



# WITH THEIR RAMBUNCTIOUS FAUX NAÏF AESTHETIC, YOUNG MAKERS ARE CHANGING THE WAY WE THINK ABOUT DESIGN

Following in the footsteps of Italian master Gaetano Pesce, these mostly millennial talents are embracing an intentionally imperfect style with wildly creative results.

by Marisa Bartolucci | February 3, 2019

Consider Katie Stout's Butt to Butt resin chair in the form of an ungainly blue-hued woman with scarlet nipples and lips lolling in a shoulder stand. Or Chris Schanck's Banglatown, a luxe gold-foil cabinet with bronze shelving that resembles an improvised Bengali bean trellis, complete with scarecrow. Or Sang Hoon Kim's foam sofa, a settee with a molten surface that evokes a cosmic eruption, leavened out of splashes of memory foam in rich yellows and blues.

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Katie Stout's cheeky Girl stool, a cousin of her Butt to Butt chair, is fabricated from upholstery, fiberglass and resin (photo courtesy of R & Company). Top: Misha Kahn's Platypus Akimbo lamp lurks in the corner of his Brooklyn apartment. The wall mirror and side table are also his own designs. Photo by Annie Schlechter, from *May I Come In?* by Wendy Goodman (Abrams)

Or, finally, Misha Kahn's Scrappy cabinet, a misshapen bureau with a pataphysical presence, woven together out of grass, trash and bits of stained glass. This is but a sampling of works by a band of mostly millennial makers who, having recently cropped up on both sides of the Atlantic, and the Pacific too, are poking, prodding and, dare I say, disrupting our notions of furniture, sculpture, art and design. "They're the heirs of Gaetano Pesce," says Marc Benda, of New York's Friedman Benda gallery, which has shown such stellar names as Ettore Sottsass and Ron Arad over the years and today represents Schanck and Kahn, among others. Some 40 years ago, Pesce set out to research the artistic potential of foam and resin, producing furnishings that ranged from the surprisingly sensual to the shockingly gory. He was part of a postwar

generation of socially idealistic and politically minded young Italian designers who proposed a new domestic landscape of meaningful objects in response to a crass and burgeoning consumer culture, which they feared might spell humanity's doom. Support for their movement came from Italy's own culturally ambitious design industry.

Today, it's a different story. Living in an age of political absurdity, on a planet drowning in plastic waste from a now-turbocharged global consumer culture and threatened by apocalyptic climate change, most members of the new design wave insist they have no other agenda than freewheeling creation. To see their work as a movement is just "passé," claims Zeynep Rekkali, the director of Etages Projects, in Copenhagen, which represents some of the most gifted and provocative European designers, like the Hyères, France-based duo known as Superpoly and Barcelona's

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Guillermo Santomà. "When they come together for collaboration," she says, "what unites them is a common ground of production, as their styles are very different." Backing for their explorations comes not from industry but from a growing network of galleries, themselves funded by an ever-proliferating, globe-trotting tribe of collectors eager to experience — not to mention possess — newfangled domestic environments.

"One of the first pieces I procured from Misha was a twisted and candy-colored concrete stool, which wound up in the Park Avenue master bedroom of a very chic sheikha," says the New York-based designer Kelly Behun, whose directional interiors have earned her a spot on the AD100. "I used a bronze coffee table of his in a beautiful West Village townhouse next to a Pierre Chateau sofa, and I just commissioned him to make an insanely tall Scrappy for me, because why should my clients have all the fun?"

"Sloppy craft" is how design curator, critic and scholar Glenn Adamson labels this work. He coined the term in 2009 to describe nascent currents in ceramics and fine art, but then the aesthetic appeared in the design world too. Intriguingly, ceramics and other traditional craft materials and methods are much in favor among these designers, who also tend to limit their tools to the most elementary. "I'm basically against machines," the 35-year-old Santomà, known for compellingly deconstructed seats, tables and lighting fixtures, told the magazine *Ignant* last year. "Having only three of them forces me to be very creative and establish strange collaborations with my own tools, to use them in a different manner every time."

