

THE REBEL



Wendell Castle in his Scottsville, New York, studio, 2015.



THE ROBOT

Wendell Castle celebrates a half century
as America's original furniture maverick

By Michael Slenske



Wendell Castle is restless. That's the first thing you realize when you enter his sprawling cedar-shingle studio compound—a former wheat- and soybean-processing plant he purchased in the late 1960s—in Scottsville, New York, just a short drive from Rochester. The multilevel, 15,000-square-foot space (one-third of which was added over the years to accommodate Castle's

metastatic operation) is a hub of artistic activity. Everywhere you look there are employees drilling, sanding, computer modeling, or carving his latest—and increasingly massive—art-furniture pieces with big-boy toys, ranging from utterly manual carpenter clamps to a 5,000-pound ABB robot named Mr. Chips. Evidence of Castle's creative output, six decades' worth of archives (from his pioneering foray into stack-lamination carving to his early mold-form fiberglass experiments and radical Italian and Deco-inspired '80s heyday to his new digital breakthroughs) is sprawled about various storage areas and showrooms. And if he needs a break from it all, there's an on-site sculpture garden, an elevated paddle tennis court, and a small fleet of classic cars, which, depending on the day, might include a 1985 slant-nose Porsche 911 Turbo, a 1949 MG TC, or his gem, a 1970 robin's-egg-blue Jaguar E-Type convertible that would make even James Bond drool.

After a short blitz through this fun house, Castle asks if I want to grab lunch. It's a balmy July afternoon, so we hop in the Jag, cruise over to Main Street, and slide into one of the cream-colored Naugahyde booths at the Scottsville Diner. This wood-paneled, Everywhere, U.S.A., greasy spoon is a study in suburban Americana—where everyone in the joint knows Castle's name—so it is probably a little jarring to the locals when the godfather of American studio furniture is moved to tears over cheeseburgers and sodas within five minutes of our arrival. This last scene was not part of my plan—typically, you serve up the softballs first and then work around to the potential tearjerker—but there was no damming the flood of emotion after I asked the 82-year-old *éminence grise* the most perfunctory of studio-visit questions: *What made you want to be an artist?*

"That's hard for me to talk about," says Castle, choking up, his inflamed eye sockets rivaling the lipstick-red rims of his signature Anne & Valentin eyeglasses. His emotion, of course, is understandable: Finding your way from the conservative climes of Blue Rapids, Kansas, to the highest echelons of the blue-chip art world (by crafting fine art furniture, no less) seems all but impossible—then or now. In fact, as a child, the closest Castle ever got to creating sculpture or furniture was crafting soapbox-derby cars, tree houses, and model airplanes with the tools lying around his father's workshop. A vocational agriculture teacher, the elder Castle educated local farmers on machinery repair and the logistics of crop rotation, as well as basic carpentry and blacksmithing, allowing young Wendell to tag along from time to time.

"He was a jack-of-all-trades, and not very good at any of them, but I was always around people who were making or fixing things," Castle recalls. While it was assumed that he and his siblings would matriculate at a college, art was never considered a possible career choice. "My parents were adamant about my not being an artist, so I convinced them that industrial design was not art, it was industry, which of course was not true," says Castle. "My grade school, junior high, and high school had no art classes, so I never had anyone look at my artwork or say I had talent. I did draw, but no one valued it. Whenever I finished

drawings, they'd be in the wastebasket by the next day. It never even occurred to me I would ever be interested in art."

However, in his sophomore year at the Methodist-leaning Baker University in eastern Kansas—a school he did not care to attend—Castle got the opportunity to take an elective. "I selected art for no particular reason, but I was really good at it right off. I could draw people, landscapes, and the teacher took me aside and said, 'You've got to get out of this school.' I went to the University of Kansas within a month," he says, a second round of tears welling between his salt-colored mane and goatee. "He basically saved my life."

