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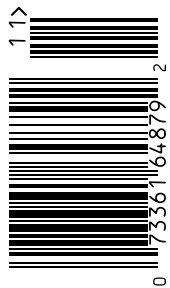
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IN THE STUDIO: CHRIS SCHANCK

BY ELIZABETH ESSNER

Chris Schanck
with his exhibition
Unhomely at
Friedman Benda,
New York

Courtesy of
Friedman Benda and
Chris Schanck
Photo:
Daniel Kukla



IT CAN GET PRETTY LOUD in the Detroit studio of furniture designer Chris Schanck. On a given day you can find a dozen or more people buzzing about the cavernous space, a former automotive fabrication shop that laid vacant until Schanck took up residence in 2015. Artisans in the studio have specific titles: *sculptors*, *finishers*, and *masters*, but it's the *foilers* that make the most noise. A staccato pulse rings throughout the building as they pound paper-thin foil bit by bit onto Styrofoam furniture forms. Known as confectionery foil, these crinkly aluminum sheets come in gemlike colors and usually package sweets (imagine a Hershey's Kiss wrapper). But in Schanck's studio, the foil instead produces the molten surfaces that have come to define "Alufoil," his best-known body of work.

Schanck's team purposefully reflects the Banglatown neighborhood where it is located. The result is a mix of art-school grads and local Bangladeshi women, who work alongside him to create his otherworldly one-off pieces. Trained in design and before that as a sculptor, Schanck is among a current generation of makers and designers for whom new, material-driven techniques are at the forefront of their practice.

The idea for "Alufoil" came to the designer in 2011, at the tail end of graduate school at Cranbrook Academy of Art, located just twenty miles away but worlds apart from his studio today.

"Alufoil" began with what were essentially leftovers: scavenged bits of discarded wood, Styrofoam, metal, cast-offs from factory-made furniture. Schanck was looking for a way to bind them together, for them to be seen, he explains, "as a whole, and not parts of other things." So one day he wrapped them in plain old Reynolds Wrap from the grocery store. It had, he says, "all the material properties of something I was looking for: very immediate and very alien." But, as Schanck is quick to point out, "It's not immediate now. It takes thousands of hours."

Those thousands of hours have translated into *Unhomely*, a recent solo exhibition at the New York gallery Friedman Benda, and a host of commissioned pieces, including for the boutiques of fashion houses Dior and Tom Ford. The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts recently acquired *Alufoil (Arcade Mirror)* from 2016. Diane Charbonneau, Curator of Modern and Contemporary Decorative Arts, points out that the piece also happens to mirror the city of Detroit. "As a curator, you sometimes see more than what was intended," she cautions; but she maintains that she can't help but see the piece "reflecting into Detroit," pointing to "the construction of the city, the arrival of Ford, the riots of the '60s, and now, the city reinventing itself."

Indeed, reinvention is inherent in Schanck's process, in which specialized skill and modest materials result in a table like *Reflectory*. Underneath its shimmering surface, you'll find a metal armature layered with carved Styrofoam, then hardened with a coat of black resin and made tacky with diluted caulk—a way to seal the foil to the form. A slick of clear resin is the final step. The foiling process alone can take up to two-and-a-half months for the largest works, but it's easy to see how this metallic skin is transformative. A reminder that while all that glitters isn't gold, humble aluminum is weightier than one might think.

Aluminum was actually more expensive

than gold before the discovery of cost-efficient production in the late nineteenth century. Now it's so omnipresent in modern life that it's barely noticeable. Lightweight yet strong, it is found in everything from architecture to aluminum cans to the auto bodies of Detroit, and elsewhere. Almost endlessly recyclable, nearly seventy-five percent of all aluminum produced is still in use today. As a design choice in furniture, examples throughout the twentieth century abound—from the streamlined styling of the Machine Age, to Charles and Ray Eames's mid-century classic *Aluminum Group* chairs, to the fluidity of Marc Newson's 1988 iconic *Lockheed Lounge*.

