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ART + DESIGN + VISUAL CULTURE



**Vital Forms: American Art and Design
in the Atomic Age, 1940-1960**

Walker Art Center

Minneapolis, MN

by Benjamin Davis

< Eero Saarinen

PEDESTAL ARMCHAIR

WITH CUSHION

designed 1956, made circa 1970

The flamboyant exhibition *Vital Forms* throws the Walker's doors open to embrace the contradictions of art history. Focusing on "biomorphism," the use of shapes suggesting the primal forces of life, the show crosses disciplines to mine the cultural strata of mid-20th century life. It includes everything from spidery, Surrealist-influenced canvases by Gordon Onslow Ford and Arshile Gorky, to furniture by artist/designers Charles and Ray Eames and Isamu Noguchi, to displays of Tupperware, jewelry, and Slinkys--even a gleaming '52 Corvette designed by Harley Earl.

With such a jumble of artifacts, *Vital Forms* cannot help but highlight the schizophrenia inherent in its theme. In the first gallery, the vibrant, sculptural form of the *Bull Mask* bowl by glassmakers Michael and Frances Higgins would seem to make a case for biomorphism as a refuge from an increasingly technologically determined reality. But in designer George Nelson's *Ball* wall clock, an orange contraption whose 12 spheroids orbiting a central face clearly reflect the "vital form" of the atom, there is evidence that such styling also symbolizes the triumph of technology. In another gallery, Minor White's evocative black-and-white photographs of frost whorls on glass point to the discovery of the theme as mystical, personal revelation, while the nearby triptych of boomerang-print Formica panels by designers Stevens and Loewy reveals still another understanding. To them, the focus on such fluid shapes simply reflects the demands of an increasingly engineered environment. In the last gallery, architect Frederick J. Kiesler's diorama of *Endless House*, 1959--an agglutination of cave-like stone shells--points to biomorphism as a return to primitive beginnings. But slide-projected images of the dynamic curves of Eero Saarinen's TWA Terminal at New York's JFK airport indicate that it also represents the super-technological.

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Nancy Warren >
WALLPAPER, SIDEWALL
Chicago, circa 1953

Perhaps these ambiguities inhere in the idea of the "biomorphic" itself, codified by European artists like Jean Arp and Joan Miró, and bearing the trace of the Surrealist confrontation with impossible contradiction. To use an example from the show, it would be peculiar to insist that



Willem De Kooning's *Woman*, 1953-54, is biomorphic simply because it depicts a figure--by this measure, any figurative painting would be biomorphic. Rather, it is De Kooning's distinctive, slashing use of paint that evokes vital processes. The dilemma, then, is that it is precisely what prevents something from *resembling* the lifelike that lets it *evoke* the abstract force of life, and vice versa. And the danger of centering a show around such a concept is that in encompassing antithetical things, it covers over the real contradictions, the reasons that different artists might want to use such forms to different, unambiguous ends. To notice that the brown snakes of enamel that cover the canvas of Jackson Pollock's *Echo*, 1951, resemble an aerial photo of Levittown is surely interesting, but if one is not careful, the comparison itself serves to cloak the fact that the painting is doing something very different than merely echoing suburban design.

For all its broad-minded eclecticism, then, one could say that this sort of history museum approach to curating favors one specific kind of art: conceptual art. Modernism itself opposed such eclecticism, claiming to offer a different way to think about the world than that found in mass culture. But in juxtaposing the choppy pinks and browns of Lee Krasner's painting *Upstream*, 1957, with a display of hula hoops, *Vital Forms* forges a bridge between Abstract Expressionism's rarefied aestheticism and Pop Art's (supposedly antithetical) embrace of forms borrowed from consumer culture. From Pop it's a pretty straight shot to Minimalism and then to Conceptualism proper, and indeed, *Vital Forms* seems to perform the quintessential conceptual gesture of reducing art to its informational content ("biomorphism"), thereby questioning the boundaries between high art and low.

In the very pluralism of forms it embraces, *Vital Forms* imposes a specific, limiting view of form. Of course, it's true that artists are no more aloof from messy, everyday culture than anyone else, and are implicated in its ways of thinking (just as the consumer culture referenced by Pop Art depends on the myth of the absolute freedom of the individual, venerated by Abstract Expressionism). The problem with the fashionable questioning of the privileges of high art, however, is that it leaves the institution vulnerable to being asked why one needs to visit a museum to see a Slinky. In that sense, beyond its historical interest, *Vital Forms* has something to say about the problems of contemporary art, though it can, of course, do nothing to answer the question of how they can be resolved.

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