

Master of Fine Arts Thesis

A Chair That... :
Philosophical riddles masquerading as furniture

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Introduction:

My work is deeply tied to my personal history as an immigrant and woman of color. It also reflects my educational and professional background. Through lived experiences, the former provides me with a critical perspective from which to view my social, political, and economic context. As a Chinese-American girl growing up in predominantly white communities, I developed a keen awareness of how my race and gender influenced the ways others perceived me. As my parents' economic situation shifted throughout my childhood, I also witnessed the effect this had on the opportunities I was presented.

My undergraduate degree in Sociology established the theoretical foundations for my practice and my worldview. During my time at Wesleyan University, I began to understand how these numerous categories with which I could be identified affected my life. I started to situate my own experiences within a political and economic system built upon racism, patriarchy, and oppression. Most importantly, Sociology offered me the tools with which to recognize how I myself am implicated in, and benefit from systemic racism, economic exploitation, and gender inequity. The awareness of these factors, and my desire to resist replicating them in my own life are strong motivations in my sculptural practice.

After college, I worked as a production designer for films. My role was to visually articulate a narrative through the design, fabrication, and installation of objects and sets. This career exposed me to a diverse array of materials and

processes, which honed my skills in fabrication and problem-solving. Through this work, I also developed an embodied understanding of how environments and objects can engage individuals in space.

As a result of these experiences, my studio practice is dynamic and interdisciplinary in nature. I weave together a wide variety of processes, from writing to glass casting, woodworking to video, as I shift between two-dimensional work, sculpture, and installation. I build connections between theory, material, and process in order to create engaging and interactive work.

Lived theory:

[Intersectionality is] a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences. The events and conditions of the social and political life and the self can seldom be understood as shaped by one factor. They are generally shaped by many factors in diverse and mutually influencing ways. When it comes to social inequity, people's lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other. Intersectionality as an analytic tool gives people better access to the complexity of the world and of themselves.¹

Intersectionality is the overarching framework for my worldview. This term refers to the numerous, intersecting vertices of race, class, gender, etc., that affect an individual's experience in society. Through this lens, I seek to triangulate my position within my social, cultural, political, and economic context. In my work, I endeavor to highlight the complex, shifting nature of identity as well as the nuances and contradictions found within interpersonal relationships.

I am motivated by the search for self-knowledge. My work begins with an internal examination of the tensions between desire and restriction, pleasure and discomfort. I mine my own emotional, psychological, and intellectual resources in an attempt to identify and reckon with the contradictions found there.

My work serves as a method of researching, experimenting, and learning how to engage with the world. By drawing connections between the internal and the external in my work, I shift focus between private and public realms to gain a greater understanding of both. I dissect my own lived experiences and then use this knowledge to create objects. These objects take the form of chairs, but are in

¹ Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, *Intersectionality* (Cambridge, Polity

fact contraptions designed for my ongoing investigation of how to live with integrity, humor, and compassion: “a philosophical riddle masquerading as furniture.”²

How can I be compassionate in the abstract, and so averse to interactions in the flesh? How do I express and exert my own power on those around me? How can I accept my flaws and continue to work on them? In what ways do I perpetuate patriarchy or reinforce capitalist values? What mechanisms can I design that will modulate my behavior and help me to live closer to my ideals? How does one hold multiple, sometime conflicting realities simultaneously?

Larger, existential questions are ground down, sifted, and separated into small, individual scenarios that I recreate in my work. My furniture pieces are constructed to exaggerate and isolate specific interactions with the self and in relation to others. My chairs become both object and location where desire, power dynamics, and relationships are externalized.

Chairs are a recurring motif in my work because of their implicit reference to the body as well as their recognizable form and symbolic value.³ I exploit the viewers’ familiarity with this ubiquitous object in order to propose new configurations that serve a different purpose. The chair becomes both place (seat or seats) and placeholder (my mother’s seat, a stranger’s seat). This allows me to explore subjectivity and the body in relation to others without directly using the figure.