Schanck brings a personal history to the material as well. Like many "aha" moments that are seemingly plucked from nowhere, the "Alufoil" technique actually has deep roots. He grew up in Dallas, "in the shadow of the aluminum plant," he recalls. His father was an aluminum salesman; his older sister worked in the front office; and his older brother managed the anodized aluminum division, which he remembers as being "total alchemy when I was young." Schanck worked in the factory too, punching parts during his summer breaks. In fact, the foiling in his studio could be thought of as a through-the-looking-glass version of the family tradition.

Aluminum foil, like the sheets that fill Schanck's studio, was first put to use in 1911 by Swiss candymaker Tobler to wrap their signature triangular-shaped chocolate bars. If you've ever bought a Toblerone, you'll know that they're wrapped the same way today, with foil candy packaging remaining in widespread use. Its metallic sheen has become something of a beacon, hinting at the pleasure of what's underneath. But once the candy is consumed, its shiny wrapper is likely forgotten as it lands in the bin.

As such, foil candy wrappers could be seen as a cheap thrill, but then one only needs to think of the generosity of conceptual artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres's candy spills, where mountains of cellophane-, paper-, or often foil-wrapped sweets are assembled in the exact weight of the artist's loved ones; the candy is offered as a gift to the viewer. Or one can imagine self-taught artist James Hampton's foil-covered masterpiece *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations' Millennium General Assembly* (ca. 1950–64). Schanck nods to that worshipful



assemblage in one of his newest designs, still in the drawing stage.

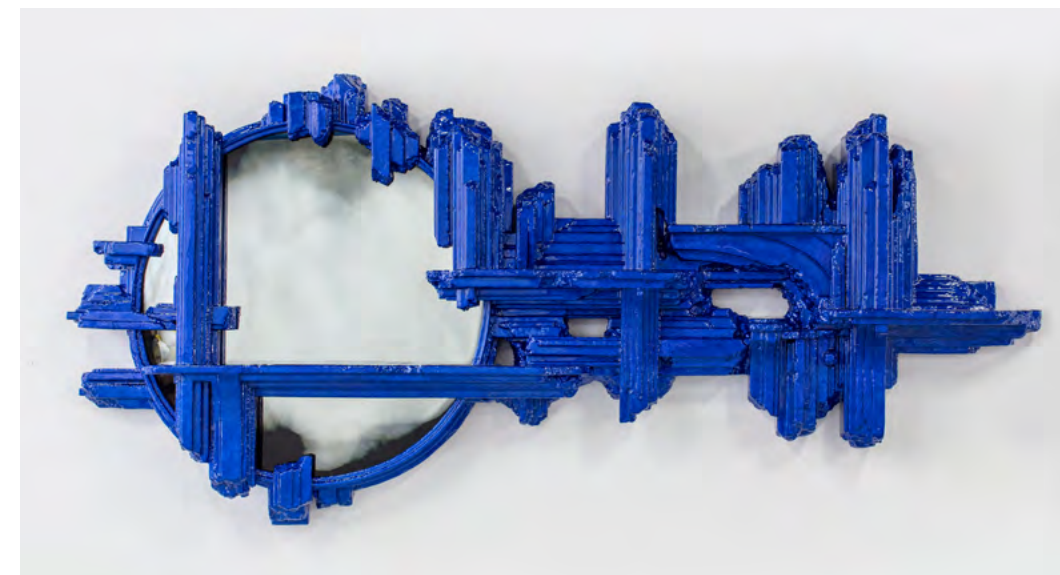
As a designer and as a maker, Schanck is deeply aware that the realization of his work comes directly from the skill found in his studio. Consequently, when he talks about his projects, he rarely refers just to himself, opting instead for "we." "I doesn't work," he says; "it doesn't feel right." Recently, a new narrative direction has emerged in his work, and materials like nylon flocking and polymer clay have joined his signature foiled surfaces. Asked where he will go next, Schanck explains that with a solid team, "I can focus more on the development," which in turn, leads to "something," he says, "completely unknown to all of us."

<http://christopherschanck.com/>

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Schanck's team
at work in his
Detroit studio

Courtesy of
Friedman Benda and
Chris Schanck
Photo: Michelle
and Chris Gerard



Chris Schanck
Alufoil (Arcade Mirror)
2016
steel, polystyrene, resin,
aluminum foil
50 × 108 × 12 in.
Courtesy of Friedman Benda
and Chris Schanck
Photo:
Michelle and Chris Gerard