“A certain amount of poetry and a certain amount of reasoning, and also a bit of kicking the arse of the establishment – that’s what I want to achieve,”

SAYS INDUSTRIAL DESIGNER JORIS LAARMAN OF HIS BONE CHAIR (ON THE COVER) AND BONE CHAISE (PICTURED HERE). THE CONCEPT WAS BASED ON THE ABILITY TREES AND BONES HAVE TO BOTH ADD AND LOSE MATERIAL.

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dreamily. Any material will do, as long as it can be poured as a liquid into the intricate ceramic mould that has to be made for each piece. “I’d call this chair high-tech minimal. But I’m interested in history too, and wouldn’t you say it owed something to Art Nouveau?” The Bone chairs proved a huge drawcard when they were launched by Barry Friedman’s gallery at Miami’s Design 06 in December. And even at $32,000 for a chair and $39,000 for a sofa, they sold at quite a pace. “We’ve stopped sales of the rubber ones; it was going too fast. They need time to grow and people need to have a sense of that.”

BONES AND ALL
Laarman didn’t come from an arty family. His father works for the government and his mother is a nurse, though according to her son: “She’s a really good stylist, she just doesn’t know she is.” The two of them, though, are the scourge of the local flea markets and antiques auctions. That the house “looks like a museum of kitsch, it’s full of old furniture and paintings” explains a lot about Laarman’s delightfully eclectic design eye. The rest of the stimulation perhaps comes from the very non-urban nature of the Netherlands. Though the country is almost entirely man-made – and every last part of it is designed – it doesn’t possess a city on the humanity-denying scale of London or Los Angeles. Life in Rotterdam, especially, is cheap and fosters its own creative community – designer Jurgen Bey, for example, works out of a warehouse, across town from Laarman, where some of his employees sleep in little caravans inside the space. “We have freedom here,” says Laarman. “In Amsterdam we’d only afford a small space to work and you have to go to hip trendy clubs to socialise. Here we have a beer outside at the end of the day and watch the ships. In the summer we have fantastic barbecues.”

Anita, meanwhile, is working on a film about her name, which is the Dutch equivalent of Sharon in Britain, or Kylie in Australia. “She’s finding out why it’s become a symbol of white trash,” says Laarman. Something that these exceptional people are unlikely ever to be considered.
THE FLYING DUTCHMAN

WITH HIS DELICATE DECORATIVE TOUCHES TO PRACTICAL FURNITURE, JORIS LAARMAN REPRESENTS AN EXCITING NEW WAVE OF DUTCH DESIGN.
YOU COULD BE FORGIVEN FOR THINKING THAT SOMEONE HAD INTRODUCED A BEAUTY BAR AT NUMBER 52 MARCONISTAAT IN ROTTERDAM'S PORT AREA, AND THAT THEY'D SET IT VERY HIGH INDEED.

Everyone working in this huge studio, which looks out to a wide ship canal where enormous tankers slide heavily by, looks like a model. It could be a fictitious design studio in a film.

This, however, is real life for Dutch designer Joris Laarman who shares the space with Jeroen Verhoeven, Joep Verhoeven and Judith de Graauw of design partnership Demakersvan (their sinuous birch plywood Cinderella table has already been collected by the Victoria and Albert Museum in London) and his girlfriend Anita Star, a filmmaker. And he doesn't have much time for playing. At just 27, Laarman is already establishing himself as one to watch in the highly competitive world of European design.

At Milan this year, he showed a new glass pendant light for Flos (Nebula, 2006), as well as a walk-through version of his Heatwave radiator that first brought him attention in 2004 and the Bone furniture (2006) he has designed for Droog Design's Smart Deco project. By the end of the year, there will be new products created for Schepping, a company he runs with Demakersvan, which a private investor has underwritten to ensure the designer's unbridled creativity and growth; kitchen appliances for Dutch company Princess; and a bespoke piece for a project that Austrian crystal company Swarovski has established on the theme of weddings. With Demakersvan, he is also working on a US-funded resort in China where those anxious about the future can go for DNA checking, to alert them to what diseases they might expect to suffer. Not your most relaxing spa, but doubtless Laarman will soften the experience with his trademark decorative touches. “We're having to hire new people for the studio, including someone who can do business management,” says Laarman, who, though not quite overwhelmed, still seems slightly in awe of his own success.

