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RON ARAD'S MATERIAL PLEASURES
LONDON SPECIAL: SEASON OF PLENTY
THE BOOM IN POSTWAR DESIGN

Big Easy Volume 2 for 2, circa 1988, by Ron Arad.

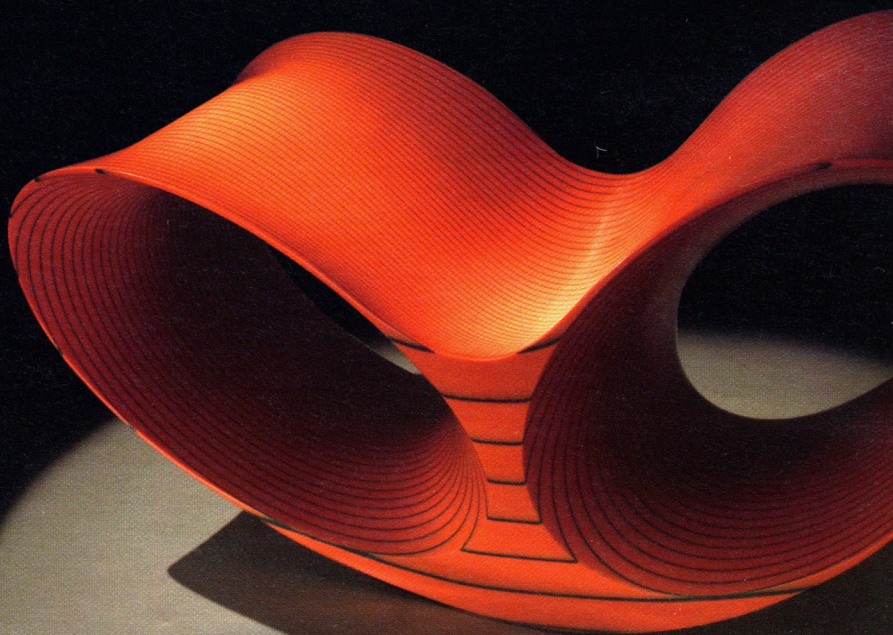




Ron Arad, in his London design studio. His furniture, with its pioneering use of materials, blurs the distinction between design and art. Far right: His Oh Void 2 chair, made of Corian



Never one to
accept convention,
Ron Arad lets
instinct dictate
his fanciful
designs, stretching
the boundaries of
materials and
everyday objects
By Aric Chen
Photographs by
David Spero



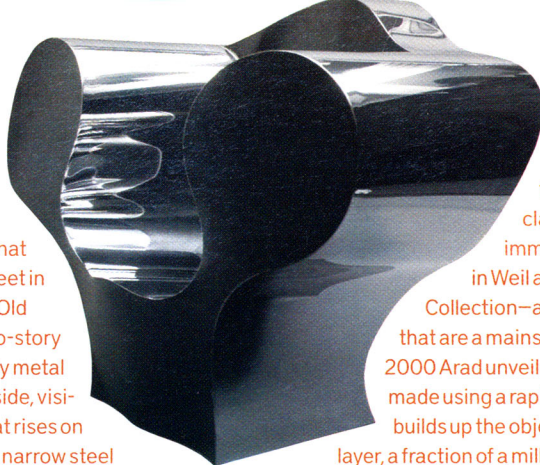
AT FIRST GLANCE, there's nothing about the exterior of designer Ron Arad's London studio that hints at what lies within. Hidden from the main street in a graffiti-splattered alleyway called Old Dairy Mews in Camden Town, the two-story brick building is accessed by a rickety metal staircase to the upper floor. Once inside, visitors step onto a curving oak floor that rises on one side like a gentle wave to meet a narrow steel bridge spanning virtually the entire length of the studio. A roof of metal mesh and plastic arcs over the soaring space, evoking an old train station shed.

Although it started as a showroom, the 14-member studio now serves exclusively as Arad's design headquarters. Its lower floor, where a metal workshop once produced much of his work, houses his architectural practice. Examples of Arad's designs—and the undulating and organic forms that distinguish them—can be seen throughout the space. Before long, the designer himself walks in, wearing a black skullcap and an old pair of jeans. As usual, he's a bit scruffy, with graying stubble.