Though it's not a story he often tells, it's illustrative of his core beliefs in the mysteries of the cosmos and its unlikely Venn-diagram intersections with artistic practice. "My life is random, but I've been in the right place at the right time a few times," observes Castle, who paid for his schooling—after defying his parents' wishes—by enlisting in the army. "I was on a train to New Jersey to get on a troop ship bound for Korea, but I had gotten very sick in basic training. I had pneumonia, and the train was nearly there, but they put me in the hospital. I was reassigned to Germany, which was a pretty lucky break, because I met a guy who was the battalion artist. I wasn't aware the battalion even had an artist, but it turned out his tour of duty was almost over, so I applied for his job and he gave it to me. I made signs for an officers' party or stuff like Keep the Mess Hall Clean and did some illustration for the battalion newspaper. It was a good deal, because when you had an actual job in the army, you didn't have to pull guard duty." While the winds of fate may have placed Castle in opportune situations—and out of harm's way—his indefatigable work ethic and willingness to take risks are the true engines of his storied career.

"I think what the public sees now is the output of someone who has 10 ideas a day multiplied by 365 days a year. He never stops," says Marc Benda, whose New York gallery, Friedman Benda, has represented Castle over the past decade, a period that some would argue has been the most prolific of the artist's life. In the past year alone, Castle opened his fifth, and perhaps most ambitious, solo exhibition at the gallery in the spring—preceded by a solo at Carpenters Workshop Gallery in Paris last fall—while his work has been all but ubiquitous at art and design fairs from London to San Francisco. Meanwhile, he just published his catalogue raisonné with the Artist Book Foundation; his daughter, Alison Castle, an editor at Taschen, is working on a documentary about her famous father; and this month marks the opening of the first museum exhibition to focus on his digitally crafted, robot-carved chairs, lamps, and tables, "Wendell Castle Remastered," at New York's Museum of Arts and Design (MAD). Of course, nobody—not even Benda—expected such epic late-career energy when he first met Castle in 2002.

"At that time, Wendell was considered a towering figure of the 1960s and '70s, an enormously important person, but people felt he was fading into the sunset," says Benda. "In the first conversation I had with him, I asked him what he wanted to do, and he told me that he drew every day and had new ideas every day, and all he wanted was to realize those things. Everything else was secondary. I realized very quickly he didn't just have ideas but *groundbreaking* ideas that needed to become part of the contemporary-design dialogue."

CASTLE NEVER SET OUT TO CONQUER THE FURNITURE WORLD. IN FACT, were it not for a snide remark by a professor in a sculpture workshop at the University of Kansas, he might well have spent his days casting bronzes. "The sculpture studio had some power tools, and I was going to make a simple cabinet to keep art supplies in, more or less a box with a door, and the teacher came



CLOCKWISE FROM
TOP LEFT:
Triad chair,
2006. Fiberglass
with silver leaf,
37 x 36 x 34 in.

Scribe stool,
1961–62. Walnut
and ebony,
54 x 26 x 26 in.

Table-Chair-Stool,
1968. Afrosia,
other African
hardwoods,
and adhesive.
Table-chair:
26 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 115 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 35 in.
Stool:
17 x 16 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 15 in.





“For a young person, he was very confident in his vision and what he wanted to do, even if he was going off the normal course of action,” says Alyson Baker, director of the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Connecticut, which explored the early part of Castle’s career three years ago with “Wendell Castle: Wandering Forms—Works from 1959–1979.” That early confidence allowed Castle to identify unlikely (if wandering) concepts, processes, and forms. So did, he argues, his lifelong battle with dyslexia. “It was a huge trouble in school, but I realize now that dyslexia is probably beneficial for artists. I think you see things differently than they are,” says Castle. “Misinformation is good.”

