

# LOKÉ

THE JOURNAL OF MAKING

## UNDERSTANDING

INCLUSIVE, CROSS-CULTURAL, AND GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES ON DESIGN

Osei-Duro, Green River Project LLC, Incan Foundations, Maison Tropicale, Active Social Architecture, Chris Schanck, Sitio Burle Marx, Andrés Jaque, Araks, 100% Silk, VVORK VVORK VVORK, Habitat Marocain, Casa Barragán

After many years in New York and a stint in London, Chris Schanck launched his studio in 2012 out of Detroit's Banglatown. Working with humble materials that range from mass-produced or industrial to natural, he and his team make highly-crafted, singular furnishings that come into being through distinctive processes and transformative techniques that rely on refined skill and meticulous labor. Desired by art collectors and luxury brands alike, Schanck's holistic approach to production synthesizes a vernacular that incorporates the materiality of his environment with the participation of his neighbors. Reflecting a variety of themes such as the body, landscape, or mythology, these works also represent community. The results of these individual and collective efforts are otherworldly design objects that layer narratives about where they come from and what they are made of.

# DEPTH OF SURFACE

IN THE STUDIO WITH **CHRIS SCHANCK** - BANGLATOWN, DETROIT



## WHAT DRIVES YOUR PRODUCTION APPROACH?

My initial education in material and processes was at the aluminum manufacturing plant where my father and my brother worked. That was the first place that gave my father, and therefore the family, any sense of upward mobility. My brother worked in anodizing, my father was a salesman, and I learned how to punch parts. I worked there during the summers, as did my sister, in the office. The whole family, including my mother, worked on the weekends at the assembly line.

Being in that manufacturing environment made me realize for the first time how much infrastructure—both people and facilities—it takes to create just one window frame or any ubiquitous object that I took for granted. That was a profound thing that I came to understand at the age of sixteen, to the extent that, at the time, I preferred to paint portraits of the machines used in production, rather than the people working them. Maybe it was because the machines stayed still. One was named ‘Rosalina Twenty-Four Tons’, a machine that applied twenty-four tons of pressure. Great name! The things we made were perfect, and perfectly reproduced, hundreds of thousands of them. They were the outcome of hard work, but I couldn’t connect them back to the person that produced them. From those experiences, I knew that I wanted the evidence of the people and place to come through in the work that I made.

## AFTER YOUR EARLY EXPERIENCES WITH MANUFACTURING, YOU STUDIED VISUAL ART IN NEW YORK AND LONDON. EVENTUALLY YOU MADE THE TRANSITION TO STUDY 3D DESIGN.

It took me years to make that transition. I became interested in design from a very

practical point of view, because I was making my living working for other people early on, mainly museums, designers, and fabricators. I love materials and processes and have always gravitated toward people and places that could teach me along the way. I enrolled in a master’s degree at Central St. Martins and, while I was in London, had the realization that I was not on the right path—I had to take a step back, reboot my expectations, and expand the idea of how I was going to define my practice. The transitional idea was that I very much wanted people to be able to interact with my work. A designed object inherently supports this behavior, so I set out to combine my fine art practice with a design education.

## THE OBJECTS THAT YOU DESIGN OCCUPY A LIMINAL SPACE BETWEEN SCULPTURE AND FURNITURE. THEY EVENTUALLY LAND IN THE FUNCTIONAL SPHERE. WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO SITUATE YOUR WORK HERE?

With furniture, I love the idea that no matter how crazy my forms get, after all is said and done, it’s still a chair or a table. There is an entry point for a lot of people. I want to establish somewhat of an even ground between the audience and myself—so right away, it’s not above or beyond anyone’s understanding. Everyone has some idea of what these things are from their own personal experience. I don’t necessarily know anything more than they do, because I’ve been sitting in chairs as long as they’ve been sitting in chairs. A work that functions on a physical level with an audience creates a shared experience, rather than presenting a singular vision.

