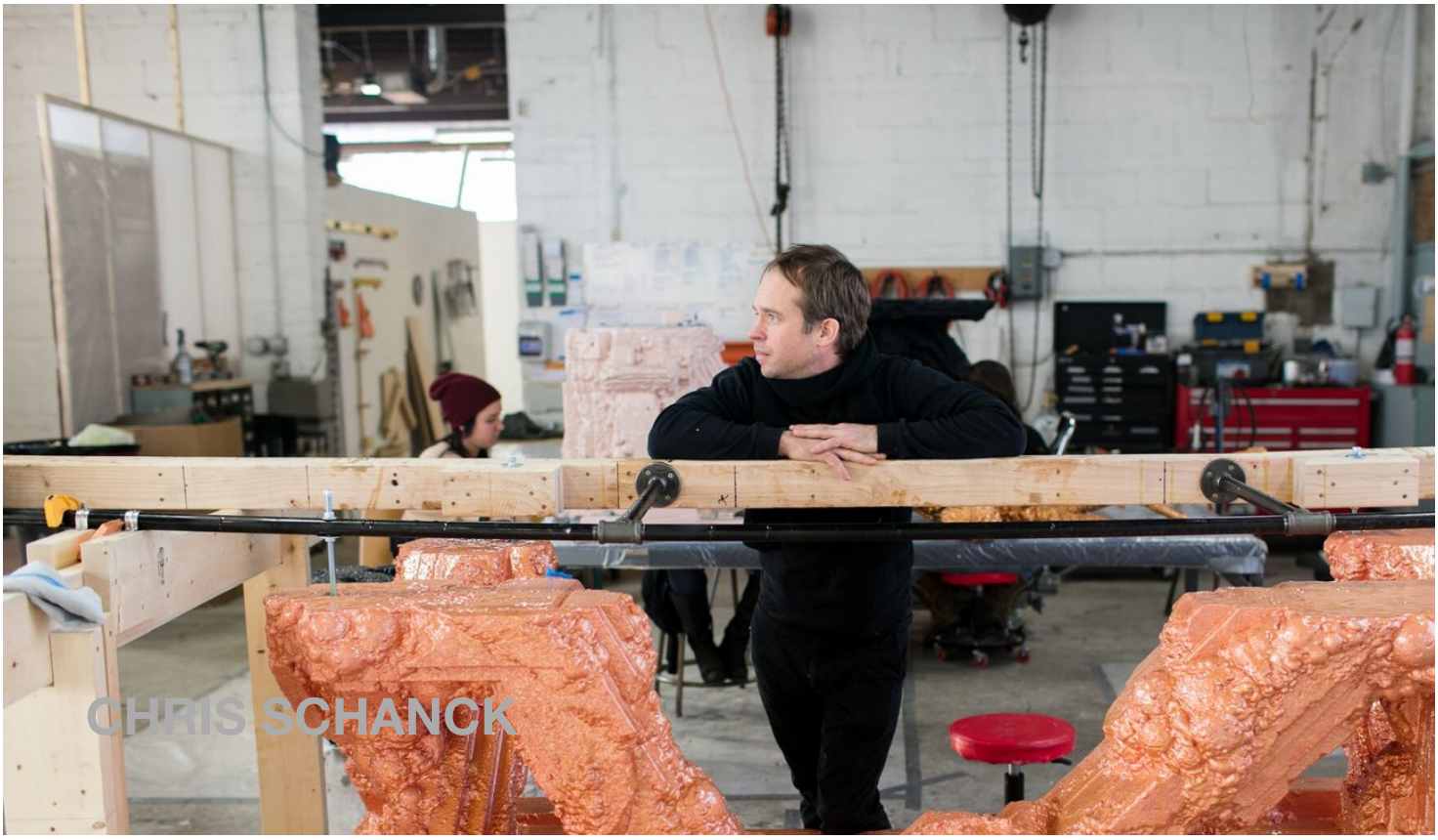


CHRIS SCHANCK

“I came back to the idea that design, for me, was going to be about an experience. I wanted the work to exist on one level as an independent artwork in the room, but then to be able to engage it as a designed object. The negotiation between the two creates a tension I’m looking for.”

