feeling rather rejected. Finally, though, his work is about to get the display space it deserves

PHOTOGRAPHERS: MICHAEL ROBINSON AND JOE FLETCHER. WRITER: AMARA HOLSTEIN





though Smythe doesn't want to talk about it. 'It's not about making money,' he declares. 'It never has been. It's about my personal growth.' A personal growth Irene has supported, emotionally and financially.

Much of Smythe's work stems, he says, from his perception of himself as an outsider. Placed in an orphanage in a small town in Massachusetts when he was two, Smythe still smarts from what he sees as natal rejection. First disavowed by his father before birth, then abandoned by his mother as a toddler, the chair designer labels himself as a 'reject'.

When he was 17, Smythe signed up with the military to 'get the GI Bill and \$300 outpay'. Briefly returning to the east coast after leaving the service and working a series of odd jobs in a machine tool shop and a laundry, he was befriended by the organist in a local Baptist church. He made Smythe question the fundamentalist Christian doctrines he'd been taught in the orphanage. 'That set me on a course over the next 30 years to unwind my religious identity,' he says, 'and create a new one in its place.'

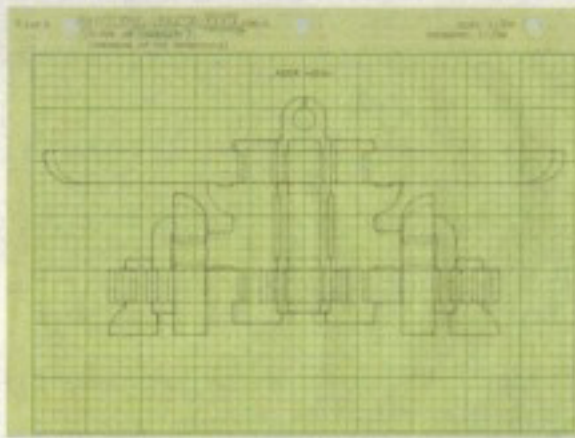
In 1968, having recently broken up with a girlfriend and on the verge of losing his job, Smythe saw the film *The Graduate*, which was set in Berkeley, and decided that was where he wanted to start a new life. He sold everything he owned, hopped on his BMW motorcycle and rode across the country.

After taking carpentry classes at a community college, because someone had offhandedly suggested he might be good with wood, he attended architecture school at the University of California, Berkeley, to refine his talent. 'That's where I got a stronger sense of my ability to design,' he says.

It's also where he made the decision to design furniture as a life pursuit, applying himself to a purist ideal of artistic creation, rather than seeing making chairs as a way to earn a living. Design replaced religion in Smythe's life. Apart from a few random carpentry jobs, he has never worked for anyone but himself; it's his wife's teaching career that has put food on the table all these years. 'My goal has always been to achieve control of my discretionary time,' he says. 'I design for myself and the universe and hope that someone else will like it.'

It all plays into Smythe's notion that 'the world is going to hell in a hand basket. People have lifestyles that aren't sustainable. They're addicted to consumerism and a throwaway culture.' Instead of sinking into despondency, Smythe channels his beliefs into his work. 'I want to capture a feeling that people had a long time ago of a mystery about the world and a reverence for life, in which the viewer looks at images and has an emotional connection. I try to bring that ideal into the home through my use of massing, colours and the way all my pieces are carefully connected. They all have a sense of gravitas, an idea of permanence. They're not going anywhere.'

Everything about Smythe's work is personal. He embraces the idea of the 'reject'



#### PAPER TRAIL

**One of Smythe's table designs; only a few dozen of his many ideas have so far been built**

by using materials that most people cast off. All his furniture is carefully made from combinations of sheet plywood, PVC pipes and Formica. 'Plywood and Formica have always been thought of as inferior materials,' explains Smythe. 'I attempt to turn a sow's ear into a silk purse. It's a challenge to me.'

To create a sleek and sophisticated look out of such lowly materials, Smythe spends hours painstakingly crafting each piece by hand. Except for some machinist jobs, like threading the metal in the chair frames and cutting leather for the seats, he does everything himself, such as stripping the Formica of its top layer of melamine, then polishing it with Scotch-Brite pads on an orbital sander until it has a glassy finish.

Central to his designs are the thin birch plywood sheets that comprise the frames and surfaces of all of his pieces, and onto which he laminates paper-thin slivers of Formica. Though there's a natural tendency to draw parallels between Smythe and the Eameses, he scoffs at this, noting that the Eameses were constrained by the necessity of creating moulds for their pieces. Smythe, on the other hand, has created a system in which the plywood can be easily, and cheaply, rendered on a computer, then cut by laser, creating unique pieces that can be mass-produced (technology not available to the Eameses).

'No one else is doing anything like this,' he says proudly. When I mention names like Alvar Aalto and Marcel Breuer, who also innovated with plywood, he is hardly reverential, insisting 'they hadn't exploited the material enough'. Indeed, there is no waste in Smythe's work; 'If the material can get cut up into a 1/4in diameter doughnut, it gets used.' All these 'doughnuts', or small round pieces that finish off the ends and edges of the chairs and tables, are the coloured exclamations that dot his work.

