

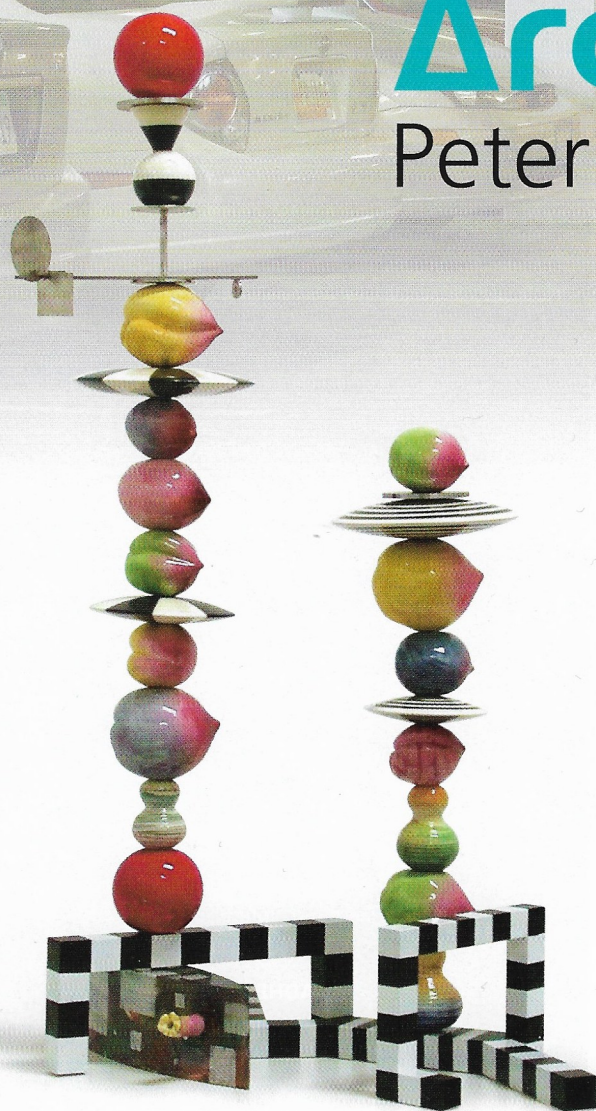
*A California Dream*, 60 ft. (18.3 m) in length, cone 06 earthenware, underglaze, clear glaze, 2003. Installed in a parking garage in Santa Monica California.



# Architextiles

## Peter Shire Goes Public

by Judy Seckler

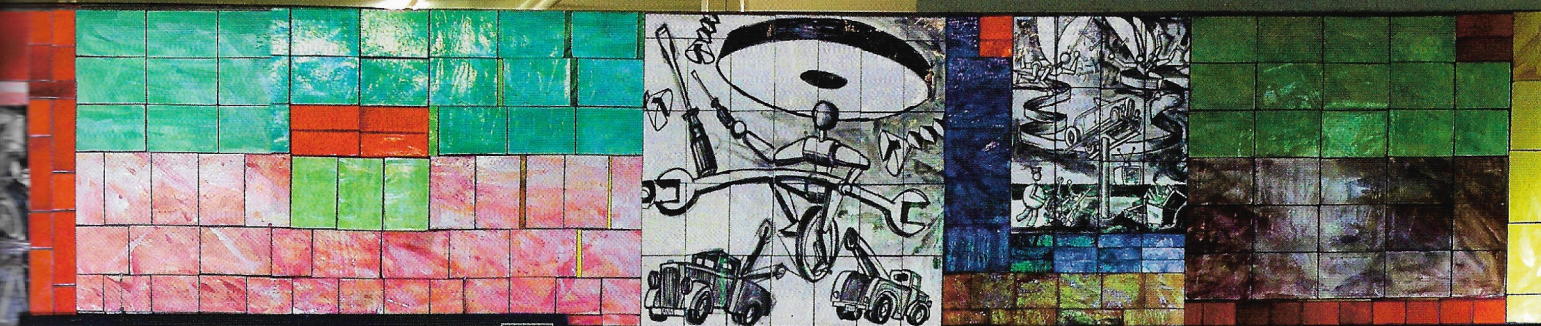


Peter Shire's studio rises up like a peach-colored whale in the ethnically mixed Los Angeles suburb of Echo Park. The location, which was once the site of an auto body shop, includes Shire's home and as you might imagine, ample parking; several cars including a bright red Mini Cooper are parked outside.

The interior of the 9800-square-foot stucco structure is filled with floor-to-ceiling shelves, where stainless steel and ceramic teapots and a generous supply of mugs and dishes line the walls. Fanciful creature-like mobiles hang overhead while pieces of custom furniture in various stages of construction sit on tabletops.

