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SURFACE

The Memphis Group's Peter Shire Just Wants to Feel Great All the Time

From his studio in Los Angeles, the 70-year-old designer talks about leaving a legacy, the importance of humor, and the true value of a good shag.

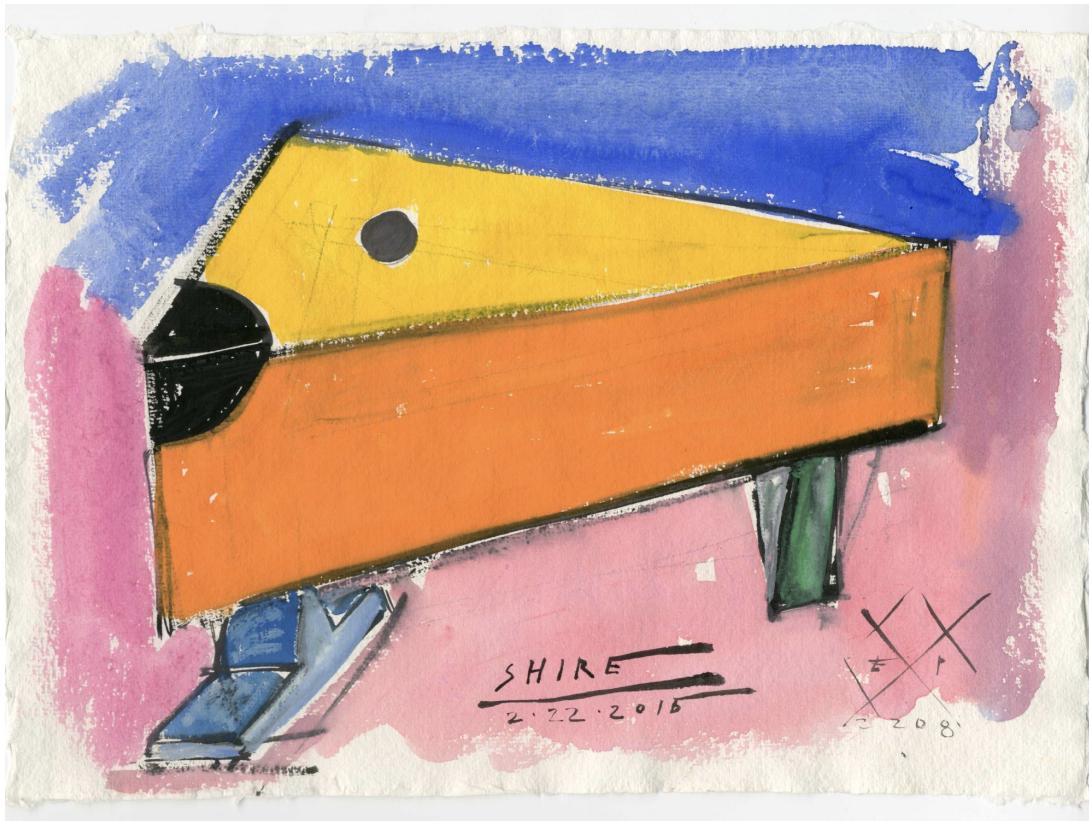


(Left) Hourglass teapot, 1984. (Right) Anchorage teapot, 1982 (Photos: Joshua White/JWPictures.com, courtesy Peter Shire Studio.)

My joke is that, in one of my lectures, I should come out in a coffin with my hand over the edge, pop up and go, “I’m baaaaaack.” Memphis is one of the most important design movements of the 20th century. It’s not that it’s having a resurgence: It never went anywhere. Everybody involved has been keeping the flame. It’s not only an ongoing history, but it’s an ongoing *part* of history. Maybe it seems like it’s come back to the people who’ve just found it.

One of the reasons the Italians pulled me in [to Memphis Group], and one of the reasons that I’m in California, is that fun is okay. In my work, that was always the goal—an aspect of feeling joy myself and communicating it, if in no other way than with the work. That’s what I want: I want to feel great all the time.