² Barbara Lattanzi, in conversation, March 2017.

³ Judith Hoos Fox, *Furniture Furnishings: Subject and Object* (Providence, Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, 1984), 3.

In my sculptures, there is equal emphasis placed on the discrete object and the relationship between a body and the object. My work revolves around the body in space, whether through direct physical interaction or the viewers' projection of the absent body onto a piece. While the designs of the chairs develop from my own experiences, they connect to the viewer's imagination and their corporeal memory. Many of my sculptures also invite the viewer to sit in them; they are then compelled to make decisions about how they will behave once seated. Through this process, the viewer (now sitter) becomes an "active accomplice" in my work.⁴

Some of my furniture functions as a catalyst for engagement; a site or a meeting place where interactions occur (*Tête-à-tête series*, *Dome Chair*). Other pieces presume or externalize the underlying power dynamics within a group (*Untitled 1-7*). Many of the pieces can operate on both levels, but their scale and the manner in which the viewer interacts with the work affects this reading. The chairs support real or imagined bodies in space, placing them in positions for confrontation, support, confession, compromise, and reflection.

By composing my chairs with a simple vocabulary of seat, back, and legs, I rely on the viewer's familiarity with sitting. The pieces of the chair correspond to the body and thus inform where in the structure the viewer projects the body. The propositional, experimental, and ever-evolving nature of the objects' intended purpose is mirrored in their flat-pack construction and prototypic state.

⁴ Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Julie Ault, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (Göttingen: Steidl/Dangin, 2006), 111.

The aesthetics of contemporary furniture design and the language of advertising and branding are present in my work. These references emerge from my ambivalence towards product design and commodification. I am seduced by the idea that aesthetic and utilitarian problems can be solved by just the right material, form, or process. Yet I am highly critical of my own impulses towards materialism; my fetishization of objects and lifestyles that seems incompatible, if not complicit in larger systems of inequity and exploitation. I use this internal tension in my work: the clean lines and simple forms in my chairs leverage the aesthetic appeal of contemporary design principles, but the intent of my furniture is to investigate our relationships and identities.

A chair that....:

My current projects have all originated from *A chair that....* (see figure 1). This list is an alternate biography, told not through chronological events, but rather by an inventory of desires, insecurities, hopes, and flaws: “a chair that makes me less self-righteous...a chair that keeps me humble...a chair that makes me sit down to eat....” This piece emerged from my own time in therapy and was an attempt to admit, to resolve, or to reconcile the contradictions I saw in my social, economic, and cultural context. This drive to confront contradictions is articulated by Grace Lee Boggs:

*Hegel believed that the human spirit or “healthy human reason” is constantly evolving through a process of overcoming contradictions or inadequacies. Human beings are constantly struggling to make what they believe to be true, right, and just into a reality in their individual and social lives. Progress does not take place like “a shot out of a pistol.” It requires the “labor, patience and suffering of the negative.” In everything there is the duality of the positive and the negative. What is important is not any particular idea but the process of continuing development as the contradictions or limitations inherent to any idea surface and require the leap to a new idea or a new stage of Spirit.*⁵

My list details genuine (embarrassing, neurotic, self-absorbed) desires. It renders the list maker vulnerable and open to critique. There are clear tensions between the author’s more admirable aspirations and her less-than-flattering realities. These tensions are reframed into research questions that I continue to explore in my furniture.

⁵Grace Lee Boggs, *Living for Change: An Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 31.