— Chris Schanck

Interview by J. Fiona Ragheb, Contributor

Detroit-based designer **Chris Schanck** embraces contradiction in his work, finding a comfortable place between the distinctions of dilapidation and assemblage, individual and collective, industrial and handcraft, romanticism and cynicism. His efforts deviate from the mass-produced, instead reviving mundane materials by transforming them into unique objects of uncommon luxury. Schanck is perhaps best known for his "Alufoil"

Ragheb, J. Fiona. “Chris Schanck,” *Curator*, November 2018.

series, in which industrial and discarded materials are sculpted, covered in aluminum foil, and then sealed with resin.

J. Fiona Ragheb (JFR): Your undergraduate degree is in sculpture and now you're making furniture that has a very sculptural quality. Can you talk about how you made that shift from sculpture to design, and what drew you to it?

Chris Schanck (CS): My training was pretty traditional. I had a great foundation in fine arts from an arts magnet high school called Booker T. Washington in Dallas, Texas. Spent my days there learning to sculpt stone and clay, and figuratively drawing every day. Then SVA [School of Visual Arts] completely opened me up to contemporary art. There I worked through my formalism, and ended up leaving there making more conceptual works.

As an undergrad at SVA my biggest hero was Felix Gonzalez-Torres, and I became really fascinated by him and this idea that some of his pieces could almost cross that line between art and design in an interactive way, so you could participate in his works, take a piece of candy, take a poster. I couldn't articulate what it was about at the time—but I started to understand that as the functioning of that experience. Experiencing something, being able to interact with it. . . I loved to be able to break that wall and touch the works. That was such a powerful moment.

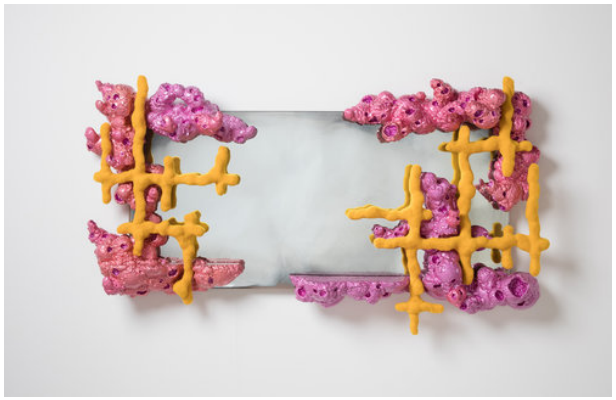
In addition, parallel to that, I got a job working at MoMA and had my first studio, trying to hustle it.

Puff & Stuff, 2018
33 x 30 x 37 inches & 33 x 30 x 37 inches
Aluminum, polystyrene, resin, and mohair

JFR: What were you doing at MoMA?

CS: Installation. Right out of undergrad, I worked for MoMA proper, then later MoMA PS1, and some other galleries in Chelsea. We would be sitting in the break room and the boss comes in with a feather duster and asks, "Who wants to go dust the collection?" And everyone is pretending they don't hear or they're asleep and I said, "I'll do it." I go into the permanent collection, and there's not a guard, there's not a patron, there's nobody in sight. It's just me with the collection, which was amazing. It was the most VIP access you could have. I'm dusting Brancusis and by extension, touching them. These little experiences just kind of added up. After that I started making conceptual design pieces that were about the body and connecting the body, but it wasn't explicit enough to me that you could actually engage them without some permission.

A desire for interaction without permission set me down a path. I wanted to make very ubiquitous objects where the authorship wasn't important. It went from at first a very conceptual exploration to needing to understand it in a more practical, straightforward way. To try on the role of a designer or the processes that they go through.



Bloom, 2018
80 x 36 x 9 inches
Steel, polystyrene, aluminum, resin, nylon fiber, and mirror glass

Blush, 2018
47 x 41 x 8 inches
Steel, polystyrene, resin, nylon fiber, and mirror glass

When I first got to Cranbrook, I made some really ubiquitous things, like doorstops. Then I found a client who had a medical condition and I built a very simple device to help alleviate the symptom. It was really interesting and rewarding to go through that process. From that point, I was always trying to find a client—trying to find someone to work with or to respond to a need, and that quickly turned into interior design for spatial needs. I learned a lot approaching projects that way, but also realized that I'm probably never gonna be a proper industrial designer. But I learned a lot working this way, most importantly how to get outside of myself and glimpse through other people's perspectives.

