

Back in Black

A New York gallery reissues a curated collection of furniture by American Wendell Castle – in black – and redefines the color of Pop Art

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TABLE TOP: Wendell Castle's Big Table is one of four gel-coated, signed plastic designs reintroduced in The Black Edition

At least in the design world, black is still the new black. Recall Baccarat's 2005 release of a signature jet-black chandelier and the reproduction of Finnish designer Alvar Aalto's most iconic chairs in black lacquer. This fall, New York gallery R20th Century also reissued a selection of work by American designer and artist Wendell Castle – produced in Technicolor hues between 1968 and 1973 – in glossy black. R20th Century's signed, limited-run series is aptly dubbed The Black Edition and celebrates one of the most creative minds behind 20th century art furniture. The collection consists of gel-coated, fiberglass-reinforced plastic tables and shelving rendered in black in order to accentuate their sinuous silhouettes. Reviving a project that continues to blur the line between sculpture and design, these cartoonishly gothic pieces will test the relevance of the Pop aesthetic in today's market.

Through the '60s, the Kansas-born artist who earned degrees in both industrial design and sculpture, worked mainly with wood, gaining renown for pieces like his wiggling, three-legged tables. As the plastics movement led by Italians like Joe Colombo and Verner Panton took root, its rich pigments caught Castle's eye and by the late '60s, had spurred him to experiment with the new material. The subsequent bulbous forms that he

turned out proved even more outlandishly voluptuous than his previous wooden work. After using paints to try to enhance his work's color and shine, he turned to automotive industry methods, realizing that he could replicate the relatively low-tech process used to create fiberglass. "It was a way for me to join a movement that I admired very much," recalls Castle, who still teaches at the Rochester Institute of Technology in upstate New York. Having punched up the color, Castle crafted a number of limited-edition pieces, including his dental-shaped Molar seating group, indicative of the biomorphism, scale and whimsy that characterized the period. Unfortunately, as the rising price of oil, integral to the manufacture of plastics, made his work prohibitively expensive, Castle's brief affair with synthetics was brought abruptly to an end.

At the time, Castle was the only American working with fiberglass. Even in the 21st century, the vocabulary of Castle's plastic interlude still stands as one of design's prime examples of form leading function, demonstrating the artist's lifelong quest to define a new way to think about furniture. Or, as Castle himself puts it, "We should constantly challenge and test how we produce furniture and the way that we use it." TJ