## TACTILITY AND MATERIALITY PLAY AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN YOUR WORK. THESE ARE RELATABLE



BANGLATOWN, 2018  
 STEEL, ALUMINUM, WOOD, POLYSTYRENE, BURLAP, HIDE, RESIN

SHUTTER TABLE STUDY, 2018  
 WOOD, FOAM, RESIN, NYLON, FLOCKING FIBER







PHOTOS BY MICHELLE GERRARD

## ASPECTS THAT DRAW PEOPLE IN, BUT IT CAN TAKE A FEW MOMENTS TO UNDERSTAND A PIECE.

I want the works to be very visceral in their appearance, and I want people to touch them, to get near them, and figure them out. Is it hard? Light? Heavy? Wet? Dry? Is it falling apart? Can I sit on it? There's some doubt about whether they'll work, or hold up in the moment, when you interact with them. Then there's a payoff when you realize that they do function. There's something else in that experience of the mental and physical negotiation between the person and the object. I think that should be a little exciting or entertaining, even.

## IN SEEKING THESE EFFECTS, HOW DO YOU APPROACH MATERIALS?

I think there's something here that's rooted in the way that my mother works. She's not formally an artist, but she's very creative and she makes things. She loves to create arrangements, for any occasion, and her tools are a hot glue gun and whatever little bits she can find from the yard, the beach, the thrift store, or in a closet, and she 3D collages them into an ornate, occasional sculpture. It becomes beautiful because she took the time with these materials, which are within her reach, to make them special and have meaning for her and for her family. She was my first art teacher, and her attitude toward material has made an impression on me—maybe the biggest impression. Whatever we have can be special to us if we treat it that way. I think of the materials I use through that lens, whether it's collecting sticks that fall from a tree, or gathering foam on the street. Here we collage them, and we master the techniques that we invent. They become really unique to us and to this studio, specific to the place and the people who make the work. I think

that process or that craft of doing becomes embedded with meaning through its creation. We are in some way rendering these simple things special. We gild them and make them even more glamorous. It's not subtle.

## WHAT SORTS OF MATERIALS ARE YOU TYPICALLY USING, AND WHERE ARE THEY COMING FROM?

See the house across the street? The owners have put shuttering ply over the windows as a temporary patch to keep both people and the weather out. When you paint the ply, it has an extra layer of protection to help the material hold up for longer. It's the cheapest wood at the lumber yard. It has become a part of the local vernacular and communicates a particular intention and purpose.

The house that I live in was boarded up in the same way. After I moved in, I removed the shuttering from the house, sanded the black paint off, and then the material came through. I made a set of furniture for my home out of that material. It was really beautiful, produced quickly, and connected to my place. The pieces we're making now, which we've never shown before, build on that experience, material, and method.

I love the aluminum foil that we use because it's familiar to my upbringing as I grew up in the shadow of an aluminum manufacturing plant. The first pieces I made were covered in Reynolds Wrap that I got from the dollar store. Now we use a confectionery foil, which is a bit thinner and comes in a variety of gem-like colors. The foil is burnished to the surface of the work using different techniques, creating either a perfect grain or a shimmering pattern. We then coat the foil in tinted resin dyes mixed with epoxy resin to change or saturate the colors.

Styrofoam is everywhere and it's easily manipulated—it can be destroyed and rebuilt quickly. It has little inherent value and it's not precious. You can take risks with it and work intuitively.

### **CAN YOU DESCRIBE YOUR PROCESS FOR MAKING THE PIECES?**

It's a balance of research and intuition. Every project starts with the drawing, and I draw constantly.

If I'm pursuing a typology, I look at historical precedents. I take into consideration the origins of these things and my own past experience with them. I let myself cling to whatever part of that history I connect to most. Drawings are then translated into tiny maquettes, with plenty of iterations.

From there, we go right into building the real thing. We'll begin sculpting it out of foam, metal, aluminum, or wood. A single piece can take anywhere from three to twelve months. I've been lucky to find a group of people to work alongside, in order to help me realize a vision and who contribute all of their expertise toward making it better.

