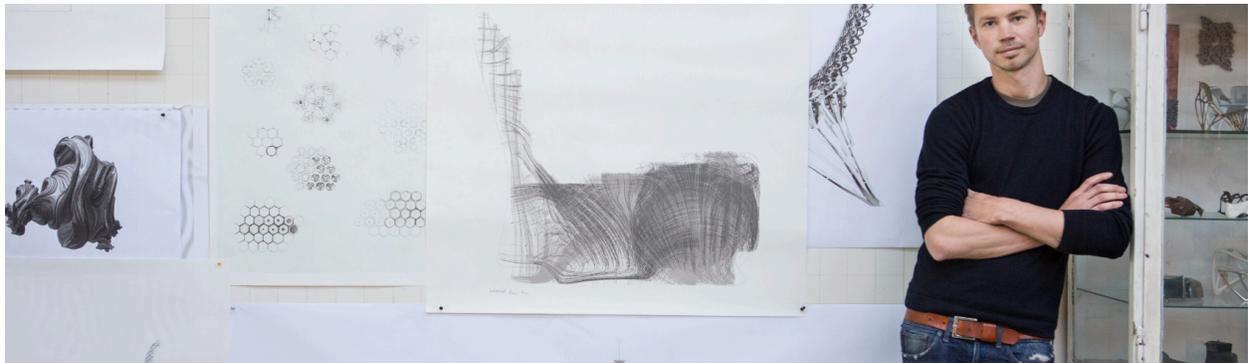




# Dutch designer Joris Laarman speaks about creating designs for the digital age

By Gail O'Neill



Joris Laarman says that nobody took him seriously as a designer until he created the prototype for a functioning radiator called Heatwave in 2003. But once the wall-mounted device, which could easily be mistaken for a work of rococo sculpture, achieved critical and commercial success, Laarman's reputation as an industry darling was sealed. The fact that he was still just a senior at the Design Academy Eindhoven in Holland at the time of his meteoric rise is immaterial to the now high-flying Dutchman.

The High Museum presents a career retrospective of Laarman's work since that breakthrough moment in *Joris Laarman Lab: Design in the Digital Age* from February 18 to May 13. Organized by Holland's Groninger Museum, the exhibition features furniture, applied projects and archival pieces from Laarman's portfolio. Videos, sketches and renderings round out the collection and help shed light on the creative and production processes of one of the most compelling designers working today.

Shortly before opening night, Laarman gave *ArtsATL* a preview tour of the show and shared his vantage point as a pioneer working at the nexus of furniture design, robotic technology and 3-D printing. But first he had to get his bearings straight.

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*Joris Laarman Lab, Makerchairs, 2014.*

**ArtsATL:** *You seemed a little shell-shocked when we first stepped into the gallery. Is it disorienting to see your work installed in a formal space like this?*

**Joris Laarman:** Yes. Anita [Star, Laarman’s life partner and collaborator] and I usually work at home because I get distracted when people are around me, so we spend most of our time in a pretty cramped space. Even though this is how I envisioned my ideas, walking into the gallery and seeing 12 years of work all in the same space is kind of strange. It’s like being inside my head. Wow.

**ArtsATL:** *Does it feel overwhelming or gratifying?*

**Laarman:** It’s very gratifying. The timeline begins with the *Digital Matter* tables. These rococo tables are complex three-dimensional puzzles comprised of thousands of self-organizing molecular building blocks that were inspired by Nintendo’s eight-bit computer games and assembled by a robot. The tabletop features a *Pac-Man* graphic, and there are *Duck Hunt* embellishments below. They were first exhibited at the High in 2011.

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*Joris Laarman Lab, (from l to r) Kilovoxel, Megavoxel and Gigavoxel tables, from Digital Matter series, 2011, robotically assembled nickel-plated neodymium voxels*

**ArtsATL:** *Who or what inspired your imagination as a child?*

**Laarman:** I could never have accomplished any of what you see here without the Internet, without visiting MIT’s website, for example, looking at other people’s research and collaborating with them to create these artistic representations of how our time is in transition. I’ve always been interested in transitions and technological progress. I like to create these poetic frozen moments in our research and development that represent our evolution from the industrial age to the digital era.

**ArtsATL:** *Your Digital Matter tables bridge the divide between baroque and modern design vernaculars. What’s the thinking behind them?*

**Laarman:** I like to blend old and new so that my designs don’t look like some alien blob that nobody is able to relate to. I also like to play with history, traditions and values in design because it’s not just aesthetics that are changing, it’s the whole system of how we design, make, sell and distribute things.

**ArtsATL:** *Digital technology has also expanded our notions of sustainability.*

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**Laarman:** We are much smarter in the way we use materials and recycle them. If you throw these Nintendo tables in a bucket of acetone, they will fall apart and all the pieces can be reassembled in completely different configurations. There is no waste.