JFR: Yes, it becomes a design problem as opposed to some sort of sculptural, intuitive . . .

CS: Solving a design problem didn't come naturally to me at all. I lived on pure intuition up to that point.

Trying to think like a designer was counterintuitive, but once I could narrow down my research to something, then new possibilities started to open up. At Cranbrook, they do a great job of exposing you to a bizarre, radical design history that I thought was amazing. It was starting art history all over again. It was a complete high and this was a whole new world to me.

JFR: Were there other formative experiences that led you here? Aside from working at the Modern and Cranbrook?

CS: Growing up, my father and my brother worked for an aluminum manufacturing plant. I grew up more or less in the shadow of that. I worked there when I was old enough, in the summers, and I was completely fascinated by the processes and the scale of production. The scale of that work was mythical to me, so much so that in high school I'd paint portraits of the machines. Learning that there were people behind all these processes and products was really impactful. And for the first time, it gave my family some upward mobility.

Since then, I'm always fascinated by aluminum—I had this intimate connection to it. They had some scheme that they were going to take all the shavings from the machining, all the bits of foil would be collected in these fifty-gallon drums and they were going to cover rooftops with them. They were going to tar the rooftop, cover them in the aluminum shavings to reflect the sunlight. That image was just incredible to me, and my first job was to sift the dirt and debris from the aluminum shavings.

JFR: I always loved those shavings in shop corners and things.

CS: Right? It was horribly repetitive and backbreaking, very Sisyphean, because there'd be a fifty-gallon drum of dirty shavings and an empty gallon and it was like sifting gold, and it took **forever**. But it was rewarding to see the clean new shavings. It was the same way punching parts. I learned to punch parts on the factory floor, and there'd be a thousand or so parts on one side of you—you grab a part, stick it in the machine, push the pedal, punch a hole, then put it off to the other side and repeat for eight hours, and your mind really wanders. I think about those experiences in relation to the repetitive finishing in my work now—it's meditative. As mind-numbing as those processes can be, there's also something kind of Zen about it.

JFR: I don't know if you're familiar with the story about Louis Kahn, the architect, and how he would encourage students to honor their materials. He famously used the example of asking a brick what it wanted to be and the brick wanted to be an arch. I always think of that in terms of your work, because it seems like it can't decide what it wants to be: is it sculpture or is it design? Is it raw or is it refined? Is it seductive or is it, dare I say, repellent?

CS: Yep.

JFR: Is that something that you strive for?

CS: I do. I came back to the idea that design, for me, was going to be about an experience. I wanted the work to exist on one level as an independent artwork in the room, but then to be able to engage it as a designed object. The negotiation between the two creates a tension I'm looking for. The works have to be negotiated in their scale, finish, and sometimes repulsive form. They're not a passive form or surface, so they take a little bit of work.

JFR: Yes, they don't fade into the background . . . they're a little bit in your face.

CS: They're very obnoxious in that way. One collector came in—she really wanted this piece and she brought in her husband the next day and he about-faced and said, "No fucking way," and walked out [laughter].

JFR: There's no two ways about that.

CS: There's not a lot of "Yeah, and it's alright . . .

JFR: It elicits a really strong reaction.

CS: Yes. I think that's a better place to be for me.

JFR: Probably the worst thing you could ask for is something that fades into the background and people don't see any more. That's never going to happen with your work.

CS: No, it's not. My ego is too big for things to fade into the background.

JFR: What you were just talking about in terms of your youth and your relationship to aluminum and whatnot starts to make a lot of sense in terms of your work, but can you talk about how you actually developed your signature technique? I'm sure you've been asked that question so many times.

CS: Yeah. There's . . .

JFR: Is that like, "Yeah, I've been asked this question so many times. It's not really interesting, but I'll tell you"? [laughter]

CS: There's a few different ways to answer. It's not one thing; it was a perfect storm of things. The long answer is: I was doing a series of objects at Cranbrook that were about collecting discarded, mass-produced, manufactured objects that had fallen outside of the system that they were designed for.

JFR: There's a lot of that at Cranbrook.

CS: There is a lot of that [laughter]. There's these three giant dumpsters on campus—I'd go through those. I found old school desks, tables and lamps. I collected all this stuff in the studio and then looked for some shared dimensional code that they could pair together, which they did rather easily. There's a lot of similarities in the manufacturing concerns from one thing to another. From shipping to point of purchase, all these dimensions start to overlap.