- ☐ A chair that makes me sit down to eat
- ☐ A chair that helps me connect
- ☐ A chair that helps me forgive myself
- ☐ A chair that helps me follow through
- ☐ A chair that alleviates my anxiety about aging
- ☐ A chair that helps me be less self-absorbed
- ☐ A chair that prevents me from jumping to conclusions
- ☐ A chair that holds me accountable to myself
- ☐ A chair that makes me more confident
- ☐ A chair that helps me address my own prejudice
- ☐ A chair that helps me eat slower
- ☐ A chair that relieves my feelings of inadequacy
- ☐ A chair that helps me read instead of watching Netflix
- ☐ A chair that helps me love more generously
- ☐ A chair that reveals my own hypocrisy
- ☐ A chair that prevents me from reacting out of jealousy or envy
- ☐ A chair that reminds me to call my sister
- ☐ A chair that helps me locate and identify my fears
- ☐ A chair that alleviates my fear of caring too much
- ☐ A chair in which I can read (and retain) all the social and cultural theory I pointed to know but only vaguely remember from undergrad
- ☐ A chair that helps me remember names
- ☐ A chair that helps me make decisions
- ☐ A chair that helps me say what I mean
- ☐ A chair that helps me recognize my self-worth
- ☐ A chair that grounds me
- ☐ A chair that helps me relax so I can look natural in photographs
- ☐ A chair that helps chip away at my internalized racism
- ☐ A chair that helps me be more present
- ☐ A chair that makes failure less terrifying
- ☐ A chair that helps me come to terms with my anxiety about having children
- ☐ A chair that helps me feel at home
- ☐ A chair that helps me take a compliment
- ☐ A chair I can do nothing in
- ☐ A chair that keeps me open to change
- ☐ A chair that keeps me humble
- ☐ A chair that helps me be less self-righteous
- ☐ A chair that helps me be more articulate
- ☐ A chair that helps me do nice things, even when no one else is around
- ☐ A chair that helps me continue to value and cultivate my relationships with friends and family, not just my partner
- ☐ A chair that helps me feel genuinely happy for the success of others
- ☐ A chair that helps me resist a binary understanding of the world
- ☐ A chair that lets me know I'm enough
- ☐ A chair that helps me decide what to keep and what to let go
- ☐ A chair that helps me recognize and claim my own agency
- ☐ A chair that helps me do exactly that thing I know I should do, that I want to do, but am avoiding
- ☐ A chair that keeps me up to date on the preferred terminology for peoples' complex and evolving identities
- ☐ A chair that produces clutter
- ☐ A chair that helps me organize
- ☐ A chair that helps me only drink the amount I need to have fun
- ☐ A chair that improves my posture
- ☐ A chair that reminds me to be grateful
- ☐ A chair that helps me loosen up
- ☐ A chair that helps me learn to trust
- ☐ A chair that teaches me patience
- ☐ A chair that helps me take my time
- ☐ A chair that keeps me from arguing with my dad when what I really want is to connect
- ☐ A chair that helps me be less judgemental
- ☐ A chair that stops me from perpetuating sexist, racist, and classist ideologies
- ☐ A chair that gives me perspective
- ☐ A chair that makes me look cool
- ☐ A chair that is just uncomfortable enough that I behave better in it
- ☐ A chair that helps me make statements and not try to justify or qualify everything
- ☐ A chair in which I can have an honest, compassionate, and honest conversation about race with
- ☐ A chair that reminds me that the past does not dictate the future
- ☐ A chair that helps me build good routines
- ☐ A chair that helps me recognize potential and not just see limitations
- ☐ A chair that reminds me to call my sister
- ☐ A chair that helps me recognize that being proud and continuing to improve are not mutually exclusive

Figure 1: *A chair that...*, 2016. Ink on paper, 22 x 30 inches.

Deeper Seats:

The first outgrowth from *A Chair that...* was *Deeper Seats*, my fictitious company which sells self-help furniture (see figure 2). With this project, I exploited the conventions of advertising and branding to parody the commodification of genuine impulses for change and self-improvement. The company promises self-actualization through luxury furniture, customized to fit your budget and lifestyle. Through the guise of corporate promotional packet, I translated the earnest, vulnerable text of *A chair that...* into the stocklist for *Deeper Seats*.

Deeper Seats reflects my own ambivalence towards design and approaches to self-help that slip into escapism and materialism. I find the optimism and utilitarian value of design very seductive, yet I am highly skeptical of the compatibility of justice and equity with capitalist modes of production. *Deeper Seats* resides on the cynical end of this spectrum. It reflects a more troubling offshoot of the self-help industry where solutions to our larger social and political issues are ignored in favor of “fixing ourselves.”



