With the mounting hype surrounding 3-D printing, LED lights, high-tech irony, and newly invented synthetics, contemporary design’s interest lately seems to be in the futuristic developments of the 21st century; at the moment, a hacked MakerBot is churning away inside the Museum of Arts and Design as part of its cutting-edge “After the Museum” show (through June 9). Two floors above, however, an unexpected counterpoint to such high-tech fetishism is on view: “Against the Grain” (through September 15) shows wood, a material you might have thought had left its place in the sun in the middle of last century, to be a very contemporary — even radical — vehicle for provoking both our senses and our sensibilities.

Contrary to her initial instincts, curator Lowery Sims opted to leave mid-century modern out of her narrative, eschewing those well-worn stories of the Eames introducing plywood to the living room. Instead, she’s arranged 90-or-so works of art and design in thematic sections
that highlight their exceptionality. Though she herself calls the labels of these sections “clichés and platitudes just to get your attention,” they nevertheless serve as a spark for closer examination: Alexis Leyva Machado’s “R.E.C. (Rectifying the Course)” (2006), for example, falls under the heading “Politically Speaking.” The curvilinear canoe made of salvaged Cuban driftwood speaks to this artist/designer’s own migratory experiences, while nearby the splay of Qing Dynasty stools in Ai Weiwei’s 2008 “Grapes” mocks our veneration of historical artifacts.

While familiar forms abound (like the dramatic slopes of Wendell Castle’s 2010 bubinga wood “Night Rider” rocking chair), they’re interspersed with constant surprises. Even a form as traditional as the chair, which has arguably been industrial design’s mascot since the age of Eames, can cause surprise and joy when it subverts the tactile qualities we normally associate with wood. Take, for instance, Australian artist Ricky Swallow’s inviting “Come Together” (2002), grouped under the theme “A Flair for Materials:” What looks like a beanbag of luxuriously buttery leather is in fact a masterfully carved block of laminated jeutlong, an Australian tree far less comfortable than it’s been made to look. Elsewhere, the show emphasizes wood’s unexpected compatibility with technology. The show’s “Digitally Speaking” section includes Jeroen Verhoeven’s plywood “Cinderella Table” (2005), a mass of meandering volumes that were spliced together from the forms of 18th-century furniture, morphed using computer software, then fabricated using a computer-numbered cutting (CNC) system.

Ultimately, “Against the Grain” goes against the assumption that old materials need to be discarded in favor of new processes. The show’s consistent derision of our presumptions is not only a source of viewing pleasure, but a reassertion of a material’s — in fact, any material’s — revolutionary possibilities with a little tinkering, and the adaptability of design. Just as it was in the 1950s, wood in the digital age is a vehicle for powerful craftsmanship — a process 3-D printing can’t help but erase from the equation.

“Against the Grain” is on view at the Museum of Arts and Design, 2 Columbus Circle, through September 15, 2013.

To see images “Against the Grain,” from click on the slideshow.
Wendell Castle
"Ghost Rider," 2010
Bubinga with oil finish

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Nina Bruun
"Nest," 2010
Birch, textile, loam

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Ai Weiwei
"Grapes," 2008
Ten Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) stools

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Gary Carsley
"D.100 Wave Hill (Tree Struck By Lightning)," 2012

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Ricky Swallow
"Come Together," 2002
Laminated jeulong

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Sebastian Errazuriz
"Porcupine Cabinet," 2011
Lacquered wood, steel, glass
Edition of 12

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Matthias Plissnig
"Thonet No. 18," 2007
Thonet cafe chair, steam bent white oak

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Alison Elizabeth Taylor
"Tao Lek On," 2009-10
Wood veneer, shellac

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Elisa Strozyk
"Wooden Textile Walnut," 2011
Walnut, viscose

Laurel Roth
"Hominoid: Chimpanzee," 2011
Vera wood, Swarovski crystal

Marc Andre Robinson
"Right of Return," 2010
Wood Chairs
William Pope.L
"Coffin (Flag Box)," 2008
Wood construction with printed tape, CD player, speakers, metal handles, casters, vinyl grills, electrical cord, book, wood stack

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Juan Muñoz
"Chopping Block," 2001
Wood, kitchen knife
Edition of 25

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Willie Cole
"Naboom's Chicken I," 2002
Matches, brooms, wax, Styrofoam, marbles

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Joseph Walsh
"Erignum Shelf," 2011
Olive ash, white oil

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Courtesy of Joseph Walsh Studio. Photo: Andrew Bradley