I was sticking them together to make hybrid pieces of furniture, like a bed and a lamp, a table and a chair, and once I got them roughly stuck together with tape, rope, stretch wrap, whatever, I wanted to give them a new coming out, to make them seductive. I didn't want to have to think about their origin, but think about the new thing, so I was trying ways to wrap and refinish in various ways. I tried fiberglass, painting, different things, and then . . . I had tons of different techniques going, but the real breakthrough I attribute back to my mother, back to foil. When we were very young she didn't have a lot of money, and out of necessity and ingenuity she wrapped all my gifts in tinfoil. While at school she sent me a care package and out of nostalgia, wrapped the gifts in foil.

JFR: Oh, this is when you were at Cranbrook?

CS: Yeah, and I was super touched. I had a little maquette and I took some of the foil she used and glued it over a model. It was instantly transformative and the effect of it was alien and seductive. I love the materiality of it, the way it just crinkled and reflected and could cover any contour. That's it, I thought. It just all fell into place, and then it had to be protected, so then I began experimenting with resins to seal it.

The process doesn't want to actually work. These things, they don't want to stick together, so it's just figuring out how to get them all to play nice together.

JFR: They're temperamental, in other words, which seems perfect for your work.

CS: Yeah, it is.

JFR: Were you aware of John Chamberlain's late work?

CS: I don't know about the late work...

JFR: With aluminum foil?

CS: No.

JFR: He was doing large-scale work with aluminum foil. Obviously, you had your own relationship with aluminum foil.

CS: I love Chamberlain. I'm sure I saw it somewhere; maybe similarly there was some late Frank Stella stuff. There was discarded metals and stuff that was all collaged together. But as an influence at the time, I was definitely thinking about Louise Nevelson. I read an interesting interview with her around that time that completely surprised me in that she was irreverent about the wood, or didn't even care. She basically said that why she painted it all black was because she didn't care that it was made of wood. She could achieve what she wanted with it, and just paint it all black so you don't think about the wood anymore, and think about it beyond the materiality. At least that's the way I remember it, and it stuck with me.

I had completely misread this forever. It intrigued me that as I went forward with the work, I could make any form out of anything or any composites of materials, to explore the forms and typologies I want, and this material allows me to just cover them completely and see it as a unified object. You don't think about its origins or how I got there as much as you take it in and accept it as its own thing.

JFR: Well, speaking of Louise Nevelson in terms of the black, what role does color play in your work?

CS: Back to the factory: my brother ended up running the anodizing division—where you tint or color the aluminum. He'd take me there, and they had these giant railroad car-sized tanks and they would dip in massive racks of aluminum. They'd emerge from the tanks bright blue, green or red. It was alchemy to me and I loved it. I tried to do bathtub anodizing on just the foils, trying do-it-yourself sort of anodizing, which is really hard.

JFR: I would imagine.

CS: I loved this idea of being able to anodize them myself, to continue this connection with my brother. Ultimately I found a range of beautiful colors from a confectioner's foil. A candy foil supplier.

So then, applying color to form... each piece has its own little soul or language going on and it's about finding the right connection between form and color. I look at color theory from science fiction and fantasy film. I'm inspired by the way color is used to represent or accompany magic or unexplained phenomena.

I want the colors to be fantastical, bright saccharine, and otherworldly.

JFR: What about the titles of your work, because some of them seem to have a play on words or puns, which also makes me think of Chamberlain, because he was interested in language in the same way. How do you decide on a title for your work?

CS: Okay, it's really hard for me.

JFR: And it's interesting, even in a way, that they necessarily have titles. They seem to be part of the work, but you could default to Untitled or something relatively generic.

CS: For a while I didn't title them, but it seemed like a nice way to peek into it, and to see that they all don't have to be so serious. I think it just shows a little bit of the personality behind it, but I'm absolutely crap at titling them. Recently I made a titling competition in the break room at the studio. I put up images of different pieces and it was a gift card competition—if you name a piece or inspire the name of a piece, you get a gift card.

