

# sitting in the lap of the goddess

chairmaker

## PAUL REIBER



**PAUL REIBER:** The first thing I want to say is I feel very chosen about what I do. "When did I decide that I was going to do what I was going to do?" would be a meaningless question to me because I am pretty much deciding what I'm going to do every day that I go out and do it.

As a maker of objects, I have a tremendous appreciation for objects that are made by hand instead of by mass production machinery. I was in the first class of James Krenov's woodworking school. One of the great shocks for me in school was realizing I couldn't make things for my peers—that I could not afford to make things for my peers. And this has always been an issue for me, and it's not just for me, it is historically true that people that make fine objects are supported by well-to-do people. They are the only people who had the surplus wealth so they could afford it. People who are scraping along, like me—I can't afford luxury.

And yet, I think that creating beauty in our world today is a very high calling. We live in a world that is being stripped of its beauty and beauty is rarely a criteria in choices, and it is an important criteria.

Krenov's school was a wonderful, transformative, exhausting experience—(laughs) being trapped in one room with twenty-five people for a year. I had been living in Gualala as a carpenter and a wood carver when I heard that the school was opening. I didn't particularly know who James Krenov was, I applied for the school because I somehow thought it would be easier making furniture than carving.

New as it was, it was a traditional, old-fashioned school because it is a traditional old-fashioned craft.

### What Jim taught me (if you remove electricity) is thousands of years old.

He connected me with the fact that the mechanics of it are ancient. I'd been aware that the visual of it is ancient all my life. Every object we deal with is the product of thousands and thousands of years of generation after generation of people making things.

This cup in my hand did not spring out of nowhere: it is a machine-made cup, but its form, function, mechanics and aesthetics are thousands of years old and a direct line of people solving problems and then teaching the next generation of people how to solve those problems.

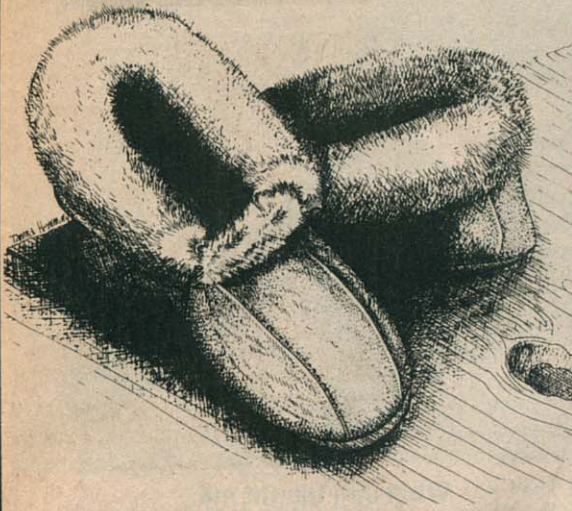
Really what I got from Jim, is a connection with that as a mechanical process, that the way you do things is within that context: how you cut a piece of wood, how you pick a piece of wood, what does wood mean? And I got a heightened awareness of that role as a maker and as a carrier-on of that tradition.

### We talk about other cultures dying out and being lost. Well, in fact, we also are at the threshold.

We are watching thousands of years of skills being lost and being replaced with mechanical garbage—and not to say that this isn't a fine cup, but compared to a real cup, that someone's hands have touched and loved, it's nothing.

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So that's part of who I am, because I am very conscious that I manipulate a material to create visual images that are very locked into the history of my culture.

With the exception right now that visual artists—all artists now—are profoundly affected by the global village. I can go to a library and I can see photographs of more images than any generation of visual artists before me have ever been exposed to—easily—anybody in this country can by going to their local library, there has been such an explosion of visual awareness.

I can go to a museum in San Francisco and see things that were made five thousand years ago. And if they'll let me get close enough to it so I can touch it, I can feel people's hands on it. I mean, you can feel that this curve in this little object happened because it fits in the palm of your hand, and it is so natural to make this curve that way.

**We are, as a species, as much a product  
of our hands as we are our brains,  
and to go through this thing that is happening now  
where we don't touch anything to make it,  
is a very powerful change.**

Anyway! I like to make things. I like to make things with my hands. I like to respond visually to what's going on around me—which is a disaster. But I don't think making ugly things contributes to correcting that disaster, so I make pretty things.