About Us:

At Deeper Seats, our mission is to craft furniture that provides multilayered support for the user. Far more than a mere seat to rest upon, we create chairs that are customized to cater to your emotional and mental health needs while helping you reach your personal development goals.

In an age defined by interconnectivity there is, paradoxically, an increasing sense of alienation and anxiety in the modern psyche. Automation has already expanded beyond mechanical tasks and computation and the new frontier is our interior world.

When our friends and loved ones are distant, whether physically or as a result of the frenetic pace of life, we at Deeper Seats believe the objects around you can and should fill this void.

We integrate the practice of mindfulness into our designs in order to bridge the gap between the physical body and your internal world. Our chairs provide an *embodied site* where you engage with and address your mental and emotional states.

Over the course of one day, many of us look at our phones far more than we make eye contact with another person; we sit in a chair far more than we are held in another's embrace. At Deeper Seats, we believe that the furniture that touches us on a daily basis can support us in profound ways.

Process:

All Deeper Seats chairs are highly customized and involve a significant amount of input and reflection on the part of the user:

- After an preliminary interview, you select the model or models of chairs that fit your needs.
- We then pair you with our expert intake staff to identify your goals and develop a personal profile for you. This profile helps us build a chair to fit your exact needs and specifications.
- In addition to feedback from you, certain models involve input from friends, family, and other outside sources.

For those with smaller external networks, we also offer standard packages that are designed using extensive research to provide a broad spectrum of comfort and support.

Figure 2: *Deeper Seats* (excerpt), 2016. Inkjet print on cardstock, 8.5 x 11 inches.

Dome Chair:

After *Deeper Seats*, I began to build my furniture (see figures 3 and 4). However, once rendered in three dimensions, the objects began to deviate from my simple satirical critique. In *Dome Chair*, the *Tête-à-tête* series, and *Untitled 1-7*, I endeavor to graft structural and cultural critique, as well as self-reflection onto forms influenced by contemporary furniture design. In an attempt to address the contradictions put forth in *A chair that...*, I create sites where viewers encounter multiple, sometimes dissonant experiences simultaneously.

Dome Chair is a tool for self-reflection that marries vulnerability and unease with pleasure and intrigue by engaging the sitter visually, sonically, and physically. As the viewer enters the installation, they encounter the *Dome Chair* within a scene created by projections (which vary widely: an oil rig, a carnival game, the sunset, etc.). When the viewer sits in the chair and pulls down the dome, they engage a shield that distorts the imagery. The projected video, no matter how graphic or mundane, becomes abstracted and aestheticized to create a visually stimulating experience inside the dome.

Once the dome is engaged, it also activates the speakers, which introduce another layer to the experience. The viewer is instructed to repeat aloud the words they hear. The eight-minute track is a recording of a woman reading *A chair that...* By reciting in the first person, the viewer is confessing to their own reflection, which surrounds them and is inescapable.

The object itself teeters on the edge of that which it critiques: it is almost an escape pod, a personal IMAX theater that converts any imagery into a light show. However the interaction between viewer and chair also requires submission: the sitter temporarily relinquishes their mobility, vision, and hearing to the chair. If they choose to obey the instructions, they also actively engage in a blurring of subjectivities. The list of chairs heard in the audio track becomes their list of chairs; they echo the hopes and flaws expressed in the recording with their own voice.

I hope to prime the participant to recognize and consider the numerous, competing narratives that define their individual experience. I am deeply invested in the rejection of binary systems that oversimplify the shifting, multi-dimensional nature of identity.⁶ A person can be both generous and racist, compassionate and petty. To recognize these conflicting ideas is not to excuse them but rather to increase our ability to hold multiple narratives simultaneously.

⁶ Gonzalez-Torres and Ault, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, 111.



Figure 3: *Dome Chair*, 2017. Plywood, 2-way acrylic mirror, speakers, projector, dimensions variable (chair is 60 x 40 x 65 inches).

