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Scott Burton's Civic Engagement and Eroticism Merge at the Pulitzer

Paradigm-shifter for public art in the '80s, groundbreaking (and openly queer) performance artist in the '70s, Burton showed new ways of connecting.

By Nancy Princenthal
Reporting from St. Louis, Mo.

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"Scott Burton: Shape Shift" at the Pulitzer Arts Foundation, "Two-Part Chair," designed in 1983, fabricated in granite in 1986. The museum calls it suggestive of queer eroticism.Credit...Estate of Scott Burton/Artist Rights Society (ARS), NY; via Pulitzer Arts Foundation; Photo by Alise O'Brien Photography

Stylish and sharp-witted, Scott Burton's sculptures of the 1980s doubled as chairs, benches or tables. When they appeared in urban plazas, college campuses and corporate lobbies, they messed with conventions for public art, provokingly and delightfully. A fresh wind blew in stale places. But a stealth polemic lurked: Burton also wanted his work to make people more self-aware and, especially, more alert to each other — he wanted to promote, as he put it, "public recognition of public values."

It turned out the stealthiness succeeded too well. After Burton's death in 1989, at the age of 50 from AIDS-related causes, the objects' meaning, and their identity as art, slowly faded. The benches were just benches, the tables, tables. Even more forgotten were the performances he made in the late 1960s and 1970s, exercises in slowing down, and thereby illuminating, everyday gestures and behaviors.

An exhibition at the Pulitzer Arts Foundation in St. Louis, through Feb. 2, contributes substantially to a revival of Burton's work in both disciplines. Among the sculptures on view is a luminous, ultra-luxe onyx table, and also three variations — all with comically extended rear legs — on the homey, vernacular species of lawn furniture known as the Adirondack chair. One is made of amiable yellow Formica. Another, in brushed aluminum, is combat-ready, its out-thrust limbs terminating in wicked points.

A rock settee, positioned in Tadao Ando's serene courtyard at the Pulitzer, is one of several chairs Burton fashioned by simply slicing a flat base, seat and back into a craggy boulder. By contrast, a suave "Two-Part Chaise Longue" of pinkish granite, composed of two gently sloping triangles, strongly suggests a languidly prostrate body.

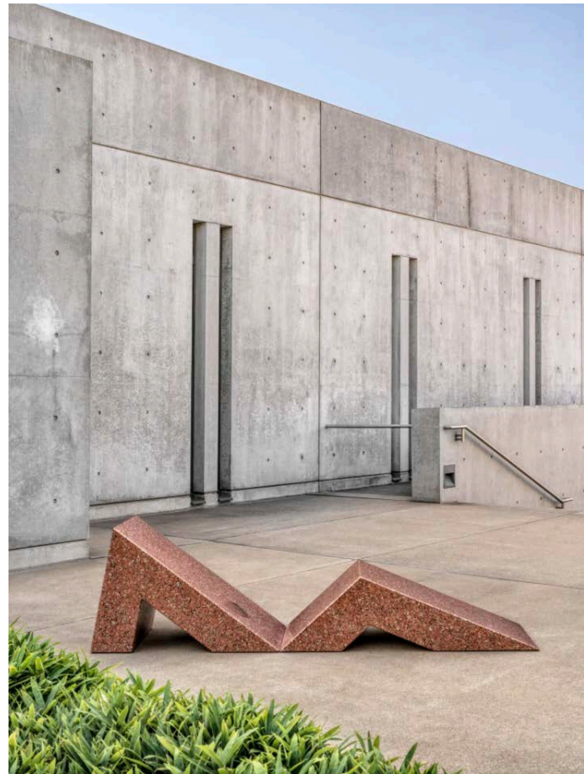
While much of Burton's work seems immutable, some examples court instability. A frisky child-size table and chair — the seat cushion is silvery, the tabletop is mirrored — are set on casters. The long curving back of a wooden settee is meant, Burton said, to evoke the embrace of "little children in the father's arms," but this perch is suspiciously skimpy. (Burton's own father departed in his infancy; born in 1939, Scott was raised by his mother, first in Alabama, then Washington D.C.) Even in the most forbiddingly stern sculpture, observes Nina Felshin, Burton's assistant and friend, irony beckons. Sitting on his sculpture, she says, "you're being made uncomfortable. That was intended, and that was the humor of it."

The art historian David J. Getsy, who has been instrumental in lifting Burton's profile, has argued that a through line in all his work is a consideration of the ways people dissemble, and signal each other with coded gestures. For gay men (like Burton), Getsy says, such behavior was once a necessity. In an essay for the exhibition's forthcoming catalog, he writes that Burton's tables and chairs "perform as sculptures."

The show's lead curator, Jess Wilcox, deems Burton's "Two-Part Chair" a "queer icon." Its lower component is bent over at a right angle to form a seat; leaning above it from behind, an upright component serves as a back. It is perfectly possible to miss the sexual allusion, but inescapable once noted.