The Israeli-born Arad, 56, is famous for blurring the distinction between design and art. For the 1987 Documenta, for example, he created a conceptual aluminum carpet that he transformed into two armchairs. His 1988 Tinker Chair—made of steel sheets beaten into shape with a mallet—was like a visual polemic on functionalism. "I don't think there's anything especially good about working between disciplines," says Arad, sounding a note of ambivalence. "You just do what you do."

Nevertheless, beyond his sizable array of mass-produced furniture, vases, barware and other products, he's known for pushing the boundaries of design with experimental creations that come in limited editions or are one of a kind. Freed from the technical, economic and other constraints of large-scale manufacturing, they demonstrate the full extent of Arad's virtuosity.

One of his most familiar pieces is the 1986 Well Tempered Chair, assembled from



four sheets of bent stainless steel clamped together with wing nuts. It is immortalized at the Vitra Design Museum in Weil am Rhein, Germany, in its Miniatures Collection—a series of scaled-down iconic chairs that are a mainstay of contemporary design stores. In 2000 Arad unveiled a series of vases, bowls and lamps made using a rapid prototyping process in which a laser builds up the objects from powdered plastic layer by layer, a fraction of a millimeter at a time. He has produced

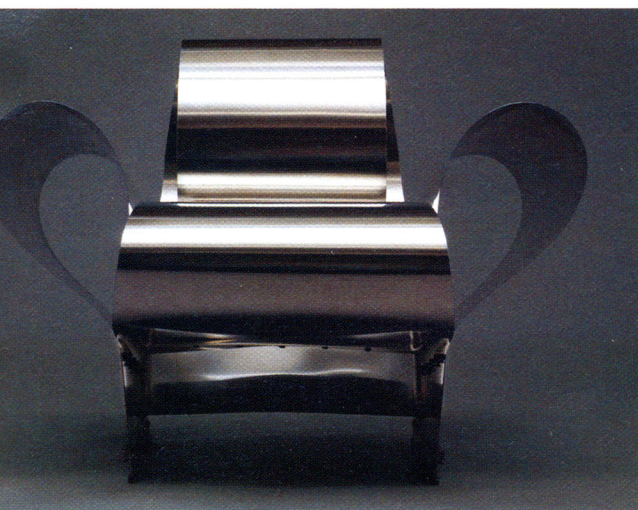
stereos encased in concrete, furniture out of Corian and an interactive Swarovski crystal chandelier that displays cellphone text messages on its embedded LEDs. All the while, Arad has boldly manipulated blown aluminum, carbon fiber, and of course, plastic, steel and glass, most often in dynamic, organic shapes.

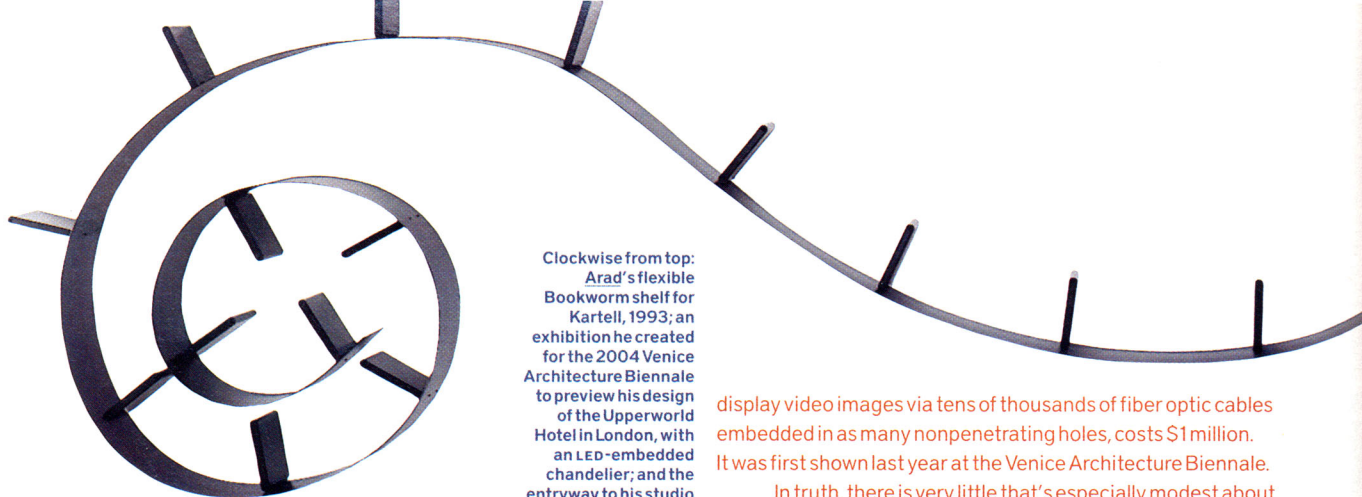
"Form comes really easily to him," says Paola Antonelli, curator of architecture and design at the Museum of Modern Art »