*This interview is about the choices you make about what to make. There is some part of me that sees you making stools meant to be sat upon, that incorporate not just female imagery, but female deity. I want you to talk to that choice: first of all the choice to make utilitarian objects to be sat on; secondly: the choice to embellish these with goddess imagery. Is there anything in your personal history that attaches you to religious or spiritual imagery?*

**PAUL:** I have been visually very fascinated by tribal art all my life. I have a BA in Greek and Mediterranean religion. I trained to be a Unitarian minister for two years.

My dad is a lawyer. I grew up in an affluent family outside of Washington D.C. It was a tremendous wrenching for me to not go to law school, to not go to business school, or not work for the government—to let go of all that—and I was heavily supported in doing that by having grown up in the sixties, but that was a big break for me.

**But my father's father was a harness maker,  
so, in terms of skipping one generation,  
I'm just doing the same thing  
that my families have done forever.**

And my sense of spirit has always been important to me. I was very active in the Unitarian Church when I was a kid. When I got out of college, I started doing community organizing, and really went to seminary to get some more legitimization to do community work.

Which is what church is. Church is, among other things, concerned with communities, and teaching and helping communities take care of themselves. I got as far in that process as having to intern in a church and realized what I faced as a lifetime job was ministering to white, upper middle class suburban people, and realized that was of no appeal to me at all.

So I went back to being a carpenter and started carving. I've drawn and painted most of my life. The connection with wanting to

make things and react visually to the world has always been there.

When I first started making things, what I wanted to do was make altars and sacred objects. And basically I moved away from that thinking I was being more practical. [smiles]

*There is some essential difference between an article you kneel before or address a congregation from behind, and an object that receives your back end. The domination of women with sexual imagery, seen and spoken, was highlighted by the plight and humiliation of Anita Hill and the selection of Judge Clarence Thomas to the Supreme court. All you have to do is speak sexually loaded imagery to shame women when you are in a place of power. That's not new. But to sit on them! . . . And even that's not new if you harken back to the thrones of Africa: the seats are supported by exquisitely carved female servants, slaves.*

**PAUL:** Would you be more comfortable with these objects if they were six-foot high representations of goddess figures on pedestals? Your tone casts a perspective. There is a flip side which is sinking in and being embraced and nurtured by this energy. It's the attitude of the sitter that is involved.

**It can be an amazingly healing process, perhaps,  
to sit into this energy,  
to allow yourself to merge into it.**

It's not necessarily a subservient thing of "Kneel slave. I'm going to sit on your back." We come at all these things with all our baggage and it isn't inherent in the thing at all, it is inherent in our baggage.

*You are not carving chairs of servers, or even erotically decorated women. There is such furniture that includes sculpture of copulation—some of them are sacred even. What you have chosen are images of goddesses from many many spiritual trends, including Catholicism. What I'm trying to do is figure the distinction between imagery of women that is obscene and dominated, and imagery of women, which is the handiwork of men that can be thought of in other domain. You chose to make something other than altars for practical reasons, but you could be making traditional Morris chairs.*

**PAUL:** I chose to make chairs. And I don't really remember that choice. What I know now is that visually to me, it is the most appealing furniture. It has more possibilities than other furniture.

**Visually, chairs are more like people than any other furniture.  
They have legs and a back. Arms.  
Visually you walk around them.  
They have positive space, negative space.  
They are to be looked at, they are to be sat in.  
They have to be utilitarian.**

Chairs are just very intriguing to me.

I started out making much more traditional chairs carved with flowers. I did that for five years. And I also carved masks. So I did some chairs that were masks on the back of chairs, and one of the problems is: as soon as you have a nose in the back of the chair, you have to get high enough so the nose isn't hitting the back of people's heads. So the chairs got high backed.

I had this new form to deal with. I had faces. I had them people-height at eye level, and I just went another jump in that chairs are human bodies. As I started playing around, I felt I was manipulating symbols that had some power to me, but there wasn't a totality to them. I liked them and they sold, but I was looking for something that was more of a unified statement.


