

# *Permission to dream.*

## *Reflections on Seating Assignment: Women in Contemporary Chairmaking and Craft Education.*

By Deirdre Visser

Several years ago, I made my first chair, a madrone rocker from another maker's design. More than any piece I'd made over two decades, it was a lesson in the intimacies of furniture, in the ways our bodies occupy, live with, are supported by chairs. In their arms, legs, seat, and back, we find and feel our bodies, and create, contain, and inform social spaces. Who is sitting next to whom and were the seats assigned or claimed? Will we lean close to an intimate the next seat over, perch expectantly at the edge, or slide deep into a chair's upholstered recesses? Our fingers slide over their articulated facets or worry a hole in well-worn fabric. That chair was an ancestor's favorite, and in the corner of our eye we conjure them sitting there still, the imprint of their body legible in worn cushions. We live *with* chairs.

When exhibition curator Rebecca Juliette-Duex was a child, her grandfather's woodworking tools were alluring but off limits. So when her middle school offered woodshop, she eagerly signed up. Most projects were made with affordable pine or poplar, but for the final assignment, Juliette-Duex was the only student given a piece of cherry, a coveted honor. Briefly, studying carpentry seemed both possible and promising, but no women attended the local vocational school, and she was actively discouraged from pursuing it further. She focused instead on fiber and textiles, but moving from textiles to weaving brought her back to woodshop 101. Juliette-Duex imagined she would learn just enough to tell a woodworker what she needed for the chair seat she planned to weave, but being back in the shop returned her to a practice rooted in both fiber and wood.

Arriving at Sawtooth for a 2023 woodworking residency, Juliette-Duex was introduced to the SIDE Chair Library at Salem College, the centerpiece of which is a gridded installation that might easily conjure the Periodic Table of the Elements, a lexicon of chair design to which Salem all-women students have extraordinary access. But only a few in that collection are designed by women.

*Seating Assignment: Women in Contemporary Chairmaking and Craft Education* not only invites us to expand our lexicon, it also suggests that the work is already there—has been there all along—and our vocabulary can be enriched by enlarging the map. If you can't see yourself in that history, you can't really envision that field as a goal or a viable future, argues the curatorial team, Juliette-Duex and her collaborators, Dr. Rosa Otero, Rebecca Silberman, and Josie Vogel. An introduction to materials nourishes possibility. "Everything changes when you put something in someone's hands," continues Juliette-Duex. "If they are the kind of person who is maybe more of a maker than a thinker/drawer/designer, what if we plant that little seed in them? I want to make things for myself, but I also want to make way in the field for others to enter."

Arranged in a circle, the chairs in this exhibition are a gathering, a bevy, a troupe, a gaggle. They are a contemporary *Dinner Party* after Judy Chicago's epic installation and icon of second-wave feminism. Not without controversy, Chicago's work—made over five years from 1974-79, and engaging nearly 400 makers in the process—was a grand gesture. Rather than calling for a place at an existing table, this was a new one: boldly triangular, with 39 place settings for both historical and mythical (s)heroic figures, with nearly 1000 more names etched into the installation. Visiting Chicago's installation at the Brooklyn Museum, Juliette-Duex felt the presence of each towering figure, acutely aware of the negative space around each place setting, each iconic figure in a history too rarely written:

*Making our gallery that negative space in a way offers a little bit of completion. It's like that last note that you sometimes hear in music that's not quite in the chord. It's a little bit off and then it resolves. That's what it sort of feels like, thinking about creating the negative space around the Dinner Party, having the chairs in that alignment.*

The chairs in *Seating Assignment*, "were dreamed up, thought up, and then brought into the world by the hands attached to that head, which is just so exciting," continues Juliette-Duex.

Annie Evelyn's chair and the cascading silk upholstered cushion echoes the train of a wedding dress, a joyful, absurd experiment in the assertion of power that adornment can offer us. Other chairs in the exhibition explore the complexity of historical referents, materiality, and tradition. Wendy Maruyama offers us a ladderback chair that continues to climb skyward, and Laura Mays and Janine Wang contributed stools that are at once comfortingly familiar and alluringly unique in their construction and consideration of this simple form.

I approach Sophie Glenn's ladderback chair pondering the wood's patina of wear and age long before I realize it's not wood at all, but metalwork, disrupting what I believed I knew about it and the tradition it echoes. And if it were set beside Aspen Golan's upholstered pink velvet armchair based on the works of 18th c. English maker, Thomas Sheraton, they might whisper about the traditions we are inescapably in conversation with, and the need to question, expand, critique, and subvert them.

*The intricate carving details that are on Golan's chair, juxtaposed with the softness of the chosen material for the upholstery, the kind of flesh-like color of the upholstery and the definite, I don't want to say feminization of the form... it's calling us to look at this, what has been sort of this stoic piece of furniture, and it's giving it a certain tenderness that is very appealing and attractive.*

Tradition, says Juliette-Duex, is the starting point of the conversation as we continue to expand our knowledge of history. "We've been here all the time. This field has been receiving the input of historically marginalized makers for the entire time that it's been a field, but their names have not been assigned to it, or their faces have not been assigned to it. So we're just trying to broaden the perspective," and throw the shop doors open wide, planting seed bombs of possibility.

(All quotes are drawn from a conversation with Rebecca Juliette-Duex.)



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