Clockwise from top: The Big Easy armchair, 1990, in patinated and stainless steel; the New Orleans, 1999, in polyester and fiber-glass; a chair display in Arad's studio; and the Well Tempered Chair, 1986, in stainless steel

Arad has boldly manipulated blown aluminum, carbon fiber, and of course, plastic, steel and glass, most often in dynamic, organic shapes





Clockwise from top:
Arad's flexible
Bookworm shelf for
Kartell, 1993; an
exhibition he created
for the 2004 Venice
Architecture Biennale
to preview his design
of the Upperworld
Hotel in London, with
an LED-embedded
chandelier; and the
entryway to his studio

in New York. "In a way, it's the materials and technology that help him make decisions. He has an amazing ability to just run with it and make something beautiful."

Arad combines the groundbreaking use of materials and technology with a sculptural sensibility, producing objects that can look polished or ad hoc, elegantly simple or dizzyingly complex. "There doesn't have to be a formal link between my designs," says Arad, whose occasionally brusque manner is tempered by a sharp wit and a warm glint in the eye. He likes to show off the material properties of his designs by tapping them enthusiastically. "It's about my approach," he continues, "which is that I'm only interested in doing things that didn't exist before I did them."

He does reinterpret many of his own designs, however. For example, the Big Easy, an almost cartoonishly curvaceous armchair designed in 1988, has appeared in patinated black, brushed and mirrored stainless steel, as well as expressionistically painted fiberglass, and most recently, carbon fiber.

All are extremely collectible. "His work sells right away," says dealer Barry Friedman, the organizer of a current, two-part exhibition of Arad's work in New York. A retrospective runs at Friedman's gallery through June 24, while newer pieces are on display at Phillips, de Pury & Company through June 10. Galerie Downtown in Paris is also presenting an exhibition of Arad's work.

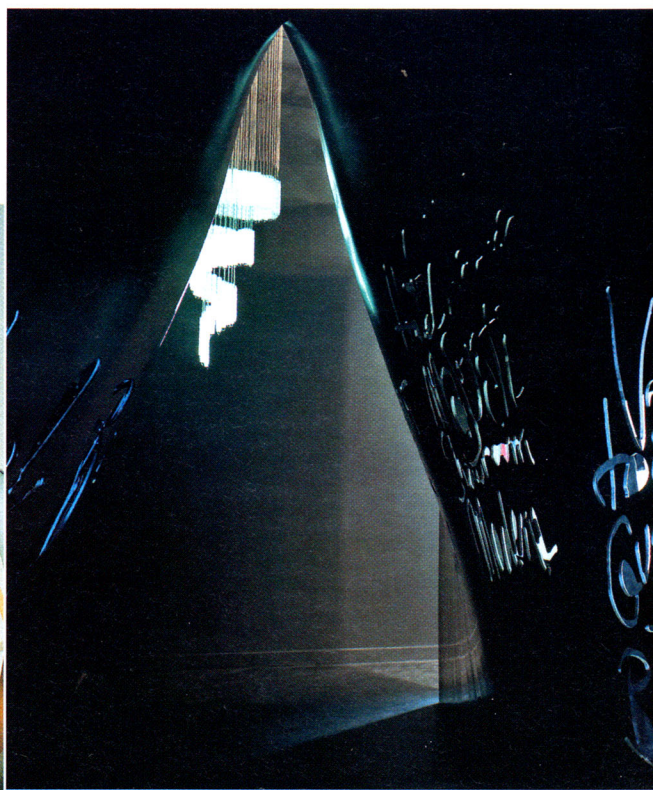
According to Friedman, Arad's unique and small-edition furniture pieces sell for between \$10,000 and \$300,000. His elaborate *Lo-Rez-Dolores-Tabula-Rasa* installation at Phillips, consisting of a Corian wall, a table and a column whose surfaces

