

SIGHT UNSEEN

JULY 29, 2019

A BREAKOUT AMERICAN DESIGNER INSPIRED BY LOWRIDERS AND LAWN CHAIRS

by Dana Covit



29-year-old Ryan Preciado, a Los Angeles-based furniture designer, started making furniture “by accident”— at least that’s how he puts it — 10 years ago. So it goes to follow that his practice feels honest, exploratory, and even childlike with a sense of play and curiosity. After moving to Los Angeles six years ago from his small hometown on the central coast of California, he’s been cutting his teeth alongside the team at South Willard, where the high-gloss tables he designed alongside artist Magdalena Suarez Frimkess are currently on view, as well as working for Peter Shire, LA’s very own human embodiment of the city’s particular strain of artistic whimsy. We recently caught up with Preciado to talk through the process of mining memories, preserving levity, designing “teenage furniture,” and more.

What was this accidental introduction to furniture making?

When I was 19, a friend and I were making mission statement videos for small businesses. A carpenter approached us and asked if we could make one for him. He proposed a trade: We would make his video, and in exchange, he would supply the materials and teach us how to make a project of our choosing. Halfway into making my desk, I knew this was something I wanted to keep doing.

Where are you from? Do you think that place has impacted your creative practice?

I’m originally from a small town on the central coast called Nipomo. Moving to LA made me realize what my hometown offered, which was a sense of community, a good work ethic, and the ability to focus on what’s in front of me. Everyone in Nipomo is a hard worker. Labor-intensive jobs are what’s available. A lot of my friends from there are mechanics, welders, commercial painters, etc. When I worked for carpenters out there, they really instilled a strong “There’s a way” attitude in me.

Do any specific memories or experiences from your childhood inspire or inform your work?

I lived with my grandma for the majority of my childhood. She is Chumash Native American and her

brother runs a small Chumash cultural center in Guadalupe, CA. When I was a kid, we would visit the center and she would teach me about the artifacts in the cases. She would tell me about how the Chumash were mindful with the materials they used, how the objects they made were made to last. That has definitely influenced my decisions.

My grandma had a big garden that my brother and I used to play around in. She had one of these flimsy little kid plastic chairs, the ones you can find at a swap meet, and it always sat in the same place just baking in the sun. After many years of use and abuse, it ended up looking like some sort of melted sculpture. I remember looking at it, and though it didn't resemble a chair anymore, we still sat in it every day. I think about that now when I am designing something: Something can be functional and useful without looking ordinary.

When I got older, I would go to lowrider or hot rod car shows with my uncles. I remember watching these guys who I looked up to drooling over cars that were pink, purple, green, and yellow... with bright pink, fuzzy interiors. This memory still gives me the confidence to use color and to not take myself so seriously when making something. I think those cars relieved me of thinking something has to be done a certain way — or that there's a formula I should stick to.

When did you get to LA? Has it become a unique source of inspiration for your work, too?

I moved to Los Angeles about six years ago. I've always been interested in car culture, and Los Angeles has definitely furthered that admiration. I introduced colors in my chairs inspired by cars, like the iconic Gypsy Rose lowrider. Then, last year, I was fortunate enough to work with a great LA-area artist, Magdalena Suarez Frimkess, on two tables that feature her art. After painting them, I used a 3M buffing and polish compound that you would use on a car to get that mirrored look. When I was a kid, my grandpa would give me five bucks to buff and polish his cars. I bet that's why I'm attracted to the glossy finish.

Aside from that, so many of the people I've met here have helped shape what I'm doing, have had some confidence in me since early on. I'm really lucky for those relationships. For example, I started working at South Willard only a couple of years ago, but I have been going in since I moved to Los Angeles. The owner, Ryan Conder, has helped me in more ways than I could count.

And you've worked with Peter Shire for a while, too. What's that like?

I've been working for Peter Shire on and off for four years. What's made an impact on me in my time there is how he considers everything. If you were to go into his studio, you would see every tool, toolbox, sawhorse, fan, all painted to his liking. You are entering a world he's created. It goes beyond art, which is something I've always gravitated towards.

What do you think drives your design process?

I'm a curious person, so everything becomes research. I am constantly trying to understand how things are made, and every once in a while, I get an idea of how I can add to that conversation and alter it in some way. It's easy for me to get sidetracked onto another idea, or to add way too much to an existing one. I'm trying to get better at simplifying...

The main goal for me is to always finish whatever is in front of me. I like having an idea, drawing it out, and then getting to work on it as soon as possible. Even if I'm not particularly happy with whatever it is, seeing a finished thing in front of me is a good feeling. Right now that keeps me wanting to create.

What about dream projects?

I've been daydreaming about designing a grocery store, thinking about how I would make the shelves and the shopping carts. A grocery store is somewhere everyone has to go... and it's a real chore. Design can impact that.

Do you have any personal design or art heroes?

Borge Mogensen, Roy McMakin, Gaetano Pesce, Ken Price, Tobia Scarpa, Ron Nagle, Bertand Lavier, and Frank Lloyd Wright.

What are you working on right now?

I'm currently working on some table lamps and sconces using porcelain and stainless steel. A friend of mine is teaching me how to work with porcelain — a really beautiful material that you can experiment with in terms of translucency and finish.

Any new ideas or memories you want to explore?

I've been thinking about this idea "Teenage Furniture." Last year, I was home visiting my family. My 14-year-old sister had her friend over and they were both sitting on the sofa. One was hanging with one leg over the arm rest while laying upside down on her back, and the other was so slouched I only saw her head and no torso! When I would look back, they would have moved into another crazy position but never sat normally. I want to make something that explores this, where these types of positions become how the object allows you to sit or lay or slouch.