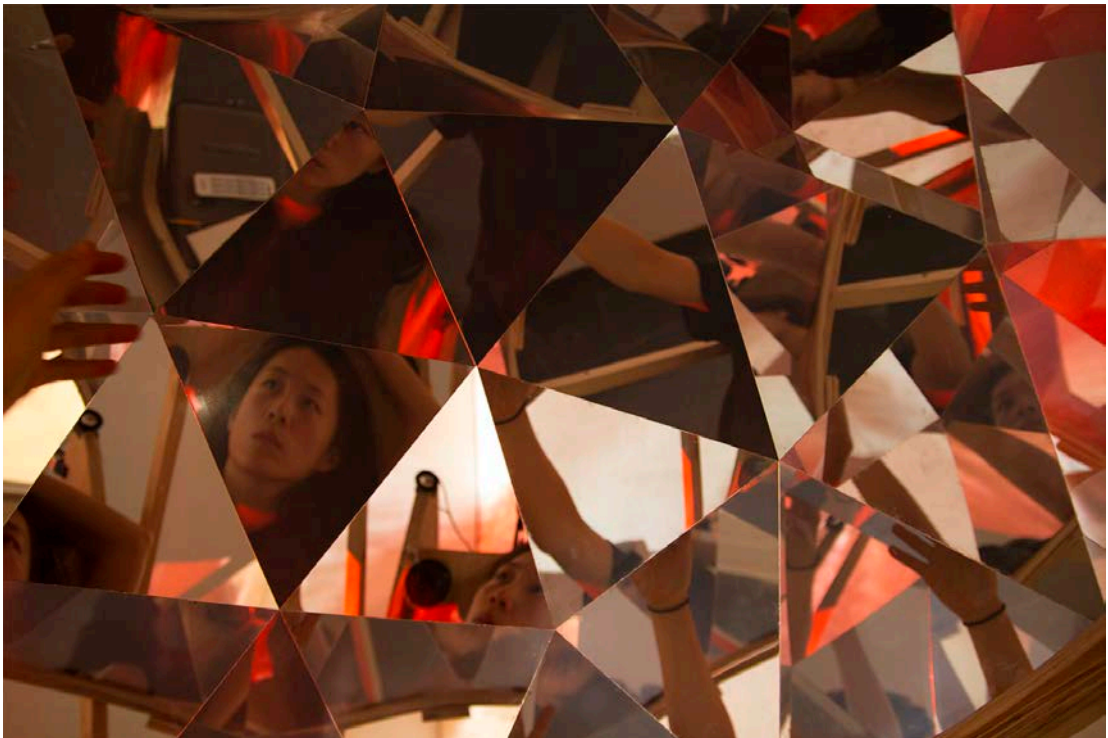


Figure 4: *Dome Chair Portrait*, 2016, Inkjet print, 21 x 14 inches.

Tête-à-tête Series:

This series of chairs continues to re-contextualize familiar elements of design and furniture in order to pose questions about relationships and identity. In my *Tête-à-tête* chairs, I create strange encounters through physically enforced intimacy. The design of these two-person chairs place the sitters in different postures to heighten their awareness of their own body in relation to another. From here, the participants are forced to arrive at some type of agreement, a temporary social contract, which dictates how they will interact with the other person. The quality and character of these interactions are affected by a number of factors, including the pre-existing relationship between the pairings, the duration of time spent in the chairs, and the context in which the chairs are placed.

With the *Tête-à-tête* pieces, I focused on the three senses: sight, sound, and touch. In *Touch* the sitters straddle each end of the chair; the conjoined seats angle downward causing both people to slide down towards the center and each other (see figure 5). The participants must make a decision about how their bodies will interact. They can actively avoid physical contact by holding themselves against the backrest with their legs, or they can slide into one another and allow their knees to touch.