So, I put up this competition with lists and you just go up, write the title, and initial it. It was really fun, and really revealing in that it opened up a dialogue with everybody in the studio, because everyone that's working on the pieces—whether they're master sculptor or finisher—has their own clear narrative of what's happening in the work, and so I'd start to see the overlap between those ideas and my ideas. I'd ask, "Why did you say this one?" It really helped with the studio dialogue, because the work takes a small army to pull off.

Banglatown, 2018
84 x 24 x 86 inches
Steel, aluminum, wood, polystyrene, burlap, hide, resin

Banglatown, 2018 (interior)
84 x 24 x 86 inches
Steel, aluminum, wood, polystyrene, burlap, hide, resin

Some titles come easy—one piece in the recent show [at Friedman Benda], is titled **Banglatown**, named after the neighborhood the studio and my home are in. The piece takes its inspiration from the gardening community here and I wanted to connect the title to the roots of the piece.

The **Gold 900** piece could have easily also been called **Gollum—**he's manifested from the materials in the studio yard. He's actual sticks and bits of wood; it's all massed around the form and then covered in gold, but Gold 900 is the name that my foil supplier gives that particular gold. “Gold 900”—it sounded so important, but it's just the way of categorizing the color. For me, it was a nice way to make the suppliers a part of the process. I like this idea that the whole process of making the work, from sculptor to finisher to outside supplier to client, exists on some level where no one part of the process is any more important than another—everyone understands the importance of everyone's role in the process, and it can't exist without any one part. It's not just me by any stretch, so even the supplier is really important.

JFR: I wanted to talk about that, both in terms of how your studio has grown and evolved, but also because it seems as if the studio is very much a reflection of its community and part of its community, and that seems to be a very important part of the process, as you just described.

CS: Yes. It's the heart and soul of it, and it's also been a big learning curve I was surprised by, but now completely embrace. Working before on my own is probably my more comfortable state, or at least it was then, so the studio grew not so much by design, but just out of necessity. I learned a lot in that, and started to value the relationships with them. To me it feels very unique to the area, because everyone is so kind and generous here, easy to work with. Some of our outside artisans and fabricators are now great friends, mine and the studio's. So I rely on their expertise, and as I get to know their strengths and their personalities, I start building that into what the work could be, where we could go.

Initially, the studio was out of my home which is just a mile from here, and it was a little corner store attached to the house. So we started in there, but then we started producing a lot more, and that spilled out into the kitchen which became the prep room, my bedroom became the finishing room; the other bedroom was an office, staging areas . . . so it was fantastic and manic.

JFR: Unless you actually want to sleep in your bedroom [laughter]**.**

CS: [laughter] We became very intimate working out of the house, and had anywhere from ten to fifteen people showing up at the door every day, and the cat would sit waiting for everyone to show up. It was a unique condition for everyone to learn—how do we coexist and do this without killing each other? It seemed to happen pretty naturally, and everyone survived.

JFR: Which seems like it's continued here, even though you've had to scale up to some extent.

CS: It has, and I think because we started that way and formed those relationships early. It's a studio and it's a business, but the relationships within that are equally as important to anything, and if those aren't positive, then nothing's positive. In the beginning it was me figuring out a lot of steps and teaching and running around trying to figure that out, and now it's matured into its own departments. They've taken parts of the work and become experts in their respective areas, so now I can focus more on creating new things.

Sketches by C. Schanck.

JFR: We talked about this a little bit before we actually sat down, but in terms of starting a new work—we looked at some of the drawings on the wall, and it seems that there's an emergence of the figure in some of your newest work and what you have on the boards. Can you talk about that?

CS: Well, with furniture, you—or at least I—project myself into the work. If there's an empty chair sitting there, you project yourself into that chair, but if the chair is already a figure, there's something interestingly problematic that happens—it's already occupied.

The figurative pieces occupy the pieces with their own little souls and narratives.

In **Nite Light**, it's a zombie or monster head that opens up and it's a light. One way to describe it is a piece of fan fiction. It's a combination of horror and monsters that I liked growing up, so it's half xenomorph, half orc. **Aliens** meets **Lord of the Rings**. Those are my real influences—and self-portraiture in the sense that these were the things that were my first art theory, the type of art that was accessible. Growing up in my house, there wasn't access to fine art or design. It was film, television, and comic books. Those were my early obsessions and escapism—I was always drawn to those things. A good friend of mine who came to the show and has known me since high school said, "Oh, it's taken you fifteen years to finally make the shit that you've been always drawing."