Every Smythe chair starts with the same seat. The space of the seat, the height from the floor and the pitch of the chair always remain constant. It's an equation the designer started more than 20 years ago. 'Everyone else designs a chair from scratch and the seating is always different because they're changing all the configurations. Their seating isn't integrated into the chair. I came up with geometry for the seating that gets plugged in

first and is locked in. The seating is essential. It's not an afterthought, it's the starting point.'

This means that setting yourself down in one of Smythe's chairs is a surprisingly comfortable experience. He's worked out the precise angle at which the curve of most people's backs hit the chair when fully reclined, and there's no slipping forward or sensation of being forced to sit ramrod straight. And 'unless you're Quasimodo', says Smythe, almost everyone finds his chairs a good fit. He doesn't glue anything, but uses notches and nuts to hold pieces together. This means that, over time, the wood expands and contracts without losing structural integrity, giving gently in all the right places to become easier to wear – like a favourite pair of shoes.

And, although the seating is standard, the variations on the frame are almost limitless. The style of the piece, the type of armrest (or the exclusion of one), the colours of the Formica additions – all these can be tailored.

Inspired by his love of classical music, it's the idea of variations on a theme that holds together Smythe's design system, from Brahms and Mahler to his current favourite, Bach. 'The music is expressed in my work. The whole idea of variations. You've got to be able to invent, then the variations come off of inventions. It's what separates the greats.'

Smythe has sent his works to galleries and competitions but always met with rejection. Until last year, when he happened to see an advertisement for the Wright gallery. He sent in some images with the brief message, 'If you like my work, I'll hear from you.' Smythe says with a smile, 'I heard from them.'

Indeed, as soon as he received Smythe's images, Michael Jefferson, a specialist in 20th century design at the gallery, decided he should pay the designer a visit. He fell in love with what he saw in the Berkeley garage, and an early Smythe piece, a simple three-legged stool, now has pride of place in his office.

'This market rewards trendy, colour-of-the-month things, but Smythe's work is far out of the mainstream,' explains Jefferson. 'He approaches design as a way to create objects that elicit an emotional response. He takes materials that are otherwise banal and makes something extraordinary and beautiful out of them by being precise with his cuts, by refining and re-refining the pieces.'

The gallery now sees itself as a steward to Smythe, planning to exhibit his works and produce one-off versions of his designs for sale this autumn. Should the partnership prove fruitful, Smythe plans to build his most elaborate pieces yet: monumental tables and lights comprised of Richlite and titanium. Weighing hundreds of pounds, the pieces will incorporate his ideas of interconnectedness of objects and nature, as well as more secular ideas of community and creation.

'The whole system I've created is about design liberation and possibilities.' Smythe pauses, thinks for a moment, then continues, 'It's about trying to create perfection.'\*

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CHAIR MAN WOW  
Smythe at work in his  
Berkeley garage studio



**C**hicago's Wright auction house sits in an area of the city where old warehouses and meat-packing facilities are slowly being turned into galleries and restaurants and design studios. Within an old print works, its vast stock of 20th-century and contemporary design is kept in a massive storeroom. Here you can look down upon the rows of Eames, Prouvé, Perriand, Memphis and more from a gallery.

It's quite a view, but among such a treasure haul, one piece jumps out – a poppy, almost cartoonish chair. It is in many colours and has a crazy yet somehow coherent geometry. It stands alone, outside the conventions of design as we know them. If you were going to make a film about a chair, a chair with odd

or magical properties, a chair of mysterious origin, this would be the chair. Actually – and it's not all that surprising when you find out – this chair comes from California.

Berkeley, California, to be precise. Here, on one of the west coast city's winding hillside streets sits a Mediterranean-style bungalow. There's nothing particularly remarkable about it, unless you count its view of the Golden Gate Bridge. Kenneth Smythe appears, tanned and bearded, flips the lock on the garage and slowly lifts the door, revealing a worktable on which sits an unfinished chair, a series of elegant wooden curves punctuated by staccato stops of reds, greens and yellows.

For the last 30 years, Smythe has laboured in this garage, designing, drawing, working,

sanding, cutting, reworking, all the time refining his ideas. He can, and will, talk for hours about the perfect chair. He's had a lot of time to think about it.

The work in his studio is just a fraction of what exists on paper and in his mind. Over the 30 years, he's only built a few dozen pieces, because, he says: 'I'm a designer, not a builder.' Most of his output furnishes the bungalow. There's a long, low storage unit made of rough-hewn wood in the living room. There's an intricately carved credenza in the dining room; and there's a sewing table he made for Irene, his wife of 37 years. Even the kitchen cabinets are his handiwork.

The last time Smythe sold a piece was in 1993. The buyer was a famous comedian, »