

## Andrew Witkin sets table for Currier visitors

By Cate McQuaid | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT    FEBRUARY 17, 2014



DINA RUDICK/GLOBE STAFF

**“I don’t want to interfere too much,” says Andrew Witkin of his exhibit at the Currier Museum of Art. “These are masterworks, and I’m a young artist.”**

MANCHESTER, N.H. — When artist Andrew Witkin was a kid growing up in Newton, he loved to rearrange his room.

“I moved furniture. I made little vignettes. ‘This is my reading area,’ ” Witkin said. “I’ve kind of always been doing the same thing.”

Now, Witkin has rearranged the Currier Museum of Art for his exhibition “Exploring the Currier Inside Out: Andrew Witkin, Among Others.” He has gone into several galleries and altered exhibitions, sometimes provocatively, sometimes subtly. He takes what’s already

there and shifts contexts, reorganizes, and adds a few things, all as a means to break down viewers' assumptions and ignite their thinking about what a museum values, and why.

Sometimes, those interventions are simple. In a decorative arts and furniture gallery, he spotted a tavern tableau that had no table.

"In the collection, they don't have any tavern tables, any dining room tables, any large tables at all," Witkin said.

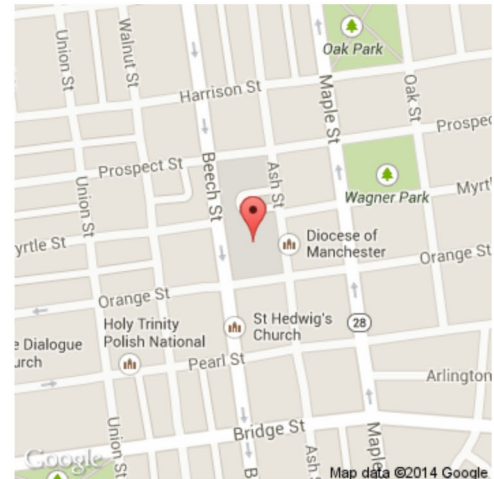
But what's a tavern without a table? He had one made. It doesn't exactly fit into the early American scene: It's made from plywood, and it juts off the tableau's plinth and into the viewer's space. Suddenly, we're not looking at a distant time occupied by precious objects. The table invites us into the scene. It's equalizing.

Witkin seeks to expose hierarchical systems. He spent time in the Currier's library, which resulted in a wall covered in text from documents he found there — words and phrases, arranged not according to era, aesthetic, or monetary value, but alphabetically. A vitrine in front of that wall holds an assortment of papers and objects his research unearthed — valuables and reproductions given equal weight.

In the contemporary gallery, among giant paintings by Frank Stella, Jules Olitski, and Adolph Gottlieb, he has placed small, blocky plywood chairs.

"I don't want to interfere too much. These are masterworks, and I'm a young artist," said Witkin, 36.

Viewers can sit on them, or move them around, to look at the art. The plywood chairs are a Witkin trademark, and appear elsewhere in



Larger map / directions→

## Exploring the Currier Inside Out: Andrew Witkin, Among Others

Currier Museum of Art, 150 Ash Street,  
Manchester NH 03104 603-669-6144.

[www.currier.org](http://www.currier.org)

**Closing date:** Through May 11

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*The most important thing is that all these ideas and materials are shuffled, to create spaces for the viewer to be part of.’ — Andrew Witkin, on his rearranging of the Currier’s exhibits.*

“Exploring the Currier Inside Out.” They echo Bauhaus designs and Donald Judd’s minimalist sculpture series. Like Witkin himself, they’re understated in some ways, smart and elegant in others.

Witkin tends to be humble about his work and astonished at his success. He is well known in the Boston art world for his day job at the Barbara Krakow Gallery, where he is a partner and director. He calls that work — helping and promoting artists, devising exhibition strategies — “reinvigorating.”

Although he has made art all his life, he went underground with it after an exhibition of photographs in the early 2000s.

“I got comments, ‘Oh, those are nice.’ That’s like one step over mediocre,” Witkin said. “I said, ‘I’m not going to be an artist. I’ll do whatever I want, for myself.’ And then I started making more than I ever had.”

After a few years, a friend urged him to exhibit, and he showed his work to Randi Hopkins and Beth Kantrowitz, proprietors of the now defunct Allston Skirt Gallery. They offered him an exhibition right off the bat. That was in 2007. By 2008, he found himself nominated for the James and Audrey Foster Prize competition at the Institute of Contemporary Art, which he won.

“What the hell? How did that happen?” Witkin said. “The whole thing surprised me.”

Since then, he has developed an international career, exhibiting in New York, Japan, and the Middle East. But he has no plans to chuck his job at the Krakow Gallery to make art exclusively. Indeed, as partner, he will take over the business whenever Barbara Krakow retires. One of the delights of working there, he says, is how collaborative the staff is. He’s eager to make those creative connections.

He partnered with others at the Currier — librarians, curators, and security staff at the museum — to begin with. Then there’s Tom McLaughlin, a New Hampshire furniture maker. He helped Witkin design the tavern table, and built it himself.

A wingback chair in the museum’s collection caught Witkin’s eye: Crafted in the mid-18th century, it is valued for its bones. The Currier displays it in a loose, red slipcover, which can be removed. It looks odd — both saggy and strangely fresh — among the fine veneers and polished silver in the gallery.

Witkin enlisted McLaughlin to make a couple of plywood wingback chairs that echo the lines of the one in the collection. They’re naked of upholstery, uncanny postmodern spawns of the

original. And you can sit in them.

“I laughed to myself,” McLaughlin said over the phone from his woodworking shop in Canterbury. “I’ve dreamed of someday getting a piece in the Currier, but I hoped it would be more than plywood furniture.”

Witkin set McLaughlin’s two plywood chairs in front of a boarded-up marble fireplace in a gallery of American paintings, along with a plywood tea table McLaughlin crafted with tapered Queen Anne legs.

“If you’re making a vignette, you need chairs and a table in front of a fireplace,” said Witkin, inviting a visitor to sit down. The plywood wingback is surprisingly comfortable.

“The most important thing is that all these ideas and materials are shuffled, to create spaces for the viewer to be part of,” he said. “Stand up, and the chair is a sculpture. I’m looking at you, and I’m looking at the work.”

“That in-betweenness, not being in a safe category, is one of the things [Witkin] does as an artist,” said Nina Gara Bozicnik, the former assistant curator at the Currier who organized the show. “It comes from thinking about how we categorize and arrange things, and how that generates meaning.”

For Witkin, the art isn’t so much in the sculptures, collages, and installations he makes as it is in the viewer’s own mind, as associations fly and new ideas coalesce.

“I’m not interested in presenting myself as someone who makes a masterwork. I’m more interested in presenting situations for conversation,” he said. “Let’s all talk, and learn something from that.”

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