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surface

THE ANNUAL DESIGN ISSUE

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It's tempting to label Joris Laarman a 21st-century Dr. Frankenstein. Inspired by the possibilities offered by emerging technologies, the 30-year-old Dutch designer has been mixing cutting-edge science with furniture design. The difference, however, is that Laarman has no intention of building a monster. "We want to incorporate technology into the design process," he says, "but to try to make something poetic out of it." Judging from the objects he unveiled at New York's Friedman Benda gallery in March, he's making quick progress.

Take, for instance, *Half Life* (2010), the world's first bioluminescent lamp, which he developed with researchers in the Netherlands. "We actually grew living cells on the lampshade that are genetically modified with the genes of a firefly," says Laarman. The piece looks like an ordinary lamp submerged in a tank of fluid, but rather than a light bulb, the cells provide electricity-free illumination.

It isn't the first time Laarman has twisted nature to his will. He's probably best known for the aluminum *Bone Chair* (2006) that mimics the structure of a skeleton, a piece developed with product optimization software from automaker Opel, and picked up by the MoMA for its permanent collection. He's continued to push software to its limits with new pieces like the *Bridge Table* (2010), made in unscratchable tungsten carbide, and the *Leaf Table* (2010), where a stainless steel base pushes up through a resin slab to create an intricately veined top.

For yet another futuristic manufacturing process, Laarman has collaborated with UK-based RoboFold to develop a system that uses robotic arms to transform a flat sheet of steel into a surprisingly curvaceous armchair. The ominous arrival of such capabilities isn't lost on Laarman, who named the seat *Asimov* in honor of the author of *I, Robot*. Paying tribute to such visionaries is respectable, but make no mistake: In this designer's world, the future is already here. jorislaarman.com

THE SCIENCE GUY

A young designer sees no difference between art, furniture and ... robotics?

WORDS TIM MCKEOUGH PORTRAIT PHILIP FICKS

BIO TECH: Joris Laarman inspects his wares at Friedman Benda gallery in New York. The cast-marble/resin *Bone Armchair* (2008, left) mimics the structure of a skeleton, while the concrete *Ivy climbing wall* (2004) sprouts from the ground like a vine