Shire, whose colorful teapots engendered a wave of visibility in the 1980s that has never stopped, has expanded his vision to include public commissions. Through his tile work, clay has become a joyous canvas. These "architextiles," or murals with architectural and design components, are sometimes strictly

*Double Solar Eclipse*, 49½ in. (1.25 m) in height, cone 06 earthenware with underglaze, clear glaze, stainless steel and enamel, 2004.



**ADDITIONAL PARKING** ↑ ♿  
7'-0" Clearance



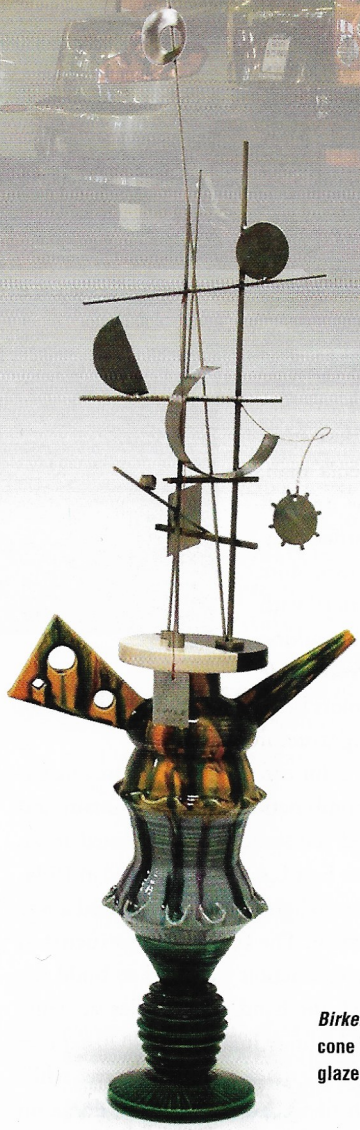
ceramic or, at times, combined with stainless steel, aluminum and enamel components for greater textural effect.

Shire works from detailed sketches and color studies. He uses a commercial white earthenware that he shapes into tiles with a slab roller. The tiles are left to dry for three weeks, then bisque fired. Shire uses a variety of low-fire commercial glazes to paint the tile surfaces, which are then fired to cone 06. The resulting work is an intersection of industrial design, craft and fine art. Combining the functional discipline of carpentry learned from his father, furniture making from both grandfathers, along with resources including automotive techniques of Southern California's car culture (see sidebar on page 46), plus an unabashed passion for color allows Shire to make his architextiles lush and lyrical.

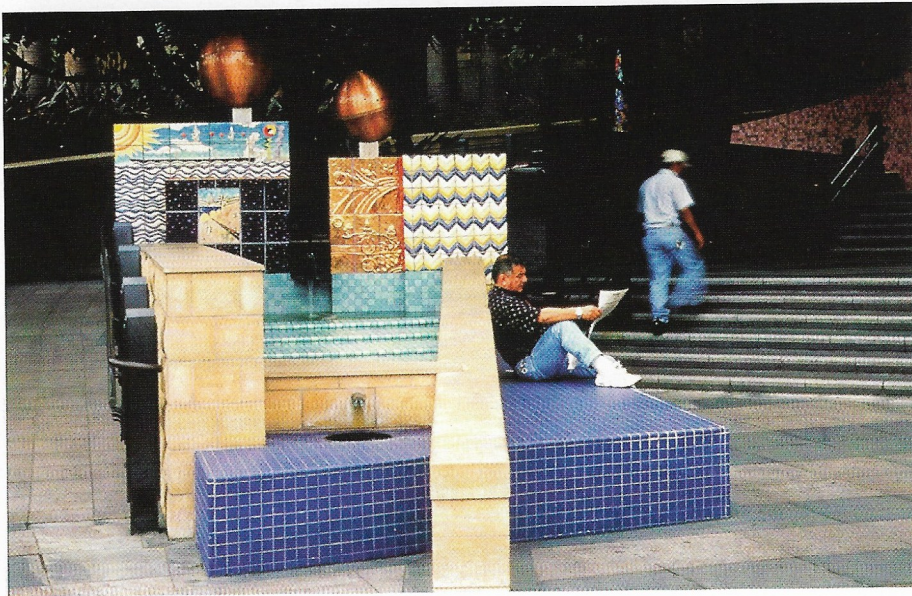
"He doesn't exactly fit into the ceramic world," remarks ceramist Adrian Saxe, professor of art and head of ceramics at the University of California, Los Angeles. He added that architects and designers are Shire's biggest support group. "He's always been a wit and it's in his work. But lately, the work is less irreverent. The demeanor is more mature and elegant."

Shire's recent public art ranges anywhere from architextiles rhapsodizing about California history or hot rods to sculptured vistas adorning shopping centers to residential sculpture.

