

Espace Sculpture

ART ACTUEL PRATIQUES ET PERSPECTIVES
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Marc Courtemanche *Not Quite*

Greg Beatty

Number 68, Summer 2004

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/8990ac>

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Publisher(s)

Le Centre de diffusion 3D

ISSN

0821-9222 (print)

1923-2551 (digital)

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Cite this review

Beatty, G. (2004). Review of [Marc Courtemanche: *Not Quite*]. *Espace Sculpture*, (68), 36–36.

Marc Courtemanche Not Quite GREG BEATTY

Wood and clay have a lot in common. Both are natural materials that humanity has developed many different uses for over the millennia. While some uses overlap — i.e., both can be employed to make such objects as bowls, plates and decorative trinkets —, others are mutually exclusive. Wood's strength and flexibility give it a particular advantage as a construction material for things like buildings, boats and furniture. Still, with recent advances in ceramic technology, clay's utility to humanity in such areas as manufacturing and medicine is expanding. One day it might even be possible to envision chairs made of clay that people could sit on. For now, however, we have to content ourselves, courtesy of this MFA exhibition by University of Regina student Marc Courtemanche, with chairs made of clay that people can look at.

Bathed in soft light, the five chairs arrayed on the gallery floor — among them a rocker, a swivel chair, and a deck chair —, certainly looked realistic. Having tramped through the rest of the exhibits, more than one gallery-goer might have been

tempted to sit for awhile. Had they done so, though, they would have been sorry. Not only would they have been chided by Courtemanche, who was in the gallery at all times, they also likely would have crashed to the floor.

Once the true nature of Courtemanche's chairs is understood, it's impossible not to think of Marilyn Levine, who for several decades has used clay to sculpt leather goods like boots and jackets. Through skillful modelling, and the application of glazes, she creates objects that are visually indistinguishable from their leather antecedents. While Levine uses traditional ceramic (as opposed to leather) techniques in her art, Courtemanche, appropriately enough, employs the tools and techniques of woodworking. "I have a furniture-making background," he says. "My grandfather used to build houses, and my dad built our own house." As an undergrad at NSCAD, Courtemanche fashioned components out of bronze, which he would then insert into existing pieces of furniture to create a *trompe-l'œil* effect. When he moved to Regina, lacking an on-campus foundry, he switched to ceramics. After much trial and error, he developed a process for working with clay. Chair parts like seats and backs are cut from wet clay, fired at a low temperature, then filed, sanded

and fitted together before being refired at a higher temperature and reassembled. Spindles, conversely, are fashioned on a lathe when the clay is "leather hard." To account for shrinkage, all components are scaled 12-percent larger than normal.

"As objects, chairs are very inviting," Courtemanche says. "People come into the gallery, they're placed on the floor. They look at them and think 'Wow, you could sit on that'. But when they realize they're ceramic they say 'Should we sit on it?' So it raises the question: is it functional, or non-functional? Is it a chair, or isn't it?" Where Courtemanche's work departs somewhat from Levine's is in his disinterest in evoking a complete *trompe-l'œil* illusion. While he does use paint to mimic the grain of such woods as oak, maple and mahogany, and to suggest usage over the years, the chairs lack the verisimilitude of Levine's ceramic leather goods. Close-up, the surface texture of the chairs is closer to sanded marble than wood. With strong roots in Regina (she began her career here in the late 1960s, and in 1998 was the subject of a major retrospective at the MacKenzie), Levine obviously casts a long shadow on ceramic art practice in the city. For Courtemanche, another local influence is Brian Gladwell. A long-time woodworking instructor, Gladwell has, for two

decades, built furniture from corrugated cardboard. Through his use of cardboard, a material not known for its strength and durability, he subverts the value traditionally ascribed to furniture as a symbol of class and wealth. But at the same time, his acrylic-coated cabinets, desks and shelves are finely crafted and fully functional. He designs each piece, and through the incorporation of architectural motifs such as lintels, columns and arches, further references monumental urban buildings. Again, this subverts an implied ideology of wealth and privilege.

With the range of chair designs on the market today, not to mention all the different types of chairs that have been produced throughout history, Courtemanche certainly has no shortage of potential candidates for inclusion in future exhibitions. The five chairs on display here — *Step Dovetail and Dadoe* (2003), *Finger* (2003), *Veneer* (2003), *Mortise and Tenon* (2003), and *Turning* (2002) — were all named after the technique employed to build them. Where possible, Courtemanche used the actual metal rods, swivel joints and rollers from the original chairs. Pieces were assembled using screws, wood dowels, glue and fitted joints. In terms of installation, another parallel exists with Levine. While many of her sculptures were displayed on pedestals, the odd jacket was shown hung from a coat rack, as it presumably would have been in the owner's home. By eschewing pedestals and placing his chairs on the floor, Courtemanche sought to evoke a similar metonymic association. Although the fact they were lined up in a row, as opposed to being installed in a domestic tableau of some sort, precluded an overtly naturalistic reading. As well, it would presumably be impractical for Courtemanche to supervise future exhibitions as extensively as he did this one. I don't think the appeal of his chairs would suffer were they to be installed on pedestals to highlight their status as "precious" art objects. Such an installation strategy is common with antique furniture in museums. And Courtemanche's ceramic chairs would still represent a remarkable technical and aesthetic achievement. ←

Marc Courtemanche: *Not Quite*
Mackenzie Art Gallery
Oct. 17 – Nov. 7, 2003

MARC COURTEMANCHE,
Veneer, 2003.
Stoneware, metal
screws, wood dowels.
93.9 x 76.2 x 40.6 cm.
Photo: courtesy of the
artist.

MARC COURTEMANCHE,
Step Dovetail and Dadoe,
2003. Stoneware, metal
hardware, wooden
biscuits. 86.3 x 60.9
x 60.9 cm. Photo:
courtesy of the artist.

