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sophisticated

sense

Artful dodger

Ron Arad's raison d'être

words : eator sparks



AYDR (at your own risk), 1991,
polished steel with lead weights, photo
by Erik Hesmerg; image courtesy of
Friedman Benda Gallery New York

portrait of Ron Arad
by Graeme Montgomery/CLM,
courtesy of Trunk Archive

"Ron likes to play. He always finds the secret hook that allows him to subvert the process and make it into something much more interesting and unexpected."

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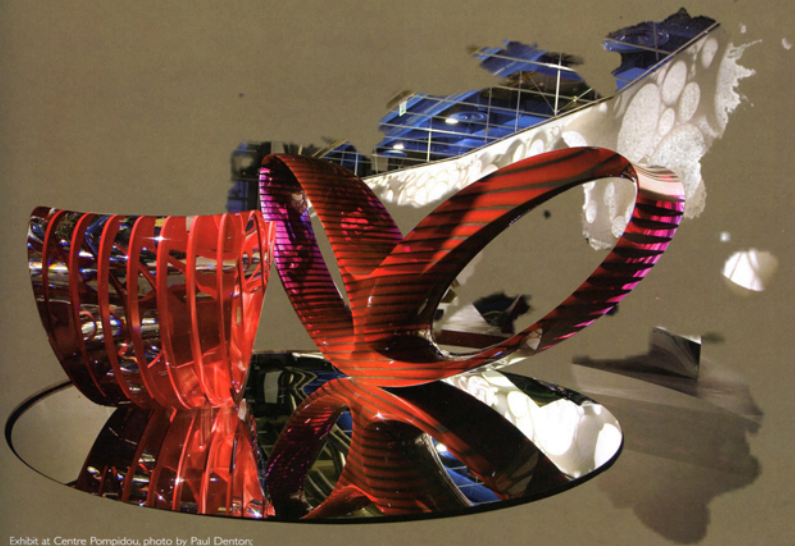


Exhibit at Centre Pompidou, photo by Paul Denton;
Image courtesy of Friedman Benda Gallery New York

For the past 25 years, Ron Arad has been blessing the design world with his art, furniture, architecture and sculpture, to the delight and bewilderment of many curators and customers. How exactly does one sit in one of those amorphous aluminum chairs? According to Arad, quite easily: "Practicality may be secondary, but not functionality."

Arad's *raison d'être* is being fully explained in a traveling exhibit that kicked off at the Centre Pompidou in Paris last November (making its way to MoMA New York in June and Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 2010). This exhibition is as profound as it is rare, in that a "designer" actually presents such a show in museums more known for art than architecture and design. Included in the exhibit are prototypes, drawings and original works that have solidified Arad's stature in the design world.

But don't expect the same cookie-cutter installation in every city. The curatorial teams in each museum will be remixing the exhibit with Arad, so that every opening will reveal new objects and a new look.

Paola Antonelli, senior curator of MoMA's Department of Architecture and Design, is looking forward to the challenge. "Ron likes to play. He always finds the secret hook that allows him to subvert the process—of a conversation, of a design exercise, of a student's application interview, of an exhibition plan—and make it into something much more interesting and unexpected." She continues, "Working with him is challenging, never boring, and always a gift. The exhibition at MoMA will reflect all this and will feature not only great design, but also great humor and great passion."

"Practicality may be secondary, but not functionality!"



Bodyguard, 2008, Polished aluminum,
photo by Jon Laim

The installations cover handcrafted pieces made personally by Arad as well as industry-manufactured products, and it is interesting to see the evolution and sometime correlation between the two. As he explains, "Sometimes the studio pieces are the laboratory for pieces that are made for mass production, but very rarely is it the opposite."

On opening night at the Pompidou, Arad's sculptures were not the only things sparking: a smattering of celebrities attended, too. Kanye West, a modern art connoisseur himself, took a spin around the exhibit before congratulating the designer. The exhibit was designed entirely by Arad, resulting in a fantasyland of luminous objects, plasma screens and reconstructed rooms.

Also present was an identical reproduction of his foyer and staircase for the Tel Aviv Opera House, where he projected a film about the Holon Design Museum—also located in Israel—that he is currently working on. Another installation was cleverly configured to lure passers-by off the street: a pile of tubes in a variety of sizes,

arranged to house pieces from Arad's mass-produced lines. The retrospective clearly shows his fluidity between design and architecture: "With industrial design and architecture there are no division lines for me," says Arad. "Some architectural projects get the same freedom as the design pieces; they certainly feed on each other. One thing can certainly lead to something else!"

As if the retrospective were not enough of an insight into Arad's world, the Friedman Benda Gallery in New York exhibited, for the first time, his new works in a show titled *Guarded Thoughts*. The fall show was comprised of works that addressed experimentation with materials and the manipulation of volume and mass in sculptural seating pieces. The show also exhibited a sleek and amusing ping-pong table made out of blown aluminum, stainless steel, and fiberglass. *Southern Hemisphere*, however, was the talk of the show, lending an almost phallic *Clockwork Orange* vibe to the exhibit—Arad actually encouraged people to straddle and rock in these sculptural designs on opening night. Shown as a corollary to the



Bodyguard, 2008, polished and patinated aluminum,
photo by Jon Lam

Afterthought, 2007, patinated aluminum,
photo by Erik Hesmerg

Pompidou show, they symbolize where his mind is at present: moving away from series pieces in favor of unique pieces and hands-on experimentation with new ideas. The resultant works are much more architectural, responding to the large, more broad-based projects currently in the works inside his London studio.

As Arad—a man who has created everything from Vitra seating to chandeliers that incorporate SMS messaging—says himself, he is hard to pigeonhole: “I invented my profession and never followed anyone else’s route.” Most people cross over from industrial design to something like limited-edition pieces. For Arad, it was the opposite. He got sucked into industrial design after his studio pieces captured the attention of major furniture companies.

Born in Tel Aviv in 1951, Arad studied at the Jerusalem Academy of Art before moving to London, where he enrolled at the Architectural Association School of Architecture. Since then, he has called London home, founding the Ron Arad Studio in 1994. From

this studio, he has continually experimented and pushed the limits with furniture design. It is also where he blossomed as an architect, receiving commissions from Selfridges, Yohji Yamamoto, and Belgo restaurants in London. Currently, he is the professor of Industrial and Furniture Design at the Royal College of Art.

Besides being known for his sculptural