*Why did you feel the need more than just your personal iconography?*

**PAUL:** I felt I was speaking a language I didn't know. Trying to write poetry in a foreign language.

To take a Mexican-inspired mask and put some red hands that I associate with Australia on it—I mean I'm sure that there is a totality there, but clearly the way to go with that kind of work was to understand more the symbols I was using and try to be more consistent. So I went down to the city and I saw these Cycladic marble statuettes at the San Francisco museum and was very moved by them.

What's true for me is—and this is sticky space here—that women have highly influenced my sense of what is beautiful. Probably the greatest influence on what I think is beautiful is women.

*Do you mean women themselves or from women.*



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**PAUL:** Women themselves: women's bodies, women's motions, women's emotion. And women's action. And I don't feel that's anything new. I think that is true for men. I don't know if that is true for women, but for men, women have highly influenced our sense of what is beautiful. That that's out there.

*There's nothing shameful about being attracted to gender-specific physical characteristics. Built into every mammal is a protective attraction to the newborn face with its stubby nose and huge eyes and big forehead and small body. Male or female, young or old, one longs to care for that configuration, as do dogs, cats, wolves. So there is nothing shameful that perhaps hardwired into heterosexual men the identity of beauty is attached to the female form.*

**PAUL:** Female form and female energy. But let's just talk about form. . . . So here I am and I'm interested in bringing in more of that feminine beauty into my work. Now I turn around (which as a person aware of tradition I do a lot) and I start looking.

And it's hard to find very direct representations of women that I am comfortable with. So all of a sudden, I'm in sacred art. And this isn't so much conscious as I can clearly see that. What is drawing to be about these images that I'm working with in the chairs is that they are beautiful, they are extremely expressive. They are awesome, to me. And they are images that I feel real good about putting out in public—big. Unavoidable, inescapable images. Some of these chairs are in my house now and they are unavoidable. When they were in my shop, all six of them lined up, I had to keep them covered.

*Describe the chairs.*

The chairs are all wood and upholstery. They are high-backed. They all have masks. They have faces and the faces are at about eye-level. Individually one is a chair based on Cycladic marble apparently burial figurines from the middle of the 3rd millennium B.C. in the Greek islands. One of them is based on a little limestone figurine from Cyprus at about the same time period. She's in a sitting position with her arms out, kind of embracing. It's a wonderful image.

**One is based on Mary,  
a fully upholstered kind of armchair  
with a Gothic Mary's head  
and where you would put your hands  
when you sit in her, her palms are upturned  
so you sit with your hands entwined in her hands.**

You sit in the lap of Mary and get to hold her hands and she looks down over your shoulder.

*[laughs] Its the spin you put on it whether or not you are coming up half full or half empty. One way it is a gross insult. The other way, its' an ecstatic experience. Not chairs, but thrones.*

**PAUL:** Thrones is such a loaded word. Instead of seeing a pair of thrones with a man and woman on them, we see one throne with a man on it.

Historically chairs are rare objects in people's homes. They're expensive to make. They're a luxury because you can always sit on a box or a log or the ground. Until 200 years ago, there just weren't too many chairs in the world. It's fairly recently, historically, that chairs have been very available to people.

Now these chairs are not dining chairs. They are not the kind of chairs you would use to sit around a table. Their primary consideration is not to be comfortable to sit in to read.

So they don't really match your basic chairs things that people buy chairs for—to sit at their table, or to sit in and read, or even sit around and talk.

**In that sense they go back to thrones,  
because if there were one in a room,  
no one would casually go over and sit down in it  
without being aware of what they were doing.**

So there is an empowerment that happens, or an acknowledgement—some kind of acknowledgement that has to happen to sit down in one of these chairs. It's different from pulling up a chair and sitting down in it.

*And the fact that the imagery comes from the spiritual part of these different cultures, what impact does that lend. They are not simply images of strong, powerful historical women like Bodica, the British queen who led her peoples against the invading Celts. They are not depicting strong leaders or warriors they are depicting divinities of the folk of cultures other than our own.*

**PAUL:** Which means that the hand that made those objects was in touch with the divine when they were being made. That's what divinities are. And when you make an object of a divinity, you are praying. You are manifesting that divinity's energy in to a solid object that has a power that an unworked piece of wood or an unworked rock or an unworked lump of clay doesn't have.

