

ARTFORUM

Margaret Wharton

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Margaret Wharton, *Jestress*, 1980, darkroom enlarging paper, wood chair pieces, epoxy glue, glitter beads, waxed cord, and bells on a metal armature, 41 × 13 × 6".

Pity the poor chair. Name another piece of furniture so vexed with symbolism. The bed? A lumpy theater of sex and death. The kitchen table? A schmaltzy metaphor for family. But it's the humble chair that hums with the voltage of our messy human lives—so much so that when its occupant is gone, an empty chair is unbearably literal. Small wonder that artists as varied as Scott Burton, David Hockney, and Vincent van Gogh have exploited this object's emotional potential.

For Chicago artist Margaret Wharton (1943–2014), chairs were, first of all, sources of cheap material—available at any flea market or thrift store. Beginning in the mid-1970s, she deconstructed common wooden chairs and remade them into sculptures that are at once cheeky and volatile. Like many of her Imagist peers, Wharton produced gregarious riddles. Her work is amusing and cleverly engineered, but beneath its surface are rigorous audits of form and materiality.

This show featured ten constructions produced between 1979 and 2011. Wharton's early sculptures are anthropomorphic without being purely figural. Take *Jestress*, 1980: At just over three feet high, encrusted with glitter beads and topped with a jaunty belled cap, this work emanated all the prankishness its title implied.

Tucked into a nearby corner was *Figurine (Ballet Dancer)*, 1979, which featured the titular character perched on pointe atop a concrete cylinder painted pink. The charm of both pieces is partly a function of their dissonance: a wooden tutu, a chair sporting clownish headgear. Their perverse scale is a bonus gag. As furniture, *Jestress* is too dwarfed and spindly to suffer a human ass, while the gawky ballerina is so distorted and teetering she should've been placed on a gurney instead of a stage.

Wharton's play with scale continued in *Book Ends*, 1980, a piece whose vertiginous verticality felt like an imminent blooper. Wood pieces affixed to the wall at floor level invoked a chair in profile; stacked on its seat was a zigzag of books, spines out, extending almost nine feet overhead. One imagined that the draft generated by a housefly could send the whole thing tumbling. Only when you browsed the titles on some of those spines did you realize that they're volumes on religion, history, government, and geometry—the foundations of civilization, which is likewise on shaky ground.

A conceptual counterpoint: In the 1960s, Lucas Samaras began creating his own mutated chair sculptures, wrenching a variety of media—bronze, cloth, wire, and other materials—into ingenious simulations. Whereas he was interested in the chair as formal shorthand, Wharton was interested in the chair as medium. Her works aren't surrogates for other ideas; they are the idea. As she notes in an undated artist statement, a chair incorporates "the human activity of destruction and reconstruction." It's a universal entity that manifests in nearly infinite variations—a bit like people. (Chairs, too, have arms and legs.)

In a trio of late works, Wharton fused chair parts with an array of different materials to form playful humanoids. *Tomboy*, 2009, is a woman hewn out of wood and baseballs, with rhinestone eyes and a necklace of miniature baseball bats. *Different Strokes*, 2011, is a tennis player hodgepoded from golf clubs, golf tees, rackets, and a tennis ball. *Bipolar*, 2011, is an ornamental chair that's been squashed and embedded with dozens of compasses. (This piece takes on pathos when you know that Wharton was bipolar and spent much of her adult life seeking an inner true north.) Although these figures were made just three years before Wharton's death, they still possess the DNA of 1970s Imagism. The sculptures' graphic boldness and aerobic jouissance—like roadkill run down mid-jeté—recall Karl Wirsum's byzantine cartoon formalism.

I'll mention a final work: *Essence of Chippendale*, 1985, a spoof of the famously genteel English furniture. Instead of the standard sober upholstery, this seat's pattern is a conniption of garish foliage. The wood is mismatched. The angelic wings flanking it give the work a lofty, chariot-like vigor. Chairs are a little ridiculous no matter their pedigree, Wharton seems to suggest, yet their architectural satisfactions can't be beat. To paraphrase Mies van der Rohe, chairs are tricky. Skyscrapers are easier.