display video images via tens of thousands of fiber optic cables embedded in as many nonpenetrating holes, costs \$1 million. It was first shown last year at the Venice Architecture Biennale.

In truth, there is very little that's especially modest about Arad. His friend and client Alberto Alessi, of the Italian design company Alessi, once suggested that Arad's need to be noticed made him suited to being a fashion designer. At the Architecture Biennale, Arad used part of his allotted space in one of the main exhibition halls to scrawl a large sign that cheekily advertised his Corian installation in the nearby British pavilion. Asked about the visual similarities between some of his blobbier pieces and those of the New York designer Karim Rashid, he half-jokingly curls his fingers like cat claws before playfully comparing Rashid's brightly colored designs to Fisher-Price toys. All this, of course, is part of Arad's charm.

Arad was born in Tel Aviv, the son of a painter and a photographer. He went to London in 1973 and soon enrolled in the Architectural Association school, where he studied under noted architects such as Bernard Tschumi and Peter Cook. Arad undoubtedly fit in with the rebellious spirit of the school that challenged the hegemony of the modernist box with unapologetically unbuildable fantasies and radical proposals that, in one way or »

Commenting on his design approach, Arad says, "I'm only interested in doing things that didn't exist before I did them"





another, have since filtered into reality. The influential Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas was also an instructor while Arad was there, and Zaha Hadid, winner of last year's Pritzker Prize, was a classmate.

After a brief stint working in an architectural firm—"I went to lunch one day and didn't come back," he says—

Arad opened his first company, appropriately named One Off, in 1981 with Caroline Thorman, who remains his business partner. With limited resources and no clear direction or clients, Arad looked to the found object. His early works were decidedly low-tech. He used inexpensive Kee Klamp scaffolding components to make furniture, and his Rover Chair incorporated a leather Rover car seat salvaged from a scrap yard. The fashion designer Jean Paul Gaultier bought six chairs—and Arad's career took off.

He has since expanded into full-scale industrial design, counting the manufacturers Kartell, Magis, Alessi and Vitra among his clients. In his current studio, the metal bridge—in actuality, a cleverly masked ventilation duct—doubles as an elevated parade ground for his 1997 Tom Vac Chair, first produced in a limited edition in vacuum-formed aluminum, and then in molded plastic for Vitra. Some half-dozen examples are lined up one after the other, the first looking untrimmed, as if just taken out of the mold.