—Or a fine cup, or a fine table or a fine chair. There is that extra energy of the prayerfulness of making those images.

So what has happened is that 3000 years later, I see a photograph of this little object that somebody sat around and made on a Greek island 3000 years ago, very laboriously; rubbing it with another piece of rock to get the shape and finish that they wanted—the amount of time involved in this is phenomenal. My baseline reaction was: this is a powerful image and I would like to make that image, I would like to incorporate that image in what I do.

*But each choice was of a goddess—sacred script for Nature itself.*

**PAUL:** The decision got made that I wanted to do a series of goddess chairs. There were two ways to do that: one was to get systematic and say "there's this kind of goddess and I want to cover her; and there's this kind of goddess and I've got to do one of those"—there was some of that.

More of it was I looked. I looked and I looked and I looked at images and images and images, and I struggled with how to manifest those images into the limitations I've accepted by being a chair maker.

Like I really wanted to do a Venus of Willendorf-type figure. But I couldn't figure out how to make a chair out of it. It just wasn't going to work. There was that selective process, that it had to be an image that I could technically do.

*Maybe that protects her. Good for her! You can't sit on her.*

**PAUL:** Let's deal with this thing of sitting on: two of these chairs you sit in the lap of and the other ones are standing on the back of the chair, so you're sitting at their feet more than you are sitting on them.

With the exception of those two, one being 'the Mother of Us All' where you're sitting in this embracing figure; and the other being the Mary where you are clearly sitting in the lap, the other ones you're much more sitting with your back to them.

They're staring over your shoulder out at the world from you.

Now there is also this level that all this happened purely and unconsciously. I responded to these images. I'm a chair



maker. I wanted to do a couple. I felt if I was going to do one or two I needed to do a bunch. I approached Zimmer's gallery and asked if I did a bunch would he show them. He was very interested so I did them.

*As a grown woman, when I see a doll, there is something in me that is relating to a human. I have thoughts towards the doll. Is there a Pygmalion experience that happens to you as a carver when you are carving the figures?*

**PAUL:** The first thing that occurs to me is that the difference between carving a mask with eyes in it and carving a mask without eyes in it is that when you carve a mask with eyes in it, you are creating an image that you are going to look at the world through. When you don't cut the eyes out, then all of a sudden you are creating an image that you're going to look at. Which is very different.

What resonates for me is I had a very definite relationship with each of these six chairs beyond the technical and craft struggle.

Some were hard, some were easy. But beyond that, I had a distinct emotional reaction to each, and I had a tremendously hard time dealing with some of them. Some of them just twinkled off my fingertips. And I think that was my relating to who these living beings were and what they meant to me.

The Snake Goddess was very hard for me to work on. She was a struggle for me. She was a very difficult figure for me to want to manifest . . . and I think because of all the figurines that's the one I have the most history with. The Boston museum has a very fine example of that figurine about a foot high in ivory and gold that sits on a little podium and I lived in Boston for ten years and I probably saw that figure once a month for the ten years I lived there and spent a lot of time with it.

But it was a foot high, and all of a sudden, it's as tall as I am. The head and shoulders and breasts are lifesize, and then from there down she's shortened (so that she is at eye level) and her arms are foreshortened. Her form and figure happened as much because she felt right to me. She's also the most realistic. Her shoulders and breasts are as close to realistic as any of the work. I had a much more the direct, tactile sense of: "this chair looks and feels like this person to me."



*Pygmalion made a statue that he fell in love with and then it came alive—he created a woman according to his own ideas of ultimate aesthetic beauty. Shaw in his play took it another step. His Professor Higgins takes a Cockney maid and creates the kind of woman who he could love by building her mannerisms. But every man who takes a piece a wood or marble and carves out a female form—that if he is heterosexual—he might be attracted to were it alive . . .*

**PAUL:** That's how you make things, is you get in touch with your relationship to the object and you make it as truthfully as you can.

In the case of the Snake Goddess, here's this very powerful, holding snakes, bugged-eye figure. She is of Crete, actually, the Minoan culture of the Island of Crete. Terrifying to me. Very strong. Very indifferent to my existence. Totally in touch with these two snakes that come straight up out of the ground which she is holding up.

