EMILIAN CRESPO — You have so many beautiful ceramics everywhere.

PETER SHIRE — That's the problem! [Laughs]

EMILIAN CRESPO — A simple cup like that is based on your handiwork, and that's beautiful.

PETER SHIRE — Yeah. You should look at my knife collection! They're hand tools — the direct extension of your hands. That's the thing with the hammer: those two basic gestures. We are primitive people. Our back mind isn't in the 21st century.

EMILIAN CRESPO — Do you mean that an artist like you is someone who connects human beings to this primitive mind?

PETER SHIRE — I think that's the good part because we need these things. They reach inside us, right? But the other problem is that we're still fighting wars because of these!

EMILIAN CRESPO — You play with the colors like a Matisse, or like a kid, and this is an abstract language, isn't it? PETER SHIRE — It's a nonverbal language. Because that's art, right? If you want to say something, you say it. But it can be expressed in a different way, and that's because art is...

EMILIAN CRESPO — So how did you become an artist?

PETER SHIRE — People ask me this question. I can't answer it. I certainly had a calling, as opposed to, “This is what I'm going to embrace: a career and a wife and two cars, and then three cars.”

EMILIAN CRESPO — What did your father do?

PETER SHIRE — He was a carpenter. He worked in the stockyards — the slaughterhouse — because they needed carpenters to fix the fences. And the way they used to slaughter the cows was: they ran them up a ramp, and there was a shoulder, and the guys would hit them on the head with a hammer.

EMILIAN CRESPO — You were living around here in Echo Park?

PETER SHIRE — My parents' house was just around here. And I still live six blocks away. Echo Park has been my whole life.

EMILIAN CRESPO — How was Echo Park at the time?

PETER SHIRE — Very peaceful.

EMILIAN CRESPO — Like a village?

PETER SHIRE INSTALLING THE 1984 LOS ANGELES OLYMPIC VILLAGE, ATHLETES' ENTERTAINMENT CENTER AT UCLA

PHOTO GARY LEONARD

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OPPOSITE PAGE: PECKER MO, 2014

Peter Shire, the only American member of the Memphis group in the 1980s, has been working out of his Echo Park atelier for decades, producing huge numbers of colorful artworks that blur the line between domestic objects and abstract sculpture. His work was the centerpiece of the Los Angeles Olympics in 1984. Recently, he received well-deserved recognition for his shows at MOCA in 2017 and at Kayne Griffin Corcoran gallery this year. We met him in his massive studio on Echo Park Avenue.
EMILIEN CRESPO — You never would stop them.
PETER SHIRE — Yeah. They were acting like a married couple.
EMILIEN CRESPO — And there wasn’t a scandal?
PETER SHIRE — Yeah. They were very discreet, but nothing would stop them.
EMILIEN CRESPO — You never left Echo Park, and that’s the nest for your art?
PETER SHIRE — That’s right. Yeah. I always regarded it as a fort. A place where I could go out and do what I needed to do. But here, I was protected. Now, look at all these hipsters moving here! [Laughs]
EMILIEN CRESPO — New people in LA used to try to go west to Venice, for example, especially French people. What is this reverse situation?
PETER SHIRE — They’re looking for quality. Quality of life.
EMILIEN CRESPO — And a secret lifestyle again! Or more real?
PETER SHIRE — More real. That would be an interesting thing to wonder about: if that idea of protection, and being away, is a part of it. I don’t think so. People see that the same way because the real estate prices are higher. People thought this place went crazy, but really it was just coming in line with the rest of the city.
EMILIEN CRESPO — But it’s like being alone? The real estate is becoming more and more expensive here.
PETER SHIRE — Everywhere! Everywhere. Now a house is a million dollars in Echo Park. My joke was: when I was an adolescent, a house was basically the same price as a Ferrari. Ferraris were about $16,000 to $20,000, and the houses were about the same. Now, you can still buy a million-dollar Ferrari.
EMILIEN CRESPO — Peter, how have you been able, all your life, to keep your love for life, your love for art, your joyful mind?
PETER SHIRE — My wife is the worried one! [Laughs] She takes care of that department.
EMILIEN CRESPO — This is very rare! People get bored, tired, cynical.
PETER SHIRE — I don’t know. Keep your fingers crossed, right?
EMILIEN CRESPO — Maybe you’re faking it! [Laughs]
PETER SHIRE — No, I’m very lucky.
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