In *See*, two mirrors are installed on each side of the chair at opposite corners and they are angled towards one another (see figure 6). Two people sit diagonally across from each other and stare into the other person's reflection

through the mirrors. The configuration of the seats holds both participants at a relatively spacious physical distance from the other, but the oval mirrors slice apart and rearrange the space between the sitters. The mirrors reflect the image of each participant, framed like a portrait, directly in the other sitter's line of vision. The participants are *indirectly* face-to-face, the other person's image sitting in their lap.

In *Hear*, two people recline ear-to-ear with each other, facing opposite directions (see figure 7). The tall, round sides of the headrests serve to partially block outside noise and focus the sitters' attention towards one another. The relaxed, open posture of the seats invites contemplation and directs the viewers' gaze upward. This chair is more comfortable than the other two and generates a subtler interaction. Like going for a long drive with your father, both sitters look outward and it becomes easier to have a conversation or to sit in silence. Conversely, the intimate body position can amplify this silence to uncomfortable levels if one is lounging with a stranger.

Sit, *See*, and *Touch* create the conditions for engagement between two people, which can take on any number of forms: comfort, confrontation, confession, collaboration, etc. Both sitters must engage with and consider the other in order to determine the nature of the interaction. The presence of the other person, regardless of who they are, must be acknowledged and addressed in some way.



Figure 5: *Touch (with people)*, 2017. Plywood, 42 x 42 x 17.5 inches.



Figure 6: *See (with people)*, 2017. Plywood, 38 x 52 x 35 inches.



Figure 7: *Hear (with people)*, 2017. Plywood, 90 x 36 x 21 inches.

Untitled 1-7:

The *Untitled 1-7* series is an ongoing project in which I focus on the representational and absurdist potential of the chairs. This series of seven maquettes are designed for three or four people at once and range in size from three to fifteen inches in all directions (see figure 8). While the *Dome Chair* is a tool for self-reflection and the *Tête-à-tête* series can be characterized as conversations between two people, the *Untitled 1-7* series references group dynamics and power structures.

The small scale of *Untitled 1-7* renders the chairs more abstract and allows them to function as symbols, or furniture action figures playing out a variety of scenes. In *Untitled 4*, three chairs are fused together, side-by-side, and their frame slopes downward from left to right (figure 9). The leg of the chair on the right splays outward in an exaggerated stance of propping up the other two. In *Untitled 1*, three chairs are stacked on top of one another, all facing the same direction, the proposed bodies sitting in each others' laps (figure 10). In *Untitled 5*, three chairs are joined in a closed, triangular configuration. All three face each other, with their backs toward the outside as if at a séance, or huddled in the act of planning (figure 11).

Untitled 1-7 serves as a type of Rorschach Test for the viewer. There are conventional associations between vertical positioning and power, which is one reading of these chairs. However, their simple, unadorned forms allow for subjective interpretations of power, positionality, and group dynamics. The

viewer's perspective and personal experiences affect the roles or identities they ascribe to each seat as well as where they may project themselves.



Figure 8: *Untitled 1-7, 2017*. Masonite, dimensions variable (3 – 15 inches in all directions).



Figure 9: *Untitled 4, 2017*. Masonite, 13 x 9 x 3 inches.



Figure 10: *Untitled 1*, 2017. Masonite, 8 x 10.5 x 3 inches.



Figure 11: *Untitled 5*, 2017. Masonite, 12 x 7 x 12 inches.

Conclusion:

In my exhibition *A chair that...*, I synthesize and recombine elements of other disciplines to reimagine and redefine the role of my work. My sculptures exploit elements of design in order to create objects that are both accessible and transcendent. My work takes advantage of the permeable, shifting boundary between public and private, interior and exterior. Through careful observation of my own relationships, to myself and to others, I seek to locate myself in my immediate world; then from there look out onto the larger political and social context: “meaning is created once something can be related to personal experience.”⁷ I am searching for ways to acknowledge or reconcile contradictions within my own identity and interpersonal relationships. While politics and policy often involve a flattening of nuance, art has the ability to present complexity. In my work, I hope to harness this unique and important power.

⁷ Gonzalez-Torres and Ault, *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, 28

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