That's something I love. Now, it's not something I would particularly want walking around live in my house in the sense of the Pygmalion tale.

*And how does your furniture differ from pornographic fantasies of domination—whips. What is the difference between the snakes and the whips in a pornographic diorama?*

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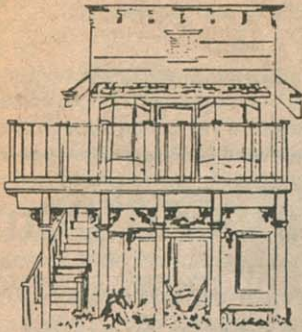
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PAUL:

**This woman is not dominating anything.  
I'm not being dominated by her. The snakes are not  
being dominated. She is standing there being oblivious to me.  
Bug-eyed and oblivious and totally in touch  
with this earth energy rising up through her hands.**

*Here you are, another neo-peasant, doing para-primitive art. The inspiration for your work comes from paleolithic and neolithic figurines, the latter have been identified as the symbolic script of matriloal partnership civilizations. I'm curious now to what extent the other thing occurred, where information about the goddess figures you were carving altered you.*

**PAUL:** I was certainly altered by doing them. I don't think I was altered nearly as much by the intellectual information of where these pieces came from or what they were about.

What altered me about them was having to be much more intensely involved with who they are to me and who they are in and of themselves as images, in the sense that images are visual in their heart and their soul. Images that work, work because they touch you deeply, and the more you interact with them, obviously, the more they are going to touch you.

*So it is an emotional connection without story—without history, without herstory?*

**PAUL:** No. Because I know some about what their history is, and I'm not looking at them devoid of that, or devoid of the intellectual description of what the symbols mean. I'm trying to differentiate between the way a scholar looks at symbolic language and the way a craftsperson uses symbolic language because they are different things.

For instance: I know from the work of Maria Gubatas, there is a continuity of vulture wing images that were wall paintings in the 4th millennium B.C. that are still used in rugs—currently they are used in rug patterns. I have no way of knowing how the current craftswoman relates to them intellectually. I have a closer understanding to how the current craftswoman relates to them as a crafts person.

**Patterns grow out of your hands  
as much as out of your eyes  
and your intellectual understanding.**

And those patterns devoid of being made lose their meaning as much as those patterns devoid of their intellectual understanding, because part of what they are is the craft process of making them.

*Much in neolithic art, and finally the symbolic rendition of it, has to do with the triangular area of the pubis, from which birth, death and regeneration cycle. So when you see the chevron in the art of the middle ages, to some extent it has leaked through into the Patriarchy with no memory of the civilized cultures it came from. I'm asking you to what extent your chairs reflect the importance of these partnership civilizations where the goddess was nature itself? Are you part of the current demonstration in behalf of those civilizations.*

**PAUL:** I don't know how to answer that question. Part of what I hear you asking is: am I interested in reinforcing the growing historical mythology of the Matriarchy. Yes. That seems fine to me. And I come to that from an intellectual understanding that started for me in college where that was the history that I learned—were those first rumblings in the world of historical studies about what happened before the patriarchy, who the patriarchy was and what they supplanted, and what evidence was there.

As an adult, it has always been part of my frame of understanding. I have tried to be as conscious a male in our times as I can. I worked with CAARE project for a number of years. I'm not removed from awareness of the current flux of male/female relationships—by any means. I have four kids. I'm a fairly conscious adult male here now which means I'm caught up in all that transformation. And I respond to it positively and that's certainly part of the background of why I settled on these images.

*What kind of life do you live here?*

**PAUL:** A very pleasant life. We have five acres of forestland that goes down to Doyle Creek. We bought the house. I immediately built the shop. And we have slowly been clearing and putting in more gardens as we go along. My partner works evenings, so we do this tag-team child care where she's around during the day and I'm around during the evening.

We have a complicated family. My partner has a son who is fourteen, I have two daughters by a previous partner who are twelve and ten and then we have a

son together who has just started school. My daughters go back and forth on a yearly cycle, as well as vacations. Danny is always with us and Mischa is always with us, so we go from being two boys to two boys and two girls. We try as much as we can to share out all the domestic chores there are to do—which has evolved into what seems like an endless task of transportation and feeding and clothing and nurturing. [laughs]

I'm also a pretty solitary person. I like working close to home because part of my tendency would be to shut myself in my shop and ignore all that, so it is nice to have it harder to do. I get a lot of goodness from being with my family.

