

Futuristic

Thinking young, practical, provocative

BY HELEN DIANE VINCENT
SPECIAL WRITER

Student design exhibits always tempt us with the promise of the future, especially if the students are graduates of the Center of Creative Studies in Detroit and Cranbrook Academy of Arts in Bloomfield Hills.



Helen Vincent

This past year, both schools had exhibits that suggested possible new directions for the home furnishings industry.

One should be reminded how these exhibits reflect differences between the schools: CCS is an undergraduate school while Cranbrook is dedicated solely to graduate education in fine arts and design.

"Most graduate schools of art and design emphasize the conceptual. Most undergraduates schools emphasize practical skills and education in various media," said Dr. Josephine Kelsey, CEO and president of CCS.

"Our graduates embody a working synthesis of the practical with the conceptual, making them ready to be productive professionals or to move on to top graduate programs," she added.

In viewing CCS student work, it becomes evident the concepts driving the industrial design department, headed by William House, complement the practical skills required of the students.

In his furniture studio class, students analyze key characteristics of various historical periods, then interpret them in scale and full-size furniture mockups. Commercial trends often are dovetailed into these designs, reflecting, in part, House's own professionalism. Many of these pieces are an up-to-date,

they warrant an annual showing at Zelsing Associates in the Michigan Design Center, Troy.

Perhaps the most unusual piece, outstanding for its combination of daring style and subtle woodworking technique, is Robert Steele's "Tete-a-tete" dining table. The 42-year-old Steele, former hairdresser turned designer, seeks to "infuse his designs with the undulations of the human form." This quality is more apparent in some pieces than in others, but overall his work fits in with one of the aspects of the post-modern style, which plays with unexpected combinations of shapes and retro themes.

For individuality that owes more to sculpture than a furniture style, Fairuz Jane Arabo, one of the few young women in House's classes, has created a coffee table using a wood stacking technique. Proud of her Assyrian and Chaldean heritage, she has included an Arabic religious saying in the brass disc connecting the two sections of the table. Could it be that future home furnishings design will incorporate deeper symbolism?

Coming from the ceramics department, headed by Tom Phandel, are a number of experimental furniture designs using ceramic glazes with steel and other materials. Thirty-something Kaiser Suklan demonstrates some of the possibilities in an accent table suitable for indoor and outdoor use.

Meanwhile, John Gargano, who enlists himself a ceramic object maker, creates large ceramic shapes that hang from the ceiling and jut from the wall. Not only do these pieces "personalize the home," as Phandel says, it's a sure bet they could redefine what we mean by "decorative accessories."

Undoubtedly, the most wildly inventive clock design you'll ever see is designed by Paul Clark. His source of inspiration is more Star Wars than home furnishings as we commonly know it. It certainly redefines our concept of "clock," giving us a far-reaching glimpse

into the home furnishings future.

Kelsey's statement about how the practical and conceptual define the key difference between undergraduate and graduate design schools especially applies to Cranbrook's recent change in design approach or philosophy.

Guided by Roy Slade, art academy president, the change takes the high road of design semantics. In an essay on Cranbrook design, Slade notes, "... It's no accident that a design movement at Cranbrook should break away from Modernism as couched in the International Style or Bauhaus tenets." He goes on to explain: "Design semantics infuses meaning into the plethora of objects and graphics that have become mundane and boring."

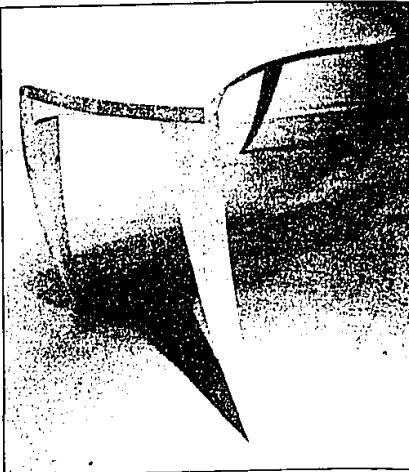
Design semantics itself emerged out of a school of linguistics and semantics (which analyzes words and symbols for their meaning). Once you get past the theoretical intricacies and the radical politics, design semantics forces students to look within themselves, in "decon-

struct" all conventional, or bourgeois, meaning — which also means seeing everything through the prism of language. Only then are students free to create a new vision.

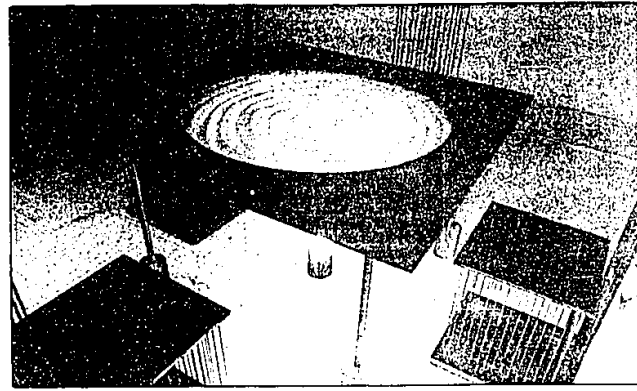
Nearly all of the 61 graduate student works selected by Roy Slade for exhibition reflect this new design philosophy. Of the 25 students from the design, ceramics and fiber departments, only four or five students showed pieces that resembled objects sufficiently identifiable as furnishings.

Even then, these few were offered as vehicles for a personal vision. The remainder contributed art pieces, or installations, also exploring personal metaphors and symbols as well as personal and social predicaments.

The weaving department head, Gerhardt Knodel, summarized the approach by saying, "Once the students have engaged in this critical dialogue, they're expected to return to the larger world as better artists and designers, all for being in touch with themselves ... perhaps for having Cranbrook as an antidote to this larger world."



A table with attitude: Robert Steele, an industrial design program graduate at the Center for Creative Studies in Detroit, designed this "Tete-a-tete" dining table; chairs aren't shown. The rock maple table is six feet long, 24 inches wide and 30 inches tall.



Shimmy and shake: That's what you do when you sit on the chairs drawn up to the table with a circular inset filled with sand. The steel, glass and leather installation is by Robert Kachmoritz, a graduate in the design department at Cranbrook Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills. It's titled, "Playing in the System: The Human Experience of Sensorial Phenomena, 1992."

Hi-tech electronic wave spurs interactive environment

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At first glance, it appears like any luxe house of the '80s. Owners John and Gwen Williamson are taking the move into their new home in stride because it's the most recent move of many, including a Far East stint John did for Ford Motor Co.'s International Division.

Everything is being readied to make way for the furniture and the Williamsons' collection of Oriental art and accessories gathered from their travels in the Far East.

Both the furniture, whose wood finishes have all been lightened, and the extensive collection have already been pared with the help of Linda Bruce, a Farmington

Hills shop owner and interior designer who has had a longtime association with the Williamsons. Each design decision accommodates the enchanting view of the small lake and natural habitat the new house overlooks.

Once you move down the grand staircase to a spacious room below, also with the

same view, you sense something else is different.

"We wanted to start off with a new approach to our personal environment we've never quite had before," says John, with a sweeping gesture toward an audio and video system built into the wall. "Actually, the space was designed to fit the system."

"It's more than just technologically advanced equipment. The 1.1 megabyte home network, makes it possible to express our appreciation of the quality and integrity in our lives, bit to bit sound. We were exposed to this while living in the small

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