### **WHAT ROLE DOES COLOR PLAY IN YOUR WORK?**

Color is such an emotional decision and a unifying force. The colors that I use are the skin over my forms. I can use color to make my works fade into the background, to coax the viewer into a sense of security, or I can make my work stand out and make the viewer confront them or feel imposed upon.

### **WHY DO YOU COURT IMPERFECTION IN YOUR FORMS?**

It makes me uncomfortable when things are too nice. I feel like I don't measure up or something, and I don't really trust people

without grit and manicured places without texture. My work comes with its own idiosyncrasies, awkward proportions and imperfect lines. It's bold but not idealized.

### **HOW DO YOU WANT YOUR PIECES TO IMPACT THE SPACE THAT THEY OCCUPY?**

I want to push something into the room that has its own sense of self and it isn't discrete or subservient to the user, but on a more equal footing. The user has to negotiate and understand how it relates to them. I want my pieces to impart a strong sense of self. The pieces are something of a manifestation of a personality. In general, I think they probably function more within an emotional space than a practical space. Although, they definitely can and should, be used.

### **BEYOND INTERIORS, HOW DOES THE WORK RELATE TO THEMES OF LANDSCAPE?**

I've taken a lot of inspiration from the landscape of my neighborhood, where I also have my studio. The local houses have informal gardens that the neighbors have built on their roofs, or in abandoned lots. The gardens form whole structures that grow, sprawl, and graft onto nearby properties. To me, my neighborhood very much feels like a living organism. It's cultural and it creates a kind of network or system of living. I pull the landscape into my studio and work, as a reference, and as material. My neighborhood is very optimistic. It's about growth and self-reliance. I want to bring these qualities into the work; I think of it as a way to thrive on the edge.

### **HOW DO YOU SEE YOUR WORK FROM A MATERIAL PERSPECTIVE IN THE CONTEXT OF CLIMATE CHANGE?**





LOKÉ—CHRIS SCHANCK



I think the materials we use act as both the protagonist and antagonist to what we do. Some of the materials are Newtonian, falling to the ground and getting collected. Others are industrially produced, or a by-product of industrial production. On one end of the spectrum, you have materials that will be here for years, and on the other, materials that are gone by next summer. That's a somewhat realistic range of conditions—of the way things mix and blend, where nature stops and manufacturing starts. It's not a message of sustainability, but I think it represents a realistic condition. These materials all have a story to tell and, like it or not, they're a part of the vernacular.

**ARE THERE MATERIALS AND TECHNIQUES THAT YOU WANT TO DEVELOP AND BEGIN TO INTEGRATE INTO YOUR CURRENT APPROACH?**

Because of how the studio is set up, we assimilate new materials and techniques into our research. We might learn how to do something 'properly' and then modify it to suit the studio's needs or skills. We also invent new techniques in consideration of the final appearance; I'm not concerned with keeping with any traditions or styles, I'm more interested in allowing my studio to ingest and produce what it will.

I'm currently taking a one-on-one class with a wonderful ceramic artist and learning how to work with both clay and ceramics. I'm a complete amateur, and engaging in that process feels so good, so free. He gives me some basic instruction, and then I explore.

**YOU HAVE A SIZABLE STAFF HERE. WHO IS PART OF YOUR STUDIO?**

My studio consists of all ranges of talents, educations, and situations in life. Collectively, we have honed a system that allows anyone to come in, work for a few days, and be done if they so wish. However, if we have people who either come with skills or are interested in gaining skills, we push them up to be more involved with the process. The result is that the studio cultivates people from all walks of life who are serious about what they can contribute.

**YOU SEEM TO BE SURROUNDED BY SOME STRONG FEMALE ENERGY IN YOUR WORKSPACE. DO YOU CULTIVATE THIS ACTIVELY?**

I am truly surrounded by strong women in the studio, and I'm fortunate that it's also been the case throughout my educational, professional, and personal lives—beginning with my mother, who was my first art teacher. In my studio, I actively cultivate

'I've been working at the studio for a couple of years. It started as a gig, and became a full-time job. My background is modest—I don't have a degree, so it's been a blessing to work with people who can see my potential as a young artist and professional. I've always been more inclined to work behind the scenes, and through my time here I've realized how many responsibilities there are and valuable positions that need to be filled in a fine art studio that creates at this scale and complexity. I feel as though this job works as hard for me as I do for it, a reciprocity that I've never felt in other work environments. There is space for me to speak my mind and grow at the same pace as the men I work with. Overall, as a team we care for the studio and for each other earnestly, and so we can put in the positive energy that makes it all possible.'