Those familiar with Dutch design won't be at all surprised to hear that Laarman is a graduate of the Eindhoven Design Academy. This is the school that gave us Droog back in the 1990s, and a whole new wave of industrial design that refused to turn its back on emotion and humanity. Where Italian
Only the ugly say beauty comes from within.
“Modernism was all square and efficient, but now we have other machines and materials and there is an explosion of possibilities.”

—Joris Laarman
CLOCKWISE FROM OPPOSITE PAGE, FAR LEFT
Stakhov tableware, 2005, ceramic. Named after a Soviet miner who became a celebrity in 1965, this series of stackable white tableware is based on the hard-wearing kind traditionally used in hotels. “Because of this industrial repetition, a slight difference in every cup quickly has a big impact on the appearance of the total stack,” says Laarman; Limited, 2003, ceramic. Laarman’s method for creating ‘limited edition’ objects involved establishing a mass-production line with a mould of a short life span. The quick erosion of the mould during a production run ensures that each reproduction is different, and only a few are functional. Pictured is a series of vases “that will bloom, wither and die as the flowers it will bear”; Beech, 2004, beech. For a commission for Arco, Laarman chose beech timber for its responsive qualities to its environment, like temperature and moisture, to create chairs that “transform with age and live like their owners”; Ivy, 2005. Ivy is made up of seven different pieces of polyconcrete – a material used for sports climbing grips – that can be mixed and matched and attached to the wall with Allen screws. It may be used as an alternative staircase; Stakhov tableware, 2005; Nebula, 2007, aluminium and blown glass. For a commission for Flos, Laarman bunched together lampshades of different sizes and shapes to create a lively suspension lamp reminiscent of “an explosion of light, like a star in the sky”.
design of the 1960s to the 1980s could be typified
by a brittle, factory-manufactured brightness, the
Dutch movement looked like its products had
been made by hand by people with little concern
for symmetry.

NEW DIRECTIONS
Laarman, though, represents the next wave. He
took Droog Design’s ideas of the great
concept, but not their sobriety. “That’s very
Calvinistic, very Dutch maybe. But I like
decoration – as long as that decoration is also
functional.” The first result of this way of
thinking was the Heatwave radiator, a swirling
ornamentation of reinforced concrete that also
happens to work very well indeed. Now in
production with Jaga, the Belgian radiator
company, Heatwave has proved that function
can be combined with the truly, elaborately,
divinely rococo.

The Bone furniture takes things one step
further, engaging with high technology at an
extreme level, in order to produce pieces of
bizarre, bewildering beauty. “I’m most interested
in science. You go onto a website like
www.noorderlicht.nl and you can be amazed for
a week.” It was precisely here that Laarman
discovered a ‘mad’ professor, Claus Mattheck, in
Karlsruhe, Germany who was studying the growth
of bones and trees. “He looks like Ozzy Osbourne
in the 70s, but with sunglasses and lederhosen,”
says Laarman. “But he’s researching into how trees
have the ability both to add and lose material.”

Laarman wasn’t the only one to be lured by
this discovery. A student working at German
car manufacturer Opel refined the software that
copied how nature could grow while reducing its
material content, and it’s this that the designer
applied to the creation of furniture that has a
dazzling lightness and complexity of form.
“Modernism was all square and efficient, but now
we have other machines and materials and there is
an explosion of possibilities,” he says. He has made
chairs in aluminium and a type of rubber that is,
weirdly, neither hard nor soft but somewhere
between. “Titanium would be super thin!” he says