Unlimited edition

Ron Arad's work is crossing the divide between art and design. By Janice Blackburn

A major London exhibition of work by Israeli-born architect/designer Ron Arad is currently running at Timothy Taylor Gallery in Mayfair, a commercial gallery that usually showcases painters or sculptors.

I asked Timothy Taylor what had prompted him to devote a show to a contemporary designer for the first time.

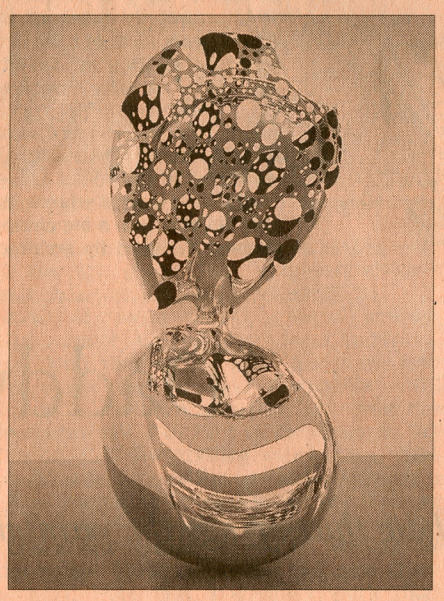
"There has been a massive change in taste over the past 15 years," he replied. "Like photography, design is a natural progression for collectors of contemporary art. I was always interested in modern design and, after a chance meeting with Ron, I felt a sympathetic understanding of his work – it's beautiful and challenging."

Arad is now established in the top echelon of international "design artists" – a term recently invented to describe makers of limited edition and one-off works that straddle the divide between design and contemporary art. Among others in this elite line-up are Marc Newson, the Brazilian Campana Brothers and architect Zaha Hadid. Until the recession took its first cruel bite about a year ago, their prices had been rising with remarkable speed: Arad's polished stainless steel D sofa sold for $409,000 (£273,000) in December 2007.

There are seven or eight main new pieces in the show, some of them exclusive to Taylor's gallery: "Gomli" (a homage to sculptor Antony Gormley) consists of thousands of individually cut stainless steel rods with an internal "chalk" bronze figure – according to Arad "the unseen sitter"; a series of amorphic "Bodyguards" are unique figurative "chairs". "Oh the Farmer and the Cowman Should be Friends" (the title of a song from the musical *Oklahoma*), a giant bookshelf in polished stainless steel and weathering steel with a map of America as its outline and state boundaries forming shelves, dominates an entire wall.

This is proving to be a significant year for Ron Arad, with record attendances for his retrospective at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, an exhibition in July at MoMA in New York which moves on to the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, and the opening after four years of construction of the Design Museum in Holon, Israel – a fluid circular structure in harmonious tones of steel outside his home city of Tel Aviv.

After graduating from Bezalel Academy of Art and Design in Israel in 1973, Arad moved to London to study at the Architectural Association, qualifying in 1979. Since jobs were thin on the ground for a young and inexperienced avant garde architect, he opened a furniture workshop/studio in London's Covent Garden. Early experimental designs were made from cheap, "found" materials. The iconic "Rover Chair", an old Rover car seat sitting on a scaffolding base; "Concrete Stereo", a gramophone turntable dropped into a rough slab of crude concrete (a touch of *déjà vu* for *Flintstones* devotees) and "Aerial Light" were witty and irreverent ideas that created an instant impact.



Innovative Ron Arad is in the top echelon of 'design artists'; one of Arad's 'Bodyguard' chairs, below

Bruno Vincent

Customers such as Jean-Paul Gaultier and Rolf Fehlbaum of Vitra Design Museum bought his work and word got around, especially about the chairs with rock song titles such as "Big Easy", "The Transformer" and "The Well-Tempered Chair". He says: "It's ridiculous to see something I sold for £300 now selling for thousands."

In 1981 Arad was joined by Caroline Thorman, who became his business partner, and together they formed One Off Ltd, a design studio, workshop and showroom. Arad has remained in the same studio/workshop, a former warehouse in north London, since 1989. The work was made on site until 1994 when production of large-scale pieces involving heavy engineering moved to Como, Italy. Since meeting Ernest Mourmans (an entrepreneur, gallerist and important collector of Arad's work) in 1997, the pair have collaborated on projects including the "Thumbprint Chair", a work of meticulous complexity and detail, and other limited edition handmade pieces that are produced at Mourmans' studio near Maastricht.

The former *enfant terrible* of design is now in his late 50s. He has been professor of design products at the Royal College of Art for the past seven years; his tenure ends in the summer. Asked how the explosion in the prices of his work over the last few years has affected him, he coolly says it gives him "the confidence and ability to make even more impossibly difficult work".

'Ron Arad: New Work', Timothy Taylor Gallery, London W1 until May 8
www.timothytaylorgallery.com