An installation at the Pulitzer Arts Foundation showing sculptures-as-furniture, variations on a vernacular American theme, designed in the 1970s and '80s by Scott Burton. The artist compared the curved railing on a wooden settee to a father standing behind his children, embracing them with his arms.Credit...Estate of Scott Burton/Artist Rights Society (ARS), NY; via Pulitzer Arts Foundation; Photo by Alise O'Brien Photography

"Two-Part Chaise," with two forms suggestive of a figure lying down, 1989, made of granite.Credit...Estate of Scott Burton/Artist Rights Society (ARS), NY; via Pulitzer Arts Foundation; Photo by Alise O'Brien Photography



Burton's sculpture output was largely compressed into his final decade, although he began thinking about furniture years earlier. This exhibition includes black-and-white photographs of "Furniture Landscape," a performance Burton staged at the University of Iowa in 1970, for which he planted an upholstered sofa, a desk and chair and a vanity in a heavily wooded glade, where he also mounted a landscape painting high on a tree. Evoking Romantic imagery of lost civilizations, their glories overgrown, and, according to Burton, the painter Henri Rousseau's fauve dream of a woman lounging on a divan in the jungle, this installation also suggests the architect Philip Johnson's glass house in Connecticut, which famously brings the Connecticut landscape inside what could be called the performance of a residence.

The considerable quality of art criticism Burton wrote, sampled at the Pulitzer, helps demonstrate the breadth of his abilities and interests. They included Constantin Brancusi, whom Burton admired as much for the bases he crafted as for the art he placed atop them. This exhibition includes a chapel-like gallery in which the Romanian sculptor's work is paired with Burton's, including a galvanized steel table inlaid with mother-of-pearl.

Regrettably, the show, titled "Shape Shift," prohibits touch for all but two sculptures.

The work now seems historically distant as well. It looks back not only to classic Americana or early Modernism but also to the wide-shouldered, bold-contoured glamour that reigned in the 1980s. The rising prestige of urban design, the surge of waterfront development, the elevation of pedestrians — even literally, as with New York's High Line — were phenomena still in the making. When Burton remarked about his Pearlstone Park in Baltimore, completed in 1985, "This is what I call the esplanade. It's not really functional for going anywhere," he was helping to introduce not just a form but also a vocabulary.

Burton's performances of the 1970s were strenuous, silent exercises in highly stylized body language. They involved grouped, paired and solo performers, including women early on and later only men, simply clothed or nude. Seating audiences very close together, but weirdly far from the action, heightened both social tension and self-consciousness.

A murky color video, shown on a small screen, of Burton's 1980 "Individual Behavior Tableaux" is this exhibition's visually modest heart. The only known recording of such work to have survived, it features a naked man enacting painfully slow postural and gestural movements, his long legs exaggerated by wedge-heeled shoes.

In his earliest performance works, beginning in the late 1960s, Burton himself appeared — or, disappeared. He cross-dressed for a downtown Manhattan stroll, nearly unnoticed; made a brief naked midnight run on a deserted street; and slept deeply (with the help of pharmaceuticals) amid a crowded opening.

In homage to Burton's several Behavioral Tableaux, the artist Brendan Fernandes was invited to create a dance for the Pulitzer. Circulating fluidly among the sculptures, two men and two women, identically dressed in jeans, T-shirts and thick-soled black shoes, part and recombine. They assume the aspects of chairs and tables, and, less chastely, of odalisques, lovers and singles looking for partners. Intermittently, they repeat two gestures, one of tapping hand to heart, the other, bittersweet, of wrist flipping.

Documentation of "Furniture Landscape," a performance Burton staged at the University of Iowa in 1970.Credit...Estate of Scott Burton/Artist Rights; The Museum of Modern Art, Licensed by SCALA and Art Resource, NY