Talk to me about the division of labor you've assigned the mechanized floor tools and the hand tools that line the walls of your shop. Where you draw the line as a craftsman. How that line effects your sense of wellbeing as well as your furniture.

**PAUL:** The bottom line is economic choices. What I do is very time-intensive. To not use power saws and power planes would just be economically crazy. Probably it would be much saner if I could slow down enough to have stuff take me hours and hours of hard work longer. I certainly wouldn't miss the sound of machines. But it's hard enough to earn a living by doing hand crafted work without taking what kind of time saving you can.

**Where I draw the line really, is with the top 32nd or 100th of an inch of the piece of wood I am dealing with.**

In that I do as much of the shaping of pieces of wood as I can using machine, and then the final surface goes on by hand.

The other place I draw the line is I don't tend to design to make things easier to do by machine. And this is really more of an issue with mass-made things.

I have a chair in my shop up on the table which was a mass factory-produced chair and I am making four of them to complete a set that somebody has—which is an interesting project. But looking at the chair, I see that a lot of esthetic decisions got made on that chair based on how it was easiest to do by machine. Rather than how it was easiest to do by hand or what looked nicest.

So that's the line that I draw. I don't make lots of anything. I tend to make one of each thing that I make, so I'm not concerned with that level of time saving. I'm not concerned with making specialized machines that will do this one operation in two seconds instead of ten minutes because I'm only going to do it once.

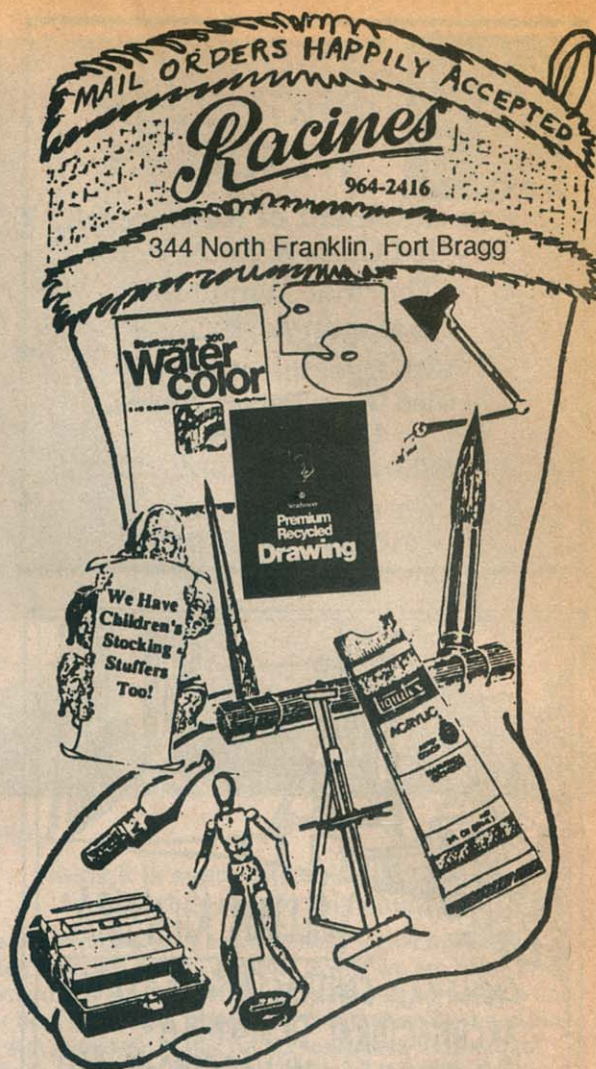
### There is a way of making objects that is informed by the hand

and there is a way of making objects that is informed by the machine. There is a way of making objects where the object has a relationship to the person who is making it, and there is a way of making objects where that isn't true because people have so insulated the hand from what is going on.

That chair on the table was probably made by twenty people, each person doing one part. The net result is that none of them particularly have any impact on it. The thing that has most impact on it is all the machine processing that went into it.