In fact, it's Adamson's theory that these young talents are reacting against digitized design, work produced through the often soulless technological wonders of 3-D printing and CNC milling, which he contends removes creators "from the physical, sensual pleasures of making." That was the experience of the 40-year-old Seoul-based Kim, who is represented by Cristina Grajales Gallery, in New York. He had earned acclaim soon after graduating from Michigan's Cranbrook Academy, in 2009, for his undulating ribbed room dividers and tables but grew tired of their digitally achieved geometric perfection. So while working at the foam factory that has been owned by his family for three generations, he turned his research to the creative potential of memory foam. Kim likens making his sofas and chaise longues, with their Jackson Pollock-like color-mottled surfaces, to "modeling with clay or drawing pictures without any formalities" and says the material's "uniqueness, that it's produced through chemical reactions that I can control, makes it ideal for creative

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expression." He notes, too, that it is neither toxic nor polluting — issues about which this generation, agenda or not, has a deep, and real, concern.

If the work's artless, imperfect quality causes some to wince, that's intentional. "These makers have dispensed with any resolved aesthetic vision," says Adamson. "It's open-ended, which is a very contemporary point of view." Yet what might appear a careless approach to making is in fact quite calculated and possesses a real, if veiled, criticality. Which may be why "faux naïf," rather than "sloppy craft," is a more fitting descriptor for this work, especially as fakery has become so evocative of these times.

Stout and Kahn, both 29 and based in Brooklyn, were in the same class of furniture majors at RISD. That's where "they developed their related but different visions," says John Dunnigan, who was their thesis professor. He is quick to note that, while both "are irreverent, always pushing it, they are not irreverent people." The senior program is "very intentional. It's about collaboration and demonstrating a world-consciousness," Dunnigan explains, adding that students are required to "create their own unique vision and put that in the context of citizenship."

Zesty Meyers, one of the principals of R & Company, which represents Stout, likens this emergent aesthetic to Dada and points out that an expanding market has pushed the bounds of taste. "Today, there's global access to design," he says. "The world is mashing up as never before, and a new sensibility about beauty is developing."

So, too, is a new definition of what it means to be a designer. Although Kahn's pieces appear naïf, he's quite philosophical about them, even theorizing about their thoughts and feelings. That may sound a bit loony, but in fact, object-oriented ontology is quite a buzzy theory within the contemporary art world. Kahn is especially intrigued by how an object's sense of being might affect those who eventually live with it.

That Stout is a woman who is self-admittedly silly and also clearly fearless, not to mention astoundingly self-possessed, adds a bracingly fresh dimension to her practice. She's advancing the female form far beyond the male gaze. In addition to her inverted-lady chair, she has sculpted a collection of polychrome ceramic gals who pose in the buff while holding, variously, lamps and mirrors. These wanton lasses are as evocative of the "Nanas" of Niki de Saint Phalle as they are of Lena Dunham's Hannah Horvath in *Girls*. In this era of #metoo, they promise a world where "girls" can just have good, clean, naked fun.

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Other works by Stout speak to how digital communications pervade our reality. She titled a cumbersome-looking wood desk and accompanying stool *Swipe Right* because she made it with a woodworker she met on Tinder. No romance resulted, but a design object did.

The French Riviera has long been known as a land of uninhibited cavorting, and Antoine Grulier, 28, and Thomas Defour, 26, of Superpoly, have developed a creative practice that draws on that liberated spirit, not to mention the colors of Henri Matisse, the zaniness of Vallauris ceramics and the kitschy exuberance endemic to all seaside resorts. Trained as an architect, and a skilled cabinetmaker, Defour makes simple wood furnishings complicated by special drawers and lift tops, which Grulier, a gifted painter, adorns with cartoony sea imagery in a tumultuous mix of pastel hues. He also makes similarly fulsome tiles and textiles. And together they fashion pillows and mirror frames out of stuffed cotton octopuses, starfish and other marine animals. Their amalgam of skills has made the duo especially good at creating immersive environments, which they've done for Silvia Fiorucci-Roman's 5Rooms project and a guest room at the boutique art hotel La Reine Jane, both in Hyères.

