

## Wood Proves Its Mettle in the Museum of Arts and Design's "Against the Grain"



Courtesy of Joseph Walsh Studio; Photo: Andrew Bradley

Joseph Walsh, "Enignum Shelf," 2011

by Janelle Zara

Published: March 26, 2013



Ricky Swallow, "Come Together," 2002 /  
Courtesy of the Artist; Photo by Fredrik  
Nilsen

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 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.

### Slideshow "Against the Grain" at Museum of Art and Design



Courtesy of Tomlinson Kong Contemporary, New York; Photo: Christopher Kurtz

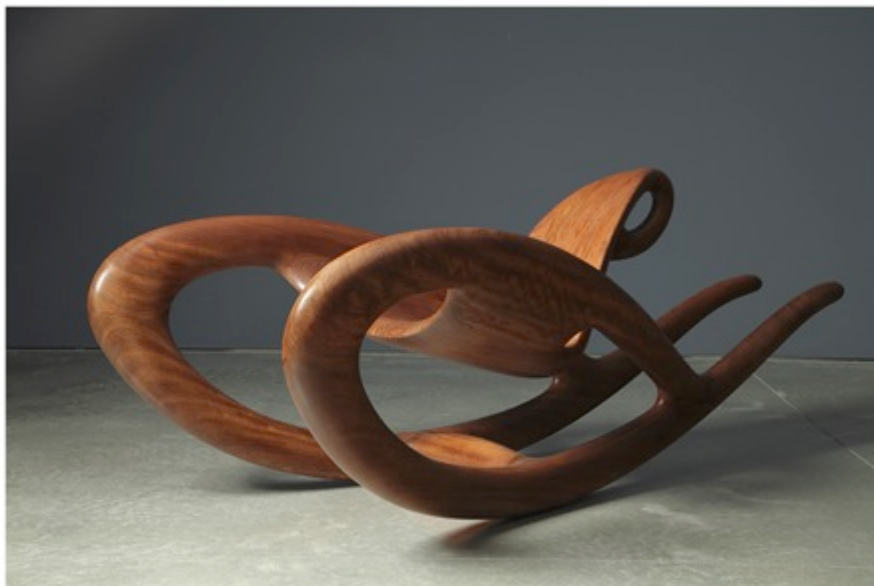


**Christopher Kurtz**  
“A(typical) Windsor Form,”  
2004  
Steam bent ash, white oak,  
pine, milk paint

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Courtesy of the artist; Friedman Benda, New York; Photo: Jon Lam Photography



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**Wendell Castle**  
 "Ghost Rider," 2010  
 Bubinga with oil finish

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Courtesy of the artist; Photo: Adam Dyrvig Tatt



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**Nina Bruun**  
 "Nest," 2010  
 Birch, textile, foam

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

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Courtesy of Thatcher Projects, New York



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### Gary Carsley

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

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Courtesy of the artist, Marc Foxx, Los Angeles, Stuart Shave/Modern Art, London; Damen Knight, Sydney; Photo: Fredrik Nilsen



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### Ricky Swallow

"Come Together," 2002  
Laminated jeutlong

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**Sebastian Errazuriz**

"Porcupine Cabinet," 2011  
Lacquered wood, steel, glass

Edition of 12

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Courtesy of Cristina Grajales Gallery, New York



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**Matthias Pliessnig**

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

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Courtesy Museum of Arts and Design; promised gift of Mini S. Livingston; Photo: Matthias Pliessnig



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**Alison Elizabeth Taylor**

"Tap Left On," 2009-10  
Wood veneer, shellac

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Courtesy of the artist; James Cohan Gallery, New York





Courtesy of the Artist, Photo: Elisa Strozzyk



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**Elisa Strozzyk**  
 "Wooden Textile Walnut," 2011  
 Walnut, viscose

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Photo: Andy Diaz Hope



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

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Courtesy of Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Rome; Photo: Courtesy of the artist



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**Marc Andre Robinson**  
 "Right of Return," 2010  
 Wood Chairs

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Courtesy of the Artist, Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York; Photo: Chris Burke

**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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Courtesy Estate of the Artist; Photo: Cuauhtli Guzmán

**Juan Muñoz**

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

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Courtesy of Alexander and Bonin, New York

**Willie Cole**

"Malcolm's Chicken I," 2002  
Matches, brooms, wax, Styrofoam, marbles

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**Joseph Walsh**  
"Enignum Shelf," 2011  
Olive ash, white oil

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