

Artistry and Craftsmanship Collide in Surf Craft Show at LongHouse

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by Scott Bluedorn

Richard Kenvin is a self-described surf auteur, historian, and design enthusiast. A lifetime spent in and on the waves of southern California and his background in surfing—including a stint as a professional surfer in the 1980s—helped to project him into the erudite upper echelons of “surfing scholarship” in a unique way.

Under the title of “Hydrodynamica,” Kenvin has launched a multi-faceted project centered on the reintroduction—through contemporary board design and an ongoing movie project—of some of the key design philosophies of pioneering surfer and designer Bob Simmons. Kenvin’s book, “Surf Craft: Design and the Culture of Board Riding,” was published early this year in conjunction with an exhibition of the same name at the Mingei International Museum in San Diego. This exhibition has now travelled to LongHouse Reserve in East Hampton to unite two coasts and two populations of surfers in the design ethos and culture they share.



“Surf Craft: Design and the Culture of Board Riding,” on view at LongHouse Reserve through October 10.

“Surf Craft: Design and the Culture of Board Riding,” on view at LongHouse Reserve through October 10, centers on the display of an engrossing collection of historically important surfboards and their relationship to several contemporary designs they inspired. The surfboard itself is here a medium of expression not just of the individual shaper, but of the surfer it was often specifically intended for. Where design, science, artistry and craftsmanship collide, the various shapes take on the spirit of a culture that celebrates individual approaches to an ancient and multifaceted sport.

Kenvin, as curator, links the historical and theoretical contexts of surfing through the lens of tradition—from ancient Polynesia through to the present global phenomenon—highlighting throughout the often unknown craftsmen and modern contributors to the art form in a way that suggests the story is still unfolding.

What puts this exhibition of craft into focus is the unifying concept of design theory. In the relationship of a hydrodynamic form to its primary element of locomotion, viewers will often feel a tangible thread running through the various designers’ approach through the ages. To begin chronologically, first up is the very ancient (some might say “primitive”) surfboard of the Hawaiians: the *alaia*, a slender and very thin finless board of wood, that was first encountered by Captain Cook in his visit to the islands in 1771. In the LongHouse exhibition, the design has been rendered anew by the hand of contemporary shaper Tom Wegener. Although sleek and finished, it is very faithful to surviving artifacts of remote origin.

We see a more recent echo of the *alaia* in a crudely hewn small board that came from west Africa, its creator unknown. This piece nonetheless represents the same essential ideas. The primitive finless board is currently enjoying an unprecedented resurgence in popularity, and has even prompted cutting edge designers to reinterpret the basic elements in a new way. This new face on boards that might once have been considered retro reinforces the notion that modern surfing is trending toward a “frictionless” revolution.

Enter Carl Ekstrom, an important collaborator on the “Hydrodynamica” project. A veteran surfboard designer and master craftsman, Ekstrom has several of his shapes on view in the exhibition. Taking cues from finless designs and the concept of asymmetry, Ekstrom’s boards appear very futuristic and perhaps even alien to the outside observer most familiar with the classic Malibu longboard or tri-fin modern shortboard. On view are several interesting quarter-scale maquettes, a conceptual stream of consciousness and a revealing look into this important shaper’s precise yet playful design vernacular.

Central to Richard Kenvin’s “Hydrodynamica” project is the design philosophy of Bob Simmons, an immensely influential yet often overlooked surfboard designer active in the 1940s and ’50s. Simmons’s boards are primarily a manifestation of the planing hull design first explored in depth by naval architect Lindsay Lord.

The planing hull on a boat offered speed and efficient displacement, less wake and therefore less drag. As translated to the surfboard, the design achieved much the same effect. Another interesting element in Simmons’s inspiration came from the physics of lift, as expressed in airplane wing foils and the Australian boomerang. His contributions to rail (side) design leave modern shapers greatly indebted to his pioneering work in this area.

Many Simmons boards are on display, polished and refinished in various ways but maintaining the same wide chopped tailblock and signature dual fins/keels that set in motion much of the modern approach to surfboard design. Simmons disappeared while surfing his beloved break, “Windansea,” off of San Diego in 1954, and faded into surfing history with a certain mythical mystique.



A display of Bob Simmons ephemera, including boomerangs that inspired his rail design, and a model version of his surfboard design.

The story of surfing comes in a multitude of chapters and runs with parallel plotlines, including the unique perspective of surfer and visionary designer George Greenough. Known for his range of approaches to wave-riding and as a ceaseless experimenter, Greenough embodies a DIY ethos of the surfing counterculture.

As a kneeboarder, Greenough introduced a spoon shaped, minimally volumetric board he named the “velo,” and later created a mold to reproduce the shape. Both boards and mold are strikingly displayed at LongHouse in a floating ensemble that seems to defy gravity.

Other kneeboards included are those by Terry Hendricks, and Steve Lis, both hugely important contributors to modern design in their own right.



Kneeboards by Terry Hendricks, comprised mostly of fiberglass.

On the other end of the surfboard spectrum are those designs that have spanned time immemorial to the modern era. These include the Hawaiian *paipo* board, the precursor of the modern bodyboard, and several obscure examples of bathing boards from England and Japan.

It's important to remember that surfing in all its forms was enjoyed by the masses, and a plethora of designs evolved in relation to leisure, fun and utility, and not just the narrow focus of high performance. These low concept boards of the hoi polloi represent a lay function in surf board purpose, to be enjoyed by all.

"Surfcraft: Design and the Culture of Board Riding" is a fantastic survey of the cultural force of surfing, serving as an interactive and fully living history lesson that enlightens even as it poses questions about the evolution of design and the various influences at work. In its investigation of a unique and developing art form, the exhibition communicates the notion that progress in design is always relative, interrelated with tradition and parallel investigation.

BASIC FACTS: “Surfcraft: Design and the Culture of Board Riding,” curated by Richard Kenvin and organized by Mingei Museum, San Diego, CA, July 31 through October 10, 2015, at LongHouse Reserve, 133 Hands Creek Road, East Hampton, NY 11937. www.longhouse.org

Surf Craft Party and Art Surfboard Auction conclusion, organized by the LongHouse Junior Council, will be held on Saturday, September 5, 2015, from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. at LongHouse, with cocktails, luau menu, and live music. Tickets \$20; \$10 for LongHouse members and LongHouse Contemporaries. All proceeds benefit LongHouse’s public programs. To bid online: www.paddle8.com/auctions/longhousesurf

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