If Castle’s gunstock stools served as his opening salvo for translating misinformation into art—most of which succeeds, ironically, by presenting aesthetically pleasing visual conundrums to the

viewer—his early foray into stack-lamination carving laid the battle plans for one of the most unlikely careers in contemporary furniture. Rather than carving from a single piece of hardwood, this craft process calls for stacking, gluing, and clamping boards into layered forms that are then carved into a desired shape. It was cheaper, quicker, and offered more possibilities at a more monumental scale than the classical technique of liberating a form with mallet and chisel from a single block of raw material. While it was unheard-of in a fine art context at the time, it’s now common practice for many star designers, including Julia Krantz, Joaquim Tenreiro, and Jeroen Verhoeven (who uses the process sort of in reverse, famously bonding 741 layers of CNC-cut plywood slices together to make his iconic Cinderella table, one of Castle’s favorite works by a contemporary designer).

“Rather wonderfully, the process was inspired by a manual Wendell had as a kid that showed how to make a duck decoy,” explains Glenn Adamson, director of MAD. “You get this stepwise model duck, and then you shave down the corners. He realized he could make any shape he wanted to using that technique.”

Spurred by the organic forms of modernist icons like Jean Arp, Henry Moore, and Constantin Brancusi, Castle began shaping idiosyncratic pieces from these stacked-oak boards that questioned the very nature, purpose, and potential of studio furniture. A sensual three-person settee floated like a cloud over a single leg (or perhaps ankle) attached to a puddling base. His Wall table resembled a worm supporting itself between two

Four views of Castle’s studio.

along and said, “You’re wasting your time on furniture? Get back to making sculpture,” recalls Castle. “I thought, I’m going to get one over on him. I’ll make a piece of furniture and disguise it as sculpture well enough that he’ll believe it.”

In short order, Castle crafted the Stool sculpture—and then the Scribe stool—with walnut gunstock offcuts from a local factory. Capping the cuts in old piano key ivory and ebony, respectively, the works were functional as seating for only the slightest of users—“They’re not as comfortable as sitting on a fence,” Castle jokes—but their delicate, bonelike design not only won over his instructor but also won prizes and went on to be exhibited around the world. In fact, the dean of fine arts at the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT), Harold Brennan, caught a glimpse of the early work at the Craft Museum in New York and sent a letter to Castle’s tiny Manhattan studio in the spring of 1962, urging him to apply for a teaching job. “The program was very Danish at that point, and they had a Dane running it, and Brennan didn’t think they should be doing Danish anymore. He thought a sculptor would be a good idea, even though I wasn’t very well qualified,” says Castle, who got a position at RIT (where he is currently the artist in residence) and moved to Rochester that summer. Though he had planned to return to the city in two years’ time—and his staying led to a divorce from his first wife—he never looked back. “I liked it; I had a great studio, and I didn’t want to leave. And I liked teaching, the enthusiasm of the students and how they think about things is interesting to me.”

90-degree planes. He also carved chests for blankets and stereos that resembled ripened produce falling or rising from a stem, and epic seven-foot-tall mahogany and cherry lamps that mimicked the fruit, or tulips and mushrooms, as well as biomorphic desks and tables whose planar surfaces rose like waves from serpentine blocks of stacked white oak and walnut. After exhibiting work in Milan in the early '60s, Castle began experimenting with mold-cast, color-infused fiberglass—most memorably in his Molar chair and Fat Albert lamps that put an American spin on the work he'd been seeing in Domus by Ettore Sottsass and Joe Colombo. Though they were marginally successful at the time, they are now comeback hits, thanks to a reproduction deal he inked with R & Company in the late aughts. Regardless of the market, they've been iconic since their debut: Designer Karim Rashid found the work so intriguing as a teenager that it later served as the inspiration for his "bobject" concept and Blob chair. "These fluid-like objects, created with new materials, spoke about a soft, ethereal, and technological world," says Rashid, who especially loved Castle's Molar chair and Cloud shelf. "I always loved the '70s works that were in the genre of Eero Aarnio, Luigi Colani, Verner Panton, and Olivier Mourgue. This work appealed to me because I have always had an affinity for organic forms that are an extension of us and nature."