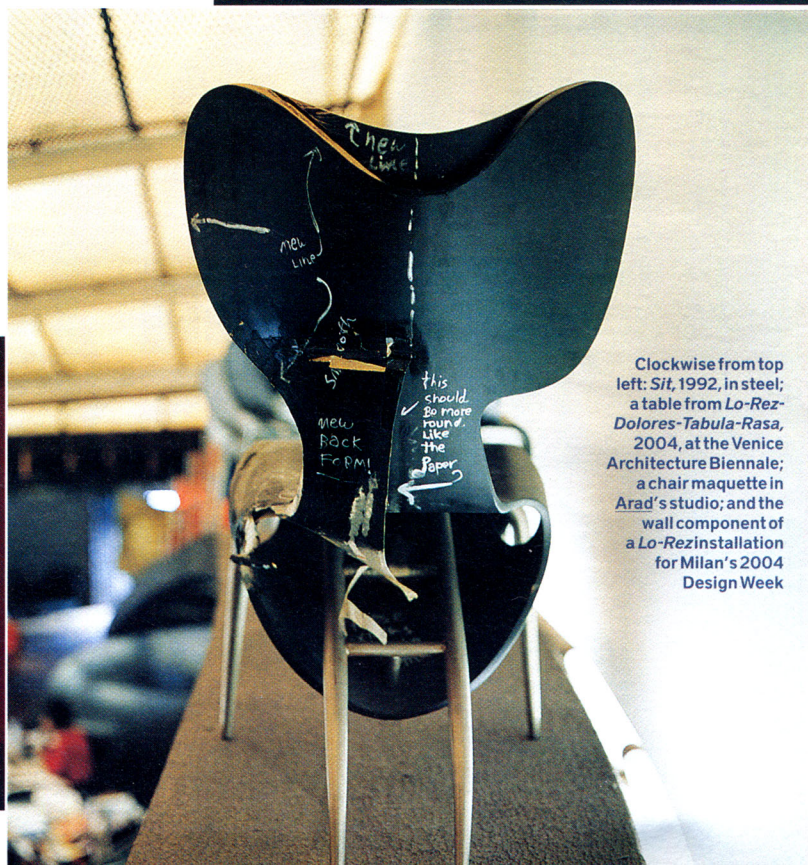
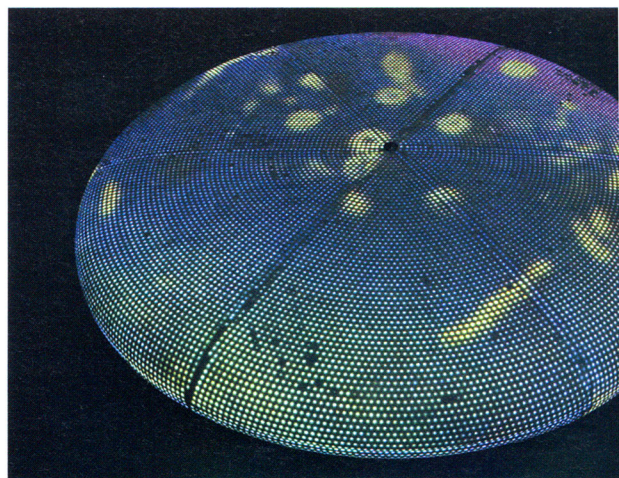
In the studio entryway, with its curved floor, is a jumble of objects, from a pair of Well Tempered Chairs to curvilinear polystyrene prototypes for a collection of mass-produced plastic seating that Arad is designing for Magis. Mounted on a wall is a giant steel ribbon, curving like a tightly coiled snake, that functions as a bookshelf. It is the limited-edition predecessor to his best-selling Bookworm for Kartell, which is similar, but smaller and made of plastic. "The studio pieces sometimes become the R&D for the production pieces," Arad explains.

Nevertheless, he freely admits that he's not a craftsman. Early on, having

committed himself to working extensively in steel, he opened a metal shop on the lower floor of his studio. His steel pieces are now produced in Belgium by the Gallery Mourmans, while his architectural practice thrives in the former workshop area. This segment of his business has done the interiors of Yohji Yamamoto's Tokyo store, Y's, Maserati's headquarters showroom in Modena, Italy, and Belgo restaurant in London. A dramatic hotel atop London's Battersea Power Station is one of Arad's upcoming projects.

Arad's strength has always been drawing, and one can see its influence in the freeform, organic shapes of his designs. "Everything I do starts with drawings, and how we can turn them into building elements or products," he says. "First we do it, and then we'll discuss why."

There's an instinctive, visceral character to the designer's work that gives life to his experiments in the technological and rational. The result is a rigorous alloy of both art and design. "My work has been interesting in itself," Arad says. "I never needed the horrible, mundane, philistine world to cure me." ■



Clockwise from top left: *Sit*, 1992, in steel; a table from *Lo-Rez-Dolores-Tabula-Rasa*, 2004, at the Venice Architecture Biennale; a chair maquette in Arad's studio; and the wall component of a *Lo-Rez* installation for Milan's 2004 Design Week

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