*Joris Laarman Lab, Bone Chair, 2006, cast aluminum*

**ArtsATL:** *The Bone Series of furniture was reportedly inspired by human physiology. Please explain.*

**Laarman:** If you take a cross-section of your bones, you'll find hollow spaces. But if you lifted weights, your bone density would increase. Bird's bones, which have to be super lightweight for the sake of aerodynamics, have evolved in a similar way. General Motors created an algorithm that mimics the way bones grow, which they've used to optimize car parts and make them more lightweight. We've applied the same algorithms to calculate what our tables and chairs should look like based on which parts are weight-bearing and which are structural. Basically, the *Bone Series* of furniture is a high-tech version of art nouveau, with a nod to evolution.

**ArtsATL:** *The pieces look futuristic and primitive at the same time. Was the aesthetic intentional, an accident or did it reveal itself to you over time?*

**Laarman:** I think every design challenge has its own happy accidents. In this case, it just evolved. There's always a reason why things look like they do. It's not arbitrary. It's not just beautiful. It's very logical. And because there's a logic behind it, I guess our brains somehow

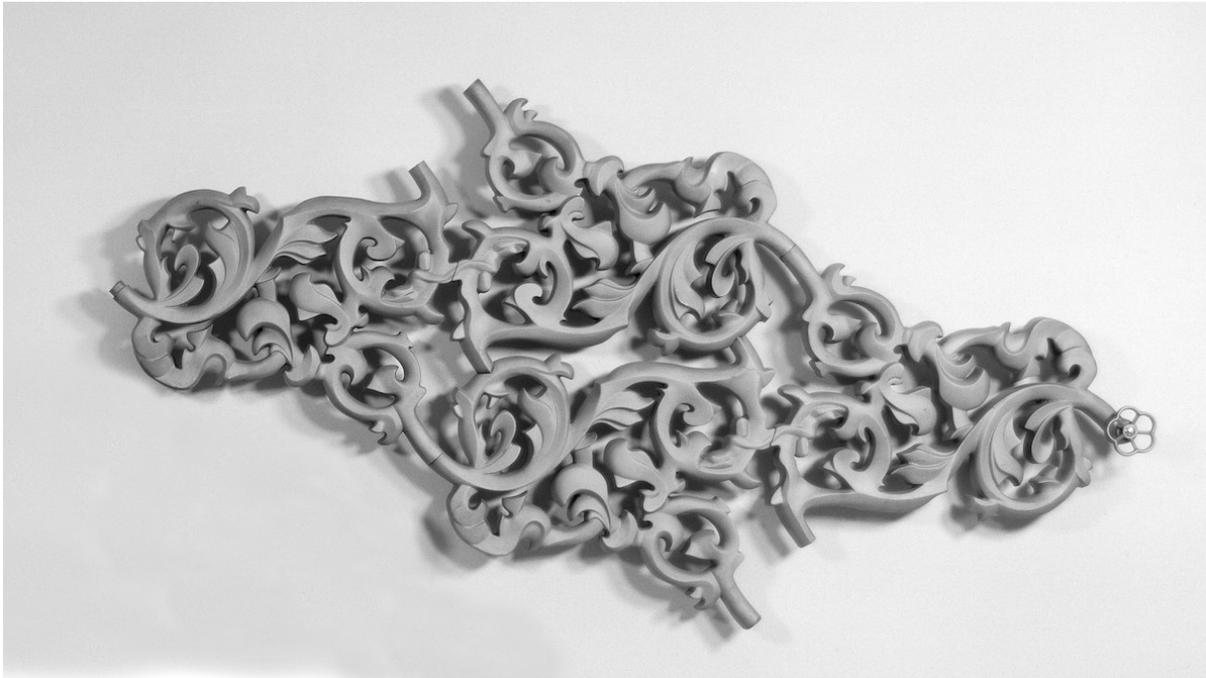
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understand why it looks like it does. All good design is usually like a complicated puzzle where all the elements fit together and make each other stronger.

**ArtsATL:** *I imagine mistakes are inevitable when taking a piece from concept to finished product. Do you regard mistakes as unfortunate occurrences or a necessary part of the process?*

**Laarman:** There are never really mistakes. Everything is a process, and the process is basically never finished. Just like when I designed *Heatwave* for my senior thesis at Eindhoven: I'm interested in why things look like they do. And rococo, as a style, is way more efficient for dispersing heat than to a more sober, modernist-looking panel.



*Joris Laarman Lab, Heatwave, 2004, cast polyconcrete.*

**ArtsATL:** *How did it occur to you to maximize the surface area of a radiator with such highly stylized expression?*

**Laarman:** In a way, designs are communication tools. I just make three-dimensional objects that communicate. Some people write poems or paint or play music. I like to express ideas and tell stories about our time and always try to look for the most powerful means of expression.