When Rashid was still in diapers, Castle's work fortuitously caught the eye of maverick dealer Lee Nordness, who curated the seminal traveling exhibition "Objects: USA," which helped propel craft beyond the mainstream into the realm of fine art. "I was the first craft person he ever exhibited, and he did well with sales," says Castle, who had a groundbreaking New York solo debut with Nordness in 1968. This early success encouraged Nordness to find other makers and expand the craft contingent of his Madison Avenue operation with the likes of Lenore Tawney, Dale Chihuly, and Peter Voulkos. "It was a lot of freedom because I had made fairly outrageous pieces. They look conservative today, but they were big, bigger than a lot of furniture at the time. In a sense, I never focused my career in terms of making things sellable. I've almost done the opposite."

When Castle finally settled into a rhythm with his stack-lamination process, he essentially blew up his practice (one of many about-faces in his career) in the mid 1970s. At the time, he was teaching a still-life drawing class at SUNY Brockport. "One day I took my sport coat off and threw it over the back of a chair and said, 'Here's what we're going to draw,'" recalls Castle. "I drew it, too, several times, and I noticed that in my drawings, I didn't try to implicate the fabric's texture. I just drew the coat and the chair so the chair had the same texture as the coat, and it made me think they could be the same thing. Being a person who worked with wood, I thought, Wouldn't it be cool to carve that chair and coat out of one thing?"

Merging classical furniture forms (coatracks, desk chairs, a demilune table) with still-life objects (keys, coats, hats, gloves) in one solid carved piece, Castle resurrected the Italian Renaissance motif of the woodworking still life by composing elements with an attention to detail reserved for a Dutch Old Master painting or a set design. While these meticulously carved trompe l'oeil sculptures failed to sell during a 1978 exhibition at Carl Solway Gallery in New York, they quickly sold out in a subsequent show with Alexander Milliken, and are now highly coveted on the secondary market.

"I understand it now better than I did at the time," says Castle of the impulse for this foray into realism. "At the time, I wanted my work to be accepted, appreciated, displayed, sold on an equal level with sculpture. Then I said, 'What's the opposite of this?'"