—Naomi Zeman, Apprentice





PHOTO BY MICHELLE GERRARD

SHOPNA KHANOM, LEAD FINISHER (R) AND RAHELA BEGUM, ASSISTANT FINISHER (L)

CO-WORKERS SHOPNA AND RAHELA SHARE A SIMILAR MIGRATION NARRATIVE. BOTH MOVED FROM BANGLADESH TO AMERICA, INITIALLY SETTLING IN NEW YORK CITY. ENCOUNTERING A HIGH COST OF LIVING ALONG WITH EMPLOYMENT BEING HARD TO COME BY, THEY RELOCATED TO DETROIT'S BANGLATOWN. WORKING AT AN ARTIST'S STUDIO IS THEIR FIRST JOB, AND THEY CONSIDER THEIR CO-WORKERS TO BE AN EXTENSION OF THEIR FAMILIES.







PHOTOS BY MICHELLE GERRARD

all types of diversity, but there are a few qualities that I look for in everyone: discipline, self-sufficiency, a commitment to the work, and studio community. Those are the qualities that one of my best teachers and supervisors, Katrin Altekamp, taught me when I started as a model-maker in New York City. As I've interviewed people over the years for my studio, I've found that so many women embody these characteristics. Ultimately a good studio environment is like a good community, a diverse range of age, gender, and class makes for a well-balanced social structure.

#### **HOW DID YOU COME TO HAVE SO MANY FEMALE BANGLADESHI EMPLOYEES OVER THE YEARS?**

The studio is located in Banglatown, so I first got to know them as my neighbors. The house where I had my first studio is a mile away, and part of the same neighborhood. Back then, my studio was in a corner store, attached to the house. In the summer, I'd have the door open for the breeze and people from the neighborhood would come and go. They would come over for tea and watch what I was doing, and eventually I asked if they wanted to do more than watch. They became my first assistants.

#### **HOW HAVE THE WOMEN OF THE LOCAL BANGLADESHI COMMUNITY INFLUENCED WHAT'S HAPPENING IN THE STUDIO?**

I think the biggest initial impact was related to quality of life. If there's anything cultural, they've brought a sense of family into the studio. When things got quiet they would start asking me if I had a mother, or why I wasn't married. Those interactions became unavoidable. I'm not a naturally open person, but I realized that there was personal growth associated with these exchanges and there's value in this form

of dialogue, that's how you start to form relationships—you share things. That can be problematic, but it also leads to trust. That started happening because the studio wasn't set up in a traditional way. So that became part of the style of things in the studio.

Their background also adds to the actual creation of the works, which I didn't realize at first. A lot of these ladies come with incredible experience from Bangladesh, working in textile and leather factories and possess an understanding of quality control. They already have a professional sense of materiality and process that's easily relatable.

There's not a lot of training needed, and everyone took to the tasks easily. I taught the skill sets at first, and then saw quickly how they surpassed my own knowledge. They would show me that there was a subtle directionality to the material I hadn't noticed before. How you lay things down changes the reflectivity. They also began customizing the tooling for better efficiency. Now, I no longer do that part of the finishing process. I'm not nearly as good—they truly are masters of this technique. Lately, I've wondered how we can turn this expertise and creativity into something that gives them more authorship. We've opened up some creative space for them to explore and develop their own patterns and techniques for the work. So far, the results are absolutely beautiful and I'll be able to share the outcome of this new work soon.

#### **DO YOU THINK YOU'LL EVER GO TO BANGLADESH?**

They've been trying to get me to go to Bangladesh.

#### **YOU'VE GOT TO GO.**

I think I have to at this point. I really do think that's going to happen ...