Shire designed a series of eight panels that were installed nine years ago on the back wall of a movie theater in Modesto, California, facing the old Highway 99. Each 9x13-foot panel was composed of 182 tiles adhered with thinset mortar. Shire included railroad, agriculture and gold rush imagery to illustrate historic and contemporary themes. The dynamically colliding angles of the images work equally well on the bottom halves of the pedestrian-friendly black-and-white sections or the top halves rendered in color for the benefit of commuters.



*Birken Bag*, 34½ in. (88 cm) in height, cone 06 earthenware, underglaze, clear glaze, stainless steel, 2004.



Left: *Union Station Gateway*, 8 ft. (2.44 m) in height, commercial and handmade cone 06 earthenware tile with underglaze, clear glaze, stainless steel and copper, 1995.

Below: The artist poses with his work *Tiki Tower*, 30 ft. (9.14 m) in height. The structure is steel, stainless steel and aluminum. The tiles are cone 06 earthenware with underglaze and clear glaze, 2003. Photo: Gary Leonard.

Shire's installations have also dressed up shopping centers and utilitarian spaces. In 2003, at the Burbank Empire Center, former site of the Lockheed Corp., Shire created a simple tiled, circular banquette for seating and decorated the tiles with colorful abstract elements and aeronautic imagery to pay tribute to both "deep space and the surface quality of TV." Spaced throughout the solid orange and blue tiles, Shire hand painted tiles to reflect vignettes of the area's history. The center installation—a mixture of steel, stainless steel, aluminum and enamel—represents man, aeronautics, technology and the mythology of post-war Southern California. That same year, on the other side of town, Shire installed a sweeping architextile filled with car and beach-culture imagery in parking lot No. 4 at the Third Street Promenade mall in Santa Monica. Shire's colors bring new energy to the drab, utilitarian interior of the parking structure.

Another outstanding use of color can be seen in Shire's installation at Union Station. The combination seating, fountain and handicap ramp, situated behind the station and anchored in an area designated as "the gateway to East L.A.," was unveiled in 1994. Shire designed the copper spheres to light up and introduced a way to run the electricity through them. The base was constructed in cement while framed, type 5 construction was used to build the Wonderboard skeleton on which the hand painted tiles sit. Shire depicted Los Angeles history and fantasy imagery. Gold luster tiles pay tribute to the Asian-American heritage of nearby towns, while white, blue and yellow chevron tiles echo the Moorish dome on



the post office across the street. It's a striking piece of public art. Shire is very aware of the need to bridge the gap between fine art and the concerns of municipalities: "It has to live in two worlds or else I'm not interested. Maybe three," he says of his role as artist, designer and architect.

"When you see his work, you know it's him," said the late ceramist Ralph Baccera, who was one of Shire's instructors at Chouinard Art Institute, Los Angeles, California. He added, "There's always some new mystery to discover; there's always some icon there that you smile at."

**the author** *Judy Seckler* is a contributor to CM and a Los Angeles-based freelance writer who writes about art, architecture and design.

# Hot Rod Public Art

by Peter Shire

One of my early recollections is driving down the hill to Riverside Drive with my Dad to see Jack Hatfield at a hardware store with the unlikely name of People Hardware. Jack's name was always invoked with reverence: "Jack can weld." Jack helped us with many projects, from furniture and brackets for buildings to fixing motorcycles.

In 1979, when ceramic and wood weren't enough, and I needed welding again, I became involved with all sorts of fabricators and services in the Burbank area. One day I realized that every one of them had a picture of a 1932 Ford in some form in their shop. Hot rods. Right—of course—we're making hot rods. We're making cars. Burbank was the hub of the aircraft industry in Los Angeles, with Lockheed being centered there, and I was introduced to all kinds of metals, not to mention processes like anodizing and spinning, variations of technical painting and methods of attachment and fasteners (pop rivets were invented by a hot rodder who worked at Lockheed).

There are also many supply houses in Burbank that have everything from the glue for certain parts of airplanes to specialized sand papers for whichever direction you want to sand in. Most of the time all that stuff gets confusing, and generic materials like Liquid Nails and PC-7 Epoxy really cover more ground.

This all seems like an odd turn of events for a guy who started his art career in ceramics. Even before 1979, I had noticed that the shapes I wanted really harkened to plywood or metal fabrication, and that the ceramics provided a speed and accessibility to color. Now all of these things co-exist with my pre-adolescent fantasies of owning a navy blue 1932 Ford Roadster with red and yellow flames.

Perhaps I'm constantly making this primary colored roadster in some beautiful mimetic way . . . and pulling up in a cloud of dust in a flurry of excitement to show off to my Dad. And once again I can be with him.

Above: Sketch for *Past, Present & Future* (detail).

Below: *Past, Present & Future* (detail), 13 ft. (4 m) in height, cone 06 earthenware with underglaze and clear glaze, 2000. Photo: Wayne Perry.