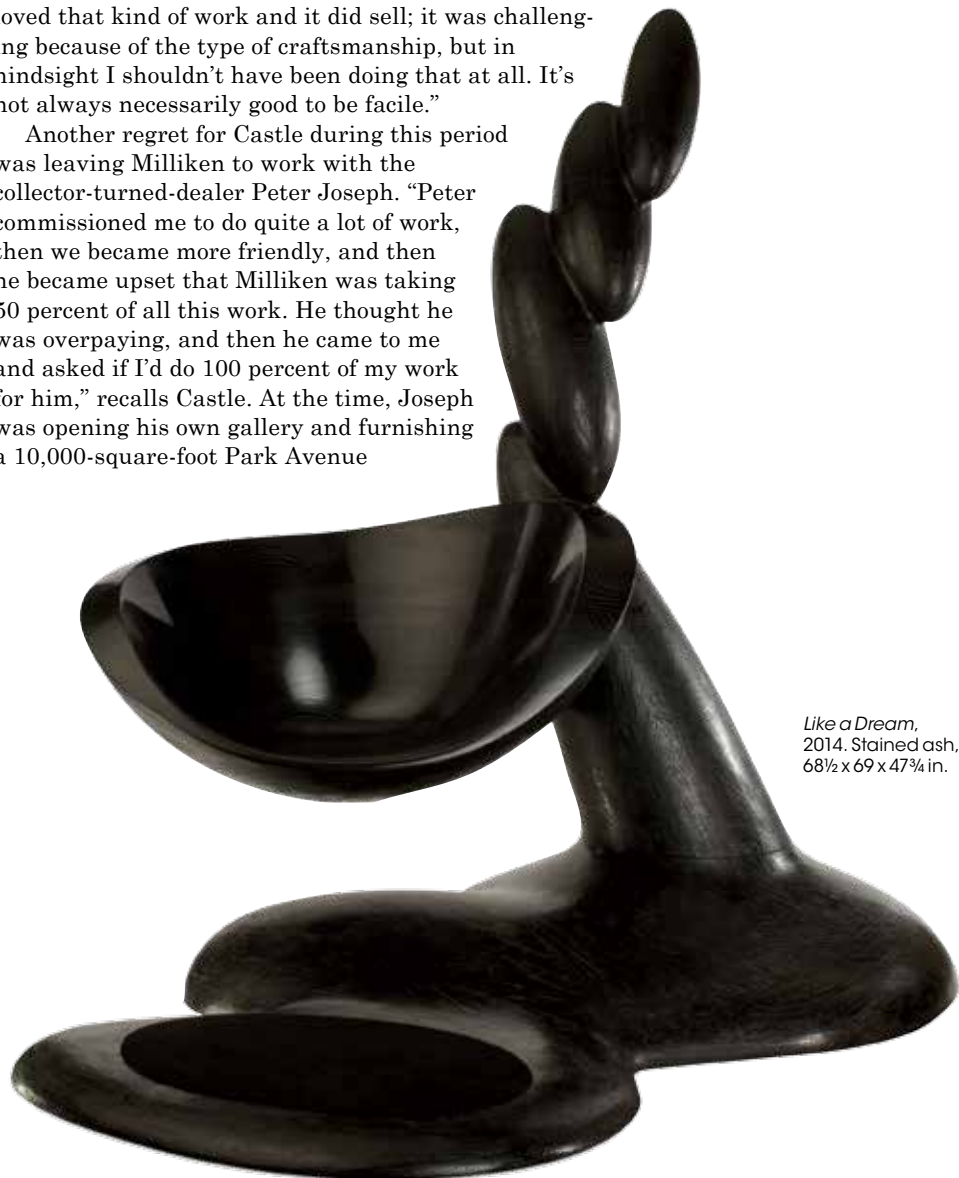
Castle created some of his most conceptual and technical work in this vein—notably *Table with Tablecloth*, 1978, and *Ghost Clock*, 1985, two shrouded forms that feel like the sculptural

forebears of David Hammons's tarp paintings—in the late '70s and early '80s, but by then he was already pivoting again to a more decorative, Memphis Group-inspired style of highly ornamental (borderline cartoonish) work. Though it was market-driven to a large extent, there are undoubtedly many iconic pieces from this colorful period, including a suite of painted and veneered pieces (chairs, a piano, and a desk), inspired sets of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, his beloved Star cabinets, numerous rare wood clocks, and his infamous Pope's chair, conceived after Milliken suggested that Castle make a chair for John Paul II's 1987 tour of the United States.

"Milliken seemed to think there should be this special chair made for the pope and asked me to do a drawing. The pope saw a drawing, and he hated it and said, 'I'm not sitting in that,'" recalls Castle, with a laugh, as he shows me the disarticulated and extremely dusty chair in his attic, which sort of resembles the Design Star version of the Island of Misfit Toys. "But I went ahead and made the chair anyway. I've torn it apart since, but I've been thinking I might redo it in some way." While Benda was thrilled to hear about this idea, Castle doesn't really acknowledge the period as a success, and it was roundly avoided by both the Aldrich and MAD for their exhibitions.

"I THINK THAT CERTAIN PHASES OF MY WORK WERE FAILURES, EVEN though there were some good pieces," Castle admits. "In the '80s, when I was doing the so-called fine furniture with the Art Deco influence, I was encouraged by Milliken, and he loved that kind of work and it did sell; it was challenging because of the type of craftsmanship, but in hindsight I shouldn't have been doing that at all. It's not always necessarily good to be facile."

Another regret for Castle during this period was leaving Milliken to work with the collector-turned-dealer Peter Joseph. "Peter commissioned me to do quite a lot of work, then we became more friendly, and then he became upset that Milliken was taking 50 percent of all this work. He thought he was overpaying, and then he came to me and asked if I'd do 100 percent of my work for him," recalls Castle. At the time, Joseph was opening his own gallery and furnishing a 10,000-square-foot Park Avenue



Like a Dream, 2014. Stained ash, 68½ x 69 x 47¾ in.



once. “I was competing against myself,” he says.

