



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: *Long Life Pine*, 2003, salvaged white pine, bronze, 16 by 30 inches; *River of Love . . . or Tears*, 2003, ash, Douglas fir, steel, bronze, 46½ x 45 x 24 inches; *Endure the Dark*, 2003, ash, maple, cherry, fiberglass, 32 by 15 by 36 inches. Photos/John Carlano.

JACK LARIMORE

Schmidt Dean Gallery, Philadelphia, PA

June 13–July 26, 2003

For more than two decades Jack Larimore has been an important figure in the Philadelphia studio furniture scene. At one time he operated a sizable commission business, and even today he makes soundly functional residential furniture most of the time. For this solo exhibition he departed from his usual *métier* to explore the territory between furniture and sculpture.

The exhibit comprised 10 objects, each carrying a specific reference to furniture. *Endure the Dark*, 2003, has six legs, a tail and a top carved to recall the veining of a leaf. Presumably it could be used as a side table, although the interior remains inaccessible. *River of Love... or Tears*, 2003, has four tiny drawers, beautifully constructed but almost useless. The simultaneous reference to and frustration of function is a familiar trope in the studio furniture biz, serving mostly to confuse the identity of the object. Is it furniture or is it sculpture?

Woodworkers have been heading into this territory for more than 30 years. The presumption seems to be that functionality is an onerous restriction, and that a furniture/sculpture hybrid offers more opportunity for free expression and unfettered exploration. Yet, there's also a hidden presumption that craft should not be repudiated entirely. Otherwise, why not just make sculpture and dispense altogether with the trappings of function and skill?

One reason is that furniture makers have proven to be lousy sculptors. Part of the problem is that they seem to define sculpture as form in space, period. This definition—widely accepted in the woodworking community—harkens back to the early 20th century, when sculpture first broke away from representation. Freed from figuration, sculptors could directly address mass and void. But it has been a long time since they have dealt with only those issues. The field is now dominated by the influence of conceptual art, and sculpture has no essential subject. Many furniture makers, however, seem not to have heard the news.

In a way, Larimore is like most woodworkers who make quasi-sculpture. His objects betray no influence from conceptual art; they're beautifully made, and they all sit on pedestals as if the mode of display confers status. But Larimore's objects are not failed sculpture. They are redeemed by two qualities not much valued in the sculpture world. The first is a kind of fantasy: the invention of odd, evocative forms. This can be traced back to the Surrealism of Arp, Miró and early Giacometti. Some observers detest the influence of Surrealism in craft, finding it juvenile and unsophisticated. Yet, the creation of peculiar shapes is a manifestation of pure imagination. The ability to leap beyond the quotidian world and fabricate something new will always be interesting. And as an inventor of offbeat forms, Larimore excels.

His table *Long Life Pine*, 2003, has 11 sawtooth legs, each terminating in a tiny bronze foot. Each foot stands on tip-toe, as if the whole thing is trying to sneak out of the room. Inexplicably, one foot rests on a golden ball. The whole is at once familiar (it's a round table, after all), strange and wonderful. The resourcefulness of Larimore's imagination is reinforced by the fact that the devices he invented for *Long Life Pine* are not used elsewhere in the exhibit. A lesser artist might have repeated himself.

The second quality that rescues Larimore's work from mediocrity is animation. Even though they are perfectly motionless, these objects grow, creep, bounce, paddle and hesitate. The secret is that each work recalls a body, and that the separate parts embody a human action. The anthropomorphic nature of furniture helps animate the objects, because we are quite accustomed to thinking of furniture as having a carcass, legs, feet or handles. Jack Larimore is an expert in making these elements irregular and unstable, and thus gestural. At Schmidt Dean, it was as if the room were a theater populated by a cast of odd marionettes, each one doing a weird little dance. Despite the occasional dark metaphor, it was hard not to be delighted.

— BRUCE METCALF

Bruce Metcalf is a jeweler and occasional writer who lives near Philadelphia.