



## GALLERY GUIDE

Damian Priour's *Texas Chair Project* underscores how artists can use any humble and familiar object as a springboard to the spectacular. Throughout history, chairs have been embellished for use by powerful people or for significant occasions. In more recent times, designers, architects, and engineers have pushed the limits of form and materials to new and more interesting realms. Priour himself has included the chair in his art since 1972, and he and his wife Paula have collected unconventional chair—large and small, functional and conceptual, serious and silly—for over 35 years. And now their collection has expanded exponentially with *The Texas Chair Project*.

In 2007, Priour approached the Austin Museum of Art about participating in a secret dream: he wanted to exchange his sculptures of limestone and glass, in the form of different chair designs, with nearly 100 of his favorite Texas artists. The gift would be sent “no strings attached,” however, he would invite them to reciprocate with works of their own making—in different forms of a chair—if they were so inclined. The Museum's agreement: if at least 50 of the artists responded in interesting ways, the Museum would organize an exhibition. That dream has come true in ways none of us could have imagined.

Artists trading their own works with other artists as part of a creative dialogue has a long and fascinating lineage. Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin, Robert Rauschenberg and Willem de Kooning, and Sol LeWitt and Eva Hesse, among others, have changed art history with their exchanges. Nevertheless, Priour's sending out his own creations in a near-spontaneous, unbridled mass act of generosity may be closer to “mail art,” an activity popular in the 1960s and 70s connected to the Fluxus movement, in which artists use the postal system as an alternative distribution system to share ephemera, postcards, decorated letters, ‘zines, or broadsides. And yet, in contrast to most mail artists who use reproductive technologies such as rubberstamps, photocopies, and digital printers, Priour's gift chairs are each individually hand crafted. The uniqueness of the stone and glass sculptures certainly inspired their recipients to reciprocate with genuine generosity—and to take the “chair challenge.”

A key to the project's success is that the assignment was narrow, not wide. Priour defined *The Texas Chair Project* with limitations of time, space, and content. In exchange for a Priour original, a collaborating artist was asked to create, within six months, an object that would fit in an 8x8x8-inch box, which explored the concept and/or form of a chair. Challenging artists to step outside their routines, to replace their own artistic goals and aspirations with a set of standards provided by another artist, Priour initiated a “call and response,” by which

participants in this game applied their imaginations to revise and re-envision—even re-invent—the chair as we know it.

As one considers the 80 responses, the range of materials used strikes one first: books, a beer can, bronze, buttons, cement, ceramic, fabrics, felt, found objects, granite, knives, lead, money, neon, paper, plastic bags, resin, sawdust, toy soldiers, twigs, and video, among others. Many styles of chairs are found here: Adirondack, desk chairs, highchairs, inflatables, recliners, rockers, settees, and stools. In some works, the formal and structural inventiveness—stretching the basic concept of four legs, a back and arms in all directions—attracts all the attention, while others morph from a chair into a cat, the moon and the sun, or an orchid, all while still remaining seating. In other works, there is an emotional narrative, such as those with children in chairs being cuddled or tied up, a school desk pierced by a spear, or shaped like an ominous knot. Other artists found inventive ways to fit a larger object into that small box by breaking, folding, or grinding up the original into sawdust. (Still others abandoned the box altogether and delivered the artwork to the artist’s door. Priour explained, “I like when artists break the rules.”)

In the end, *The Texas Chair Project* transcends the specifics of each chair and becomes a manifesto for community creativity. In his book *The Gift*, about creativity and generosity, Lewis Hyde writes of the beauty and reward of transferred momentum. “The gift must always move.”<sup>1</sup> *The Texas Chair Project* began with nearly one hundred chairs sent out in boxes near and far. On the receiving end, artists pondered the request, and then produced their own chairs in response, a gift reciprocated. Priour shares these with us, and here the viewer becomes yet another recipient of a very special gift, the manipulation of materials and ideas into something new and different, and yet deeply familiar.

—Dana Friis-Hansen, The Dr. and Mrs. Ernest C. Butler Executive Director

<sup>1</sup>Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World*. Vintage Books, 1979, p.4



## CELL PHONE AUDIO GUIDE

Hear Damian Priour speak about *The Texas Chair Project*.

- Step 1** Call 512.895.9154  
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Kindly refrain from cell phone conversation, use of speakerphone, and photography while in the galleries. Please set your phone to silent ring mode.

Cell phone audio guide produced by Andrea Mellard, Curatorial Associate/ Manager of Public Programs and delivered by Guide by Cell.

Image: Joe Janson, *Lounger with Ottoman*, 2007, Wire, Chair: 7½ x 6½ x 6½ inches, Ottoman: 3½ x 4½ x 4½ inches. Courtesy of Damian and Paula Priour



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Downtown • 823 Congress Ave  
suite 100 • Austin, TX 78703  
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## *The Texas Chair Project by Damian Priour* November 15, 2008–February 8, 2009

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