Castle remained in a fallow period for years after, until Benda and his partner, Barry Friedman, came into the picture. “Artists have to be selfish to the point where they are able to create and put out into the world whatever they need to put out, and in Wendell’s case it was the opposite—he wasn’t selfish enough for a long time,” says Benda. In order to resurrect his practice in the wake of the go-go ’80s and ’90s, Castle posed a simple question to himself: *What if I had no employees and had to do everything myself again?*

“The answer was pretty clear, I would do exactly what I did when that was true in 1962,” he says. “Partly because of my age, I’m not going to be experimenting with too many radically different directions, so I need to focus on what is the best.”

Long before Castle enlisted Mr. Chips, the robot, to do his carving, he presented a seminal work—the Triad chair—to Benda, which was pivotal according to the dealer. “He showed me a lot of drawings, and I was thrilled to be in dialogue with him, but I wasn’t yet on the wagon in the way I was with Ettore Sottsass, whose last show was dedicated to Mondrian. Ettore said he had wanted to do an homage to Mondrian his whole professional life. Wendell was doing an homage to himself,” says Benda. “This Triad chair combined all the virtues of his practice, and it was composed of these volumes that were undeniably him, but it didn’t look like a knockoff of 1965 or 1975; there was something when you looked at it, you knew it was a piece made in 2006. You could trace our professional relationship back to that chair. He started thinking forward again instead of back, harnessing all the things he’d learned before.”

TACKED UP ON THE WALLS OF THE VARIOUS WORKSHOPS, offices, and showrooms of the Scottsville studio—including Castle’s personal studio, where he still breaks out a file from time to time—you’ll find numerous poster prints of “My 10 Adopted Rules of Thumb.” More gestural than gospel, the notion for the rules originated with a phrase Castle heard during a 1990 artist talk that ventured into Zen Buddhism. He later tweaked the aphorism, which

is now known as Rule 10: “If you hit the bull’s-eye every time, the target is too near.” These rules now seem to offer spiritual guidance for his current approach—especially Rule 5: “The dog that stays on the porch will find no bones”—and he’s even planning to add two more when he narrows down the most illuminating koans from a list of 50 he’s been amassing for years.

“He’s a risk taker and he gets bored easily. He always wants a new challenge,” says Adamson, noting that Castle’s willingness to continually move the bull’s-eye certainly played a part in the artist’s decision to buy Mr. Chips four years ago, which in turn prompted MAD to give him a show. “I thought that was so amazing, that at his age he would be expanding his tool kit in this radical way, engaging with these automated digital manufacturing techniques and using a robot as his primary carving tool after all this time; it seemed absolutely astounding to us. The basic idea of the show is: What happens when a maker’s skill goes digital? There’s also the comparison of his early breakthrough work with this new breakthrough—50 years apart.”

penthouse and a large Southampton estate. “Between furnishing his two homes and the gallery, he said, ‘I’ll buy everything you make.’ That was unfortunate because I liked Alexander Milliken a lot, and he was really pissed that I would do that, but I couldn’t say no because it was almost double the money. But in hindsight it was a good move only financially.”

In fact, it even proved financially troubling after Joseph died of cancer in 1998. The dealer had been arbitrarily inflating Castle’s prices, creating what the artist calls a “false economy” by prearranging to buy the biggest and most expensive piece in any given show—at a greatly reduced price from the retail figure—for himself. “When it all collapsed, it did in almost everyone who showed with him,” says Castle, who had been ramping up his studio apparatus, hiring more and more assistants to meet the demand for the hundreds of pieces (including a now famous library) that Joseph commissioned. The bottom really dropped out after Joseph’s widow, who wasn’t a fan of Castle’s work, dumped nearly all of it on the market at

Walnut
Sculpture,
1958–59. Walnut
and brass pins,
48 x 30 in.