We loved absurdity. We loved ridiculousness—it made us happy. It made us giddy.



São Paulo sketch, 2015. (Image: Courtesy Peter Shire Studio)

I read about this guy who wears the same thing every day, because he says you waste two years of your life deciding what to wear. I choose what to wear because it's about how I feel. It's about color combinations that I'm working with, or that I want to create with. With striped shirts, which I now have to wear, to a degree, so I don't disappoint people [*laughs*], it's a moment of joy, because it's vacation wear. It's the antithesis of a tie and a suit, with your neck constricted.

And you know the other thing about stripes? You don't have to choose black or white, or red or yellow. You can wear both at once.

Painting is when I'm my best self. I paint while I do anything. There's an aspect of action, of doing.

me in my studio, with the work, and my battles, and my demons. I did actually get recognized once. I was charging a pair of shoes, and the young woman recognized my name from my Visa card. But I'm not Leonardo DiCaprio trying to be a normal person at the museum, or whatever. As an artist-designer person, celebrity is not the same commodity.

My wife [Donna] is very concerned with my being modest, so I very rarely think of myself as successful. It's about responsibility, and the responsibility is that we underestimate how lucky we are. Our parents fought, and died, often, to establish a freedom in America where I can do the things I'm doing. I am shocked at how many people think that this is the way it always was.



Bel Air chair, 1981. (Photos: Joshua White/JWPictures.com, courtesy Peter Shire Studio.)

There's a forgetfulness that politics is two things. One, it's the pejorative definition: of power and influence, and the corruption thereof. And there's the, shall we say, *real* definition, which is the governance of people. This is the part that's been forgotten. To do the best we can, to act with integrity, morality, and ethics—these are the issues. These are things that are real.

God, where did the Bel Air chair come from? They said, "Do a chair this year." Somehow, that's what came out. I'd sent 40 or 50 possibilities, but that's the one [they chose]. I got to know [legendary photographer] Julius Shulman when he was 96 or 97, a couple years before he died. He was really an irritable guy, very cantankerous. Once when we were visiting, he was chewing me out, and says, "You've got to make something iconic." And, I'm going, "You know, I've got something iconic, even if you don't know what it is."

When you really get down to it, you talk about people that made a mark. With Rauschenberg, you think of the goat with a tire [*Monogram* (1955–59)]. Ed Ruscha makes you think of the Hollywood sign or Standard Gas Station. It gives people a way to appreciate you—to hook into what you're doing. People need that kind of thing.

I've seen some people set out to make a career—guys I was in school with all working on what they thought would sell. From my point of view, that's wrong. [I believe] you evolve and you become something because of life experience.



Scorpion teapot, 1996-2009. (Photos: Joshua White/JWPictures.com, courtesy Peter Shire Studio.)

When I was in high school, I got involved with all these guys that were dope addicts. Their *raison d'être* was that they didn't have to do anything because they could *imagine* doing it. It was partly about the fantasy of narcotics, and the stylish conversations around not knowing what's real. They tell us that atoms have infinite space between them, but try putting your hands through me, buddy. Real is just fine. I want to have sex, that's real enough for me.

I read this thing once: "You aren't born in a dignified position, and you don't die in a dignified position. How do you expect the rest, what goes in between, to be dignified?" We all aren't quite as important as we think we are.

When you're standing at a party and there's a beautiful woman on the other side of the room, and she waves at you, always remember to look behind you to see if she's waving at someone else.

Sayin' it and doin' it are different. It's about putting in the time. And that isn't a guarantee in itself. Doyald Young was a producer of letter forms and logos—he did the actualization of GE. Doyald used to lead off his lectures by saying, "I've been a teacher for 25 years, taught over 4,000 students, and I've learned that I can only teach one thing: Keep your pencil sharp, because talent and ambition and drive are something that happened a long time before they got to me." That's the problem, right? I mean talent isn't something you can develop just by working harder. But take the chance. Maybe that's the advice: Take the chance.

—Sasha Levine