Octopuses seem to be something of a leitmotif among this group, as are immersive environments. In 2017, Kahn presented a seascape installation at Friedman Benda titled *Midden Heap*, the term for the elaborate pile of food scraps the great Pacific octopus arranges around its nest. He collected dreck from Dead Horse Bay, near Rockaway Beach, in Queens, where one of New York's landfills is located, to make cabinets, tables, seats and chandeliers in the forms of fantastical aquatic creatures. What captivated him most during his rummaging was the way the rubbish seemed to mimic the natural world. As he told *TL* magazine: "Clusters of bags had been so entangled with each other that they now looked like kelp. A toilet seat became a textured shell, shards of broken bottles became so wobbly and deformed they looked like translucent calamari." Although Kahn sees parallels in this transformation with the creative process, it's hard not to also detect an underlying commentary on consumer culture's catastrophic impact on the environment. Will we all end up adorning our homes with debris?

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Misha Kahn lounges in his 2017 installation *Midden Heap*, at Friedman Benda Gallery. Photo courtesy of Friedman Benda and Misha Kahn

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That's how Santomà furnished his dining room. The architect-turned-furniture-maker melted the backs of a series of generic Monobloc chairs into distinctive shapes and then painted them and the space's walls the same Pepto-Bismol pink as his future-forward dining table. "Destroying things," Santomà has said, "is essential for the artist to be able to create." Color is particularly important to him, as it is to so many in this group. Two years ago, he created a series of sculptures inspired by the squiggly shapes that his young son had made out of Play-Doh. After fashioning his own versions, he had them 3-D scanned into furniture-size forms, then carved out of foam by a CNC mill and sprayed with automotive paint. Despite resembling neon-colored turds, they are surprisingly compelling.

Castoffs and vivid hues are part of the enticing design vocabulary of Chris Schanck, who, at 44, is an elder among these aesthetic rebels. It was as a graduate student in 3-D design at Cranbrook that the Detroit-based designer developed his signature Alufoil series of furnishings, which are constructed out of packing foam and various scrap materials, encased in aluminum foil and coated in resin. Aluminum is a "family material" for Schanck, as foam is for Kim (who happens to be a friend of his from Cranbrook). Schanck's brother and father worked in an aluminum-manufacturing plant, where he also hired on during summers in high school and became fascinated by the metal's production process and applications.

The Motown glitter and edgy shapes of the Alufoil pieces quickly made Schanck a darling of such tony tastemakers as architect Peter Marino and designer Bill Sofield. But what Schanck believes makes these weird works so curiously alluring is the tension between their simultaneous existence as artwork and as design object, a tension that for him ignites an "experience." His work also possesses a layer of significance beyond the sparkle: Based in Detroit, his design production has evolved into a kind of social practice, an artistic medium that took root in the city during its years of financial collapse. Having set up shop originally at his home, in the Bangladeshi neighborhood known as Banglatown, he recruited local Bengali women to help with his fabricating, and their culture and assimilation experiences have over the years accreted into pieces like his Banglatown cabinet. In fact, Schanck is unabashed in calling his work a response to late-stage capitalism.

If there is an almost Marxian slant to his corpus, it hasn't dissuaded collectors. One adventurous admirer commissioned him to design all the furnishings and fittings for a bathroom, pushing him to experiment with bronze finishes that he'd never before employed. Another client contracted with him to provide chairs for an enormous