“I’ve never focused my career in terms of making things sellable. I’ve almost done the opposite.”

Citing Paul McCarthy’s massive walnut bookends as facsimiles, Castle argues the robot has allowed him to explore depth, volume, and interiority to degrees that simply aren’t possible by hand. While Mr. Chips doesn’t increase Castle’s output—programming can actually take longer than hand-carving—it does help with crafting editions made in mirrored unique multiples. It also increases precision immensely. For the most recent Friedman Benda show, “Gathering Momentum,” the artist explored (and exploited) his love of ellipsoids, which dates back to early fascination with auto design and illustration, by using phallic, football-like bullets to suspend sensual flower-evoking seating elements that are undeniably sexual in form and title (*Above, Beyond, Within; Temptation*). He also took a page from William Burroughs with his new Misfit chairs, which are essentially parts cut from two or three separate chairs that are then reassembled to make a new collaged piece. “I wouldn’t even think of making stuff like this in the ’70s because it would have been ridiculous to make a chair that weighs 800 pounds because nobody could move it,” he says. “But I don’t worry about that now because anybody who is going to buy this piece isn’t going to move it anyway.” In other words, rooms are now designed around Castle’s furniture, not the reverse.

“It’s a different language from five years ago,” the artist says. His 2010 series of darkly titled rocking chairs—inspired by the tilted-wheel motion captured in Jacques-Henri Lartigue’s iconic 1914 photograph of a Bugatti race car—radically defied perception, and seemingly gravity, but even they aren’t fast enough to keep up with his latest forms.

“To push the work further, I wanted to work large and bring in these other potential problems, like things having to be disassembled, because you couldn’t get them through the door. The solutions have opened up real possibilities,” says Castle. “We haven’t even scratched the surface of what we can do.”

For MAD, he’ll do his best to push the envelope. He’s constructing a massive lamp that “eliminates the ceiling, kind of this monument to the technology he’s working with now,” says Adamson. There will also be a massive one-seat chair attached to a peanut-shaped chest of drawers, which is currently being assembled in one of the smaller finishing workshops, as well as an epic 16-foot-long dining table called Suspended Belief, only in a plaster-model form at the moment, that floats off a cluster of treelike, eight-foot-tall ellipsoids. He was even thinking of making a 30- to 40-piece total environment—an extension of his

two-story 2013 installation, *A New Environment*, which was based on *Environment for Contemplation*, the foam-padded, Flokati-lined reflection chamber he made in 1969—but he realized that, no matter how perfectly he selected the wood (he works primarily in ash these days), he would be able to assemble it only once.

“You could make it in fiberglass, but I planned to put a chair inside, so there would have to be a lot more happening in that chair; it should be air-conditioned, maybe there’s a TV, some stereo equipment,” says Castle, his mind running wild, as Mr. Chips makes some precision cuts on a chair while his daughter, Alison, films in the background. Going forward, he hopes to work more in glass (he’s currently crafting a series of weighty martini glasses for Corning, which mimic his ellipsoidal chairs) and perhaps do another massive room install, but with his 83rd birthday around the corner, there is no time for anyone else’s vision but his.

“These days I’m thinking this way: I want the things that I make to have a life of great length. Whoever buys whatever I’m making now, they’ll get divorced, move, die, and the things will go somewhere else, so I really want to entertain ideas that have the chance for many lives,” he says, noting that while he wishes this glut of attention could have come a couple of decades ago, he’s perhaps better equipped now to appreciate the adoration. In fact, when he’s home on the weekends, he claims he’ll put on jazz records and dance by himself—when nobody else is looking.

“I love what I’m doing so much. It’s so exciting, so much fun,” he says. “There was always some hesitancy about going too far in the past, but now there isn’t. I have all this wonderful freedom.” MP

Temptation, 2014.
Bronze,
42¼ x 101 x 50½ in.

