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FUSION POINT

High style meets high tech in the groundbreaking creations of Dutch designer Joris Laarman



Growing up in rural Holland, Joris Laarman was an unexceptional student who was distinctly drawn to "the creative stuff," as he puts it. "My school reports would say, 'Very good at fantasy and writing and drawing,' and the rest was average. I was always a bit of a dreamer, I guess."

Following a brief stint at art school and five years at the prestigious Design Academy Eindhoven, Laarman has spent the past decade dreaming up mind-blowing furnishings that blur the boundaries between technology, nature, and art. Often based on algorithms or complex forms in the natural world, his works implement cutting-edge ideas to create strikingly beautiful objects. He's designed tables modeled on a flock of starlings in flight and, most recently, he devised metal bookcases in which the shelves are partially distorted into gorgeously scrolling waves, replicating the swirls that result when fluids interact. "I need to have a logic behind the aesthetics," Laarman says.

The bookshelves, known as the Vortex series, are featured in a much-anticipated show of Laarman's latest works currently at the Friedman Benda Gallery in New York, through June 14. Also on view are an undulating stainless-steel bench fabricated by a metal-printing robot and a dozen of Laarman's Makerchairs, which are composed from unique sets of puzzlelike pieces, some in traditional materials such as walnut (cut by a computer-controlled mill) and others in 3-D-printed plastics. "There is a symbiosis between craftsmanship and digital tools," Laarman says. "It's not industrial, it's not handmade, but something in between."

Laarman calls his Amsterdam atelier a lab, and he runs it like an experimental playground. Programmers crunch lines of code on computers, assistants meticulously construct chairs from 3-D-printed parts, and engineers tinker with a robotic arm. One of the most exciting new toys Laarman and his team have pioneered is a robot that functions like a

From top: At his Amsterdam studio, Joris Laarman perches next to one of his Makerchairs, the Diamond Checker model, which is assembled from maple components cut by a computer-controlled mill. A rendering of the oak Polygon Makerchair. One of the designer's Dark Matter tables, made from a composite of Noir Belge-marble powder and resin.



From top: A metal table from Laarman's Bone furniture series, in the office of fashion designer Reed Krakoff. Tools used to shape the laminated-metal shelves of Vortex bookcases. A rendering of a finished piece from the series, whose scrolling forms mimic those created when fluids interact. The Maze Makerchair, rendered in maple and walnut.



real-life version of *Harold and the Purple Crayon*, capable of drawing freestanding objects without using support structures and eliminating the need for molds. Utilizing a process akin to soldering, the machine prints metal rods, gradually building intricate pieces that can be polished and refined by hand. Laarman envisions a future where local workshops make objects to order using similar technologies.

"Joris is able to recognize incredible advancements in other disciplines and apply them to his designs," says Ronald

Labaco, a curator at New York's Museum of Arts and Design. Labaco has included an example of Laarman's most famous work, the 2006 Bone chair, in the exhibition "Out of Hand: Materializing the Postdigital," open through June 1. Cast in various materials using 3-D-printed molds, the Bone furniture marked a flash point in history: the moment when a designer's imagination took its cues from a digital algorithm—specifically, one set up to mimic how nature would construct an object for optimal strength and efficiency of form. The results are dazzling. "Every chair from that line is aesthetically considered, not only in the materials but in the harmony of the composition," Labaco says.

Laarman is a star among collectors as well as curators—his work is coveted by such tastemaking figures as Reed Krakoff, Michael Ovit, and Dakis Joannou. "Joris is a true leader," Krakoff says. "He seamlessly melds technology with artisanal techniques and has the sensitivity of a poet. He creates things that defy categorization."

As Laarman is quick to explain, he's not interested in only making extreme (and expensive) pieces for wealthy patrons. And while he has designed products for brands like Flos and Droog, he prefers to work independently. Increasingly his focus is on the possibilities of 3-D printing. Coinciding with the Friedman Benda show, Laarman is offering the plans for one of his Makerchairs free online. Meaning that rather than buying a chair from the gallery, anyone with a 3-D

printer can, in theory, create one at home—though time and printer quality are concerns. "The printing is pretty slow, but you can do it for less than \$50," Laarman says.

The designer sees parallels between his generation and the early modernists, who also embraced new technologies to transform the way objects are made and sold. "They worked with industrial machines and the potential of standardization, while we grew up with digital machines," Laarman says. "We're in a similar period. You see the same sort of optimism." jorislaarman.com and friedmanbenda.com —DAN RUBINSTEIN