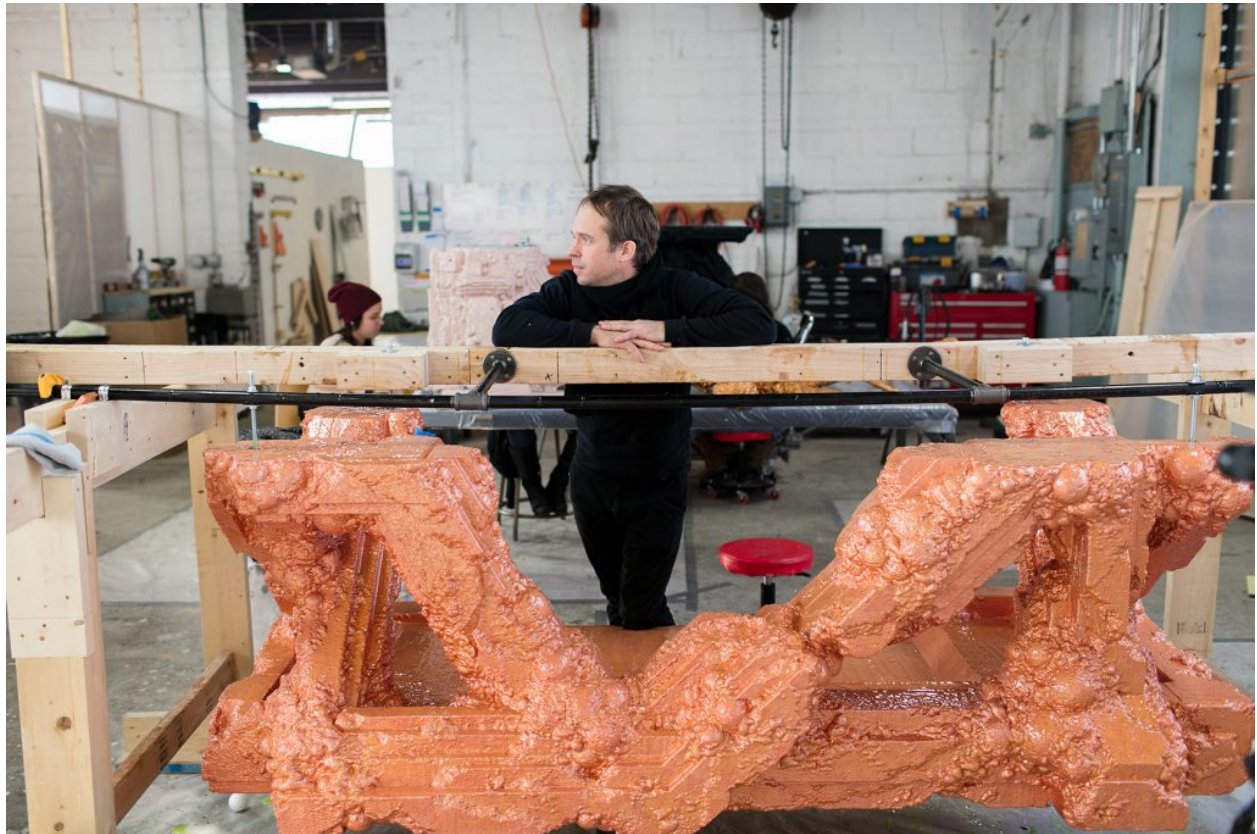
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dining table he had produced earlier. Drawing inspiration from his Cranbrook roots, Schanck acquired 40 vintage Tulip chairs by Eero Saarinen, who not only attended the school and grew up nearby but whose illustrious architect father, Eliel, was its longtime dean. Schanck then made individual cutouts in each of the chairs, filled them with carbon fiber and covered the high-tech material with purple flocking flecked with gold leaf, thoroughly upending its tasteful mid-century modern design.



Chris Schanck creates his signature Alufoil pieces — made from packing foam and other materials covered in resin-coated aluminum foil — in his Detroit studio. Photo by Michelle and Chris Gerard, courtesy of Friedman Benda and Chris Schanck

If all these insurgent furnishings don't compose a movement, they certainly signal that a new zeitgeist has permeated contemporary creation. It's rude, brilliant, wily, rambunctious and sometimes just plain gonzo and speaks difficult truths about the world and its trajectory. You can't get more collectible than that.

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