When I make a chair, I make it all. I conceive of it, and I cut it out, and I put it together, and I deal with errors and every bit of it is informed by me and my hands and is an interaction with me. It takes with it—it has within itself forever—me. It's my child in the same sense that people have children. I have a very strong connection with something that I make. That chair [pointing to the Mary chair] probably involves eighty hours of actual work and who knows how many hours of love and attention and thought and pondering. And it's all pretty much lovingly done, and so it is imbued with that. My awareness in my life, the difference that I notice between objects that are handmade and objects that aren't is that they just have a warmth to them that machine-made objects don't have.

And there is just a greater consciousness that goes with fewer-nicer. We live in a society that is driven by the need to have more cheaper. I'm much more interested in less-nicer. I would rather in my life have fewer nicer things than more not-nice things. And that's



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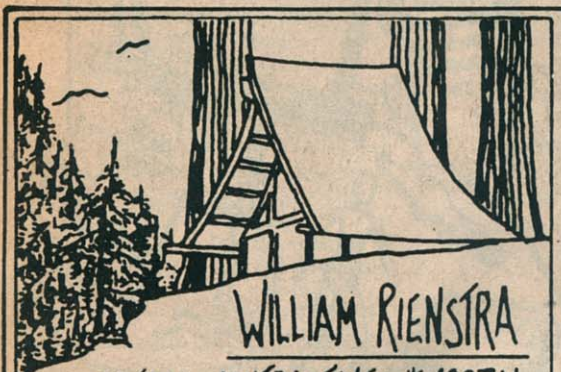
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very contrary sense of our culture which is to have as much stuff as you possibly can that you can then throw away. These chairs are going to be around in generations, with my mark carved into them on the back, my two initials overlapped, like Mason's marks, that little way of marking that survives.

*Let's talk about the role that chores play in your life. Which are the chores you relish?*

**PAUL:** Chores are things that make the day go round. What I understand by chores are all those maintenance things you get to do every day to keep everything working, and some of that is firewood and feeding chickens and tending the garden and feeding kids.

**My reaction to chores is to try to make them as routine and regular as I possibly can so they go by in the great round of the day without being jarring.**

I like splitting wood, I like working in my garden. Those are probably my favorite. My relationship to wood then is that I split to burn it. I like wood. I like watching pieces of wood go through my hands. It's very different from when I handle all these spiffy, carefully-milled, trucked-around-the-country pieces of wood that all have smooth surfaces. It's nice to watch my local trees as wood.

And it's just nice physical labor. Carving is a very rhythmic action, and that is one of the things I like about splitting wood too: it has a rhythm to it. That's a funny question to be asked.

*And your garden?*

**PAUL:** I used to like watering until we put in a drip system and now I don't do that anymore. I just like growing food. I enjoy watching plants grow and I get a real thrill out of growing my own food and trying to figure out ways to make a real impact on the amount of food we have to buy by what we can grow.



I like looking out the door of my studio and seeing the garden out there and my chickens. I've had chickens off-and-on whenever I've been anywhere long enough to have them. I grew up in a household that has chickens. I've traveled a lot in Mexico and chickens have very strong Mexican associations for me. I like the sound of chickens. I like knowing they are out there hustling and rustling and bustling about. I'm not a big animal pet fan; they are that substitute.

And they are definitely part of the garden/compost cycle. They get a lot of our household scraps and all the garden weeds. They also take all of my sawdust. That's another reason for having them and it is a good thing to do with sawdust because the breakdown of the wood, which sucks up nitrogen, helps balance out the real rich scrapings from the poop in the ground outside. So I just dump all my sawdust through there—in the chicken yard and the coop—and then in comes out and goes into the garden. That helps me deal with my sawdust, which is something to deal with otherwise.

A good deal of what I try to do for a living grows out of wanting to be where I am. I grew up in fairly rural environment outside of Washington D.C. I lived in cities for fifteen years. Then moved to Monte Rio up in the hills and then to Gualala up in the hills and then Westport up in the hills and then back down here one mile up 409. A lot of what I do has grown out of the question: what can I sit in my own space and do and feel good about and earn a living with?

That's been my response to wanting to go live in the country: it's been: well how am I going to earn a living? This is where I've ended up—somehow. •