**ArtsATL:** *How did Heatwave change the trajectory of your career as a designer?*

**Laarman:** Well, it was the first time somebody took me seriously. [laughs] After *Heatwave* was photographed and featured in design magazines everywhere 15 years ago, it gave me the opportunity to start my own practice. Back then, [the piece inspired trends, so] you suddenly had

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a lot of rococo styling and flowery elements in design, which was a bit of a misinterpretation of what the piece was all about.

**ArtsATL:** *For all the efficiency and time-saving benefits computers have to offer, you have mixed feelings about them. What's the downside to technological advancement?*

**Laarman:** I recently did research for a manufacturer of self-driving cars, which are a good example of how computers, the internet and technology are making our lives so efficient. By the same token, we never get lost anymore, and people have abandoned the streets. When the humanity is taken out of neighborhoods, they suffer. You *want* people on the streets. You *want* people to get lost and talk to each other. We work a lot with computers and robotics and algorithms, and I think it's a miracle what they've made possible. But now that I have kids, I sort of miss the spontaneity of life, of making mistakes and making things.



*Joris Laarman Lab, Branch Bookshelf, 2010, bronze, Collection Groninger Museum, Netherlands.*

**ArtsATL:** *Did you grow up around people who made things with their hands?*

**Laarman:** I grew up in the rural countryside, which was better for my imagination. Now that I have kids and we live in a city, I see how they are constantly entertained. They go from the iPad, to some kid's theatre, to a playground predesigned by some guy to play sports. Their brains go nuts. When I was a child, I had nothing. There were the woods, grasslands and a sand pit behind our house. I had friends, of course, but that was it, and I miss that a lot.

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**ArtsATL:** *The Lab, which you cofounded with Anita in 2004, is a multidisciplinary hub of scientists, engineers, filmmakers, computer programmers and craftspeople. What was your thinking when curating such an eclectic group of people?*

**Laarman:** Usually, society appreciates high-education jobs over people who actually make things. I think that's a real pity. In Holland, 50% of children go to technical schools. But everyone prizes those stupid office jobs, which are mostly unattainable without a university degree. I think craft and the ability to make things is really important.

**ArtsATL:** *What are the backgrounds of some of your colleagues at the Lab?*

**Laarman:** We have a blacksmith, a woodworker, a carpenter and coders, of course. The nice thing about how we work together is that computer programmers — who are usually behind their screens — get educated by the craftspeople, and vice-versa. They learn from each other and appreciate what [people outside their fields of expertise] have to offer. The physical world is very different from the virtual world. People who make things on computers usually don't really understand how metal actually functions in the real world, how it warps when it becomes hot or how it cracks when it cools down, or how it oxidizes. So you need a balance of knowledge. Besides, it's just unhealthy for anyone to sit behind their computer screen nonstop.



*Joris Laarman Lab, Puzzle Print Makerchair, 2014, 3-D printed ABS (Acrylonitrile-Butadiene-Styrene).*

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**ArtsATL:** *Pieces from the High's permanent collection of your designs will be on exhibition. And your Vortex Series of furniture is a playful exploration of what happens when patterns are interrupted. Still, I hear you want people's heads to explode when they enter the gallery devoted to Experiments.*

**Laarman:** I could go on forever in this room! I'm really proud of these 3-D printed chairs for children that anyone can download for free and make at home or wherever they have access to a printer. All you have to do is visit Bits & Parts for details. Sometimes we make things at the Lab that remain an experiment and don't become these giant series of works. The bio-luminous lamp, for example, is powered by an immortal cell line that was genetically modified with the cells of a firefly. It lights up without electricity. And there's also a replica of the Project Aurora Time Capsule we made with Greenpeace. The globe-like container is now at the bottom of the sea at the North Pole, but its heavy base [which anchors it to the ocean floor] was designed to erode and allow the structure to float to the ocean's surface around the time the polar ice cap will melt.



*Joris Laarman Lab, Aluminum Gradient Chair (detail), from Microstructures series, 2014, laser-sintered aluminum.*

**ArtsATL:** *Anita, your kids and your parents have accompanied you to Atlanta for this exhibition. Do you have a special affinity for the city?*

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**Laarman:** I've been coming here for my first exhibition since 2011, and what can I say: Atlanta is really friendly. Like *honestly* friendly compared to places like New York, where even as you step out of the airplane you get yelled at. But everybody here is so relaxed and friendly. Besides, we're all really big fans of *The Walking Dead*, so now we can finally visit [Senoia](#) to see where the series is filmed.

*Joris Laarman Lab: Design in the Digital Age* runs from February 18 to May 13. *Laarman will speak in conversation with Sarah Schleuning, the High Museum's curator of decorative arts and design, in the High's Hill Auditorium on February 17 at 4:30 p.m.*

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