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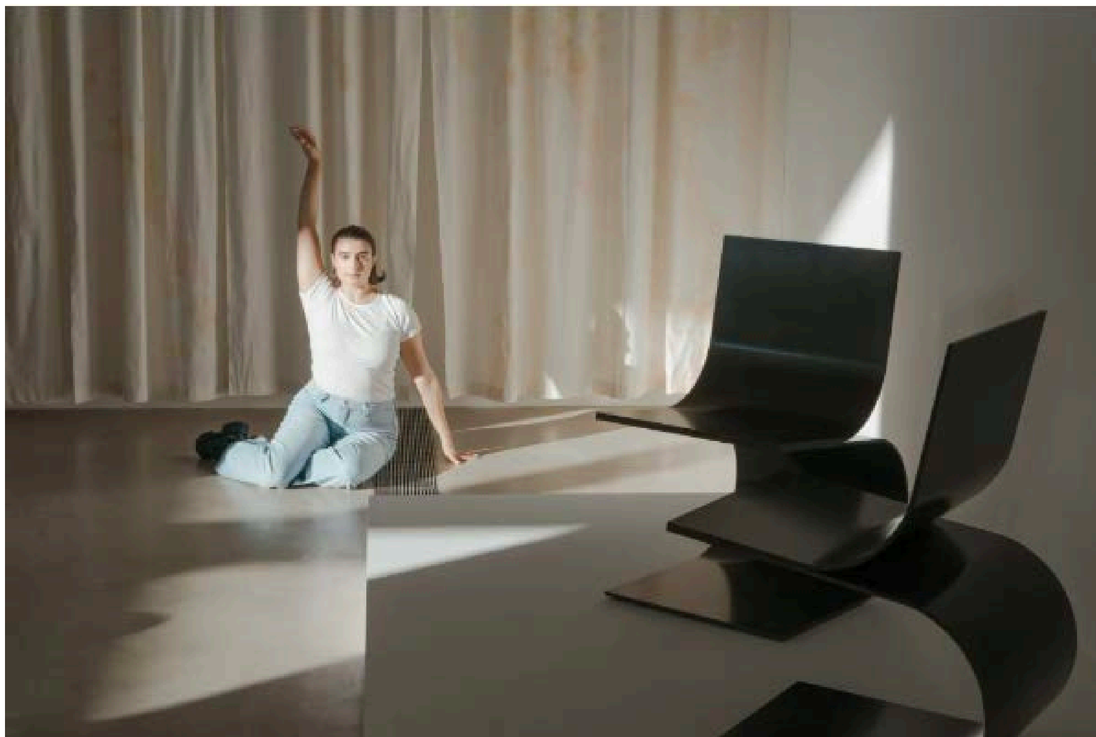
While Fernandes honors the silent, measured and sometimes explicitly sexual movements Burton scored, his dance is tenderly sensual, which Burton's performances were not. Elizabeth Baker, longtime chief editor at Art in America who first worked with Burton in the mid-sixties, recalls that at the time, sex was not a political tripwire, just novel subject matter, "a curiosity rather than a danger." Tenderness was not the point.

In a public conversation after the performance I saw, Fernandes spoke about the importance to Burton's work of the coded behaviors involved in cruising — of "finding outlaw desire and mutual connection in public." The obsolescence of those codes, Fernandes proposed, may have less to do with social tolerance than with alternative ways of connecting, such as dating apps. Curtains commissioned for this performance are very lightly patterned — coded, one could say — with photos of fingerprints from swipe marks on his phone screen.

View of "Individual Behavior Tableaux," as performed by Kent Hines, 1980, seen in a video at the Pulitzer.Credit...Estate of Scott Burton/Artist Rights; The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY



A dancer performing Brendan Fernandes's "In Two," 2024, with Burton's "Two-Curve Chair," 1989.Credit...via Pulitzer Arts Foundation; Photo by Virginia Harold

Discussing these curtains, behind which the dancers at times disappeared and then re-emerged, Fernandes asked, “If I become invisible, does that mean I gain my civil rights?”

If only Burton was here to address such puzzles. A master of compartmentalization, he could be happily outrageous and also, as Baker remembers, impeccably professional. In the blink between Stonewall and AIDS, between the punk spirit of the 1970s and the backlash of the Reagan years, he was as comfortable in downtown leather bars as in the uptown art world. When he became ill, he mostly spurned sympathy from his peers.

Thirty-five years later, in a distant cultural galaxy, an atmosphere of mourning drifts around Burton’s sculpture. The pseudonymous Darling Green writes in the forthcoming catalog that Burton, likely aware of his H.I.V./AIDS diagnosis by the mid 1980s, lent the work of his last decade “a sepulchral tone.”

This elegiac sentiment prevails in Álvaro Urbano’s ongoing installation in homage to Burton at the Sculpture Center in Long Island City through March 24, where faux weeds, dried leaves and half-eaten apples are strewed among salvaged elements of Burton’s lobby furnishings for what was once the Equitable Center in midtown Manhattan (the dismantling is addressed in an article Julia Halperin wrote for the Times). Another salvage-based project, this of fixtures that Burton created for a pier in Sheepshead Bay in Brooklyn, is to appear this fall at the AIDS Memorial Park in Greenwich Village.

In a second performance presented during “Shape Shift,” Gordon Hall delivered a thought-provoking meditation on the experience of waiting, and the provision Burton’s public seating made for it. But Burton wasn’t a patient man, and he knew during his final years that he didn’t have time to be. His work supports more bracing pleasures.

Álvaro Urbano’s exhibition engages with Scott Burton’s former public artwork at SculptureCenter in Long Island City, Queens.Credit...Bess Adler for The New York Times