JFR: It's interesting, because we were talking in the beginning about how your work is somewhat equivocal. Is it design, is it sculpture, is it seductive, is it repellent? And this direction seems a little less equivocal.

CS: Yes. With the gold man, too, I do describe him as a gollum and that idea is best represented in that form. A lot of the work is super fantastical, but with this piece I wanted to really ground him in the medium: materials that fall from the trees outside. To me personally, he is a positive energy, inspired by my community and local material. But alternative interpretations can manifest equally valid ideas and feelings.

He's a little deity-like form to project onto and he's also like an Atlas, too.

Gold 900, 2018
35 x 32 x 31 inches
Resin, steel, aluminum, polystyrene, and wood

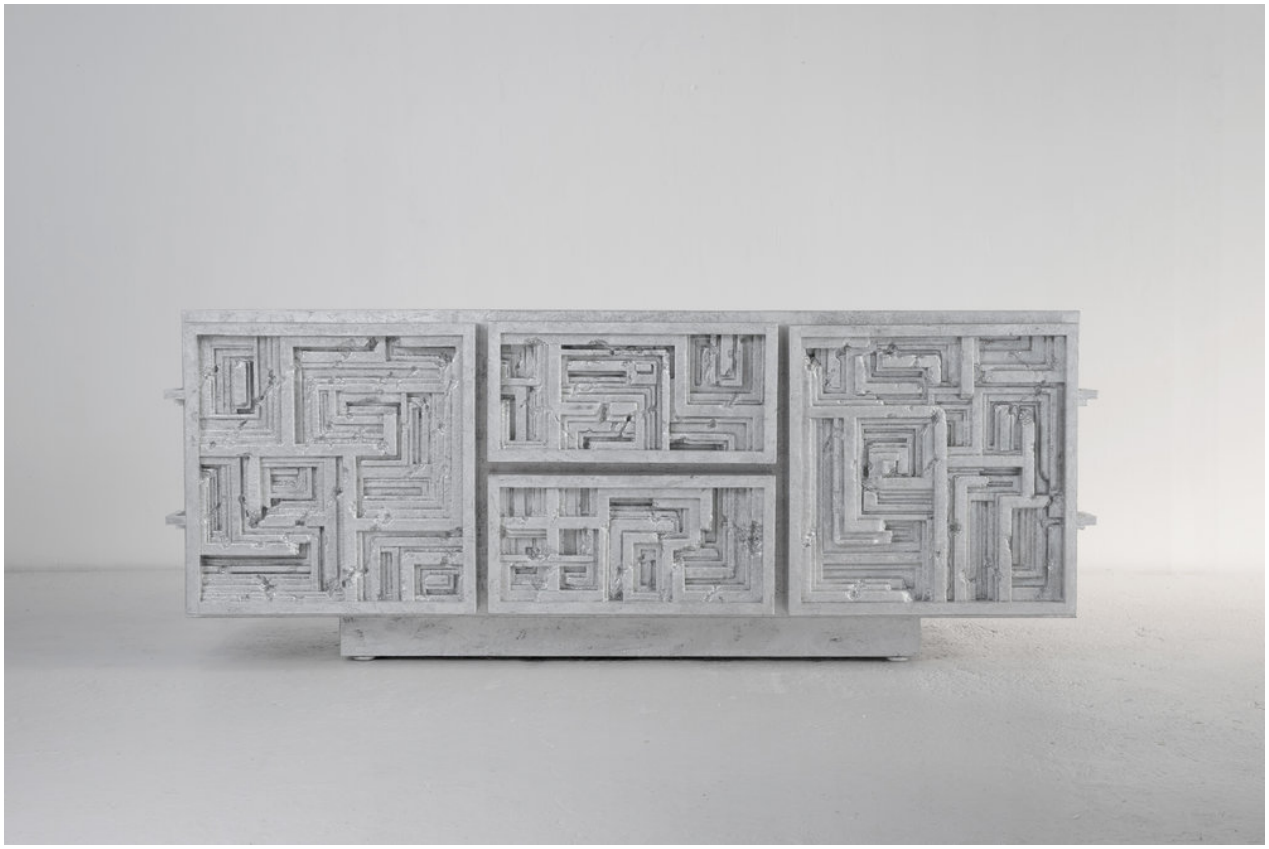
He's holding a piece of the sky, or he's reflecting the sky, or the cosmos. It's about this place or this little corner of the world that the studio is in, and being reflective of that.

JFR: I'm curious where the work goes from here, in terms of figuration and expressing more of your original interests and whatnot, but also in terms of studio work versus commissioned work and the larger interior projects you've done.

CS: There are a few branches of the studio—each one gets handled a little differently.

The works for exhibition are interested more in exploring an immediate narrative within the area, looking within our own backyard for inspiration. There's specifically the one piece in the last show that looked at the gardening community. Now I'm looking at the layering of technology on the exterior of the home. A lot of the houses in the area were built in the '20s and '30s and they weren't meant to last even a generation, but the community has been doing this repair, patched and restored, to keep them together. There is this collaging of repair and being in this state of entropy and repair, and then the technology from television antenna to satellite dish to cable to wireless. There is this overlapping of things, but it starts to tell a narrative. You can see how people live, by looking at the outside of their homes, without seeing the interior. There are different ways of doing that. The work can become more radically sculptural, but also tell a very grounded story.

The commissioned stuff is fantastic. We have great clients who are adventurous, and are down to experiment and try new things that we haven't done before. Clients are also opportunities to get to know people. To learn what other people care about. There's usually a very nice exchange of information that adds to the body of work, so I'm grateful for those.



Oubliette, 2017
80 x 20 x 32 inches
Wood, polystyrene, resin, and leather

JFR: Is there something that you haven't done yet that you really secretly want to do, or not so secretly want to do?

CS: There's a couple things. I do want to do an entire interior, and a home.

JFR: That's appropriate coming from Cranbrook, if you think about Saarinen House . . .

CS: It totally is. Yes, I would love to do that. The real dream is to do my own home one day for a place to live more than to work: to build a home for a family, for people I care about. That's probably the secret hope, but I don't know that I'd show anybody that, if I did it.

JFR: I only have two more questions for you. One, you addressed it a little already in terms of the community, both within the studio and outside of the studio with suppliers and all that kind of thing, but I'm curious how working here in Detroit as opposed to somewhere else, how that has affected or influenced your work, whether conceptually, or literally, or . . . ?

CS: It's influenced the quality of my life, which has influenced the work. I'm not from here—I don't have any family here, so the studio became my home and the people and the relationships here became more like family and that builds something that feels more socially sustainable to me, and that I care about.

Inside Schanck's studio.

Then I find people in the studio who have some overlap in their backgrounds or interests, but they bring their own stories into the studio. A lot of the pieces start by sitting down and having a dialogue with some of the assistants and sculptors about what the piece is going to be and how do we approach it—how do we get into it? It's through those conversations that a lot of the ideas get fleshed out and developed, so it's not me running around telling everyone what they're making all the time. Some of the pieces have a very clear vision and then everyone backs away because they don't know what I'm doing yet, but a lot of it is more collaborative in the development.

I couldn't imagine doing it anywhere else. It's the very best place for starting a studio, for me, and because, obviously, we could afford to start. I could afford to start here a little bit at a time—but in that same regard, you could also afford to fail, to risk it all.

JFR: Which is so important.

CS: That made all the difference. I had a home and a studio and a job out of Cranbrook without even trying that hard. It's not what I expected, not at all. Definitely what I **hoped**.

JFR: Speaking of expectations, since you talked about the role of your family in various aspects, what do they think of your success?

CS: My brother said to me recently something like, "Well, what would the high school Chris think of what you've done now?" Keep in mind the high school version of me was on a path to destruction. I have to be very good at stopping and being appreciative, but at times the anxiety around creating is more powerful than gratitude. But all of my family is very proud, supportive, and happy for me, that I stuck with it, and even if they don't get every bit of it, it doesn't matter. I have a fantastic family.

JFR: And in terms of the aluminum?

CS: Oh, yes, it's like the family material. And it's also nice, because I think it was maybe even harder when I was making goofy conceptual work in undergrad: they would ask, "Why's there a stack of plates on the floor?" Now that I make furniture, my practice is a little more approachable. I think about my family a lot in the making of the work. From my mom and her foil wrapped gifts, to my brother on the anodizing line at the plant, and my father as a way to support the family . . . It feels right.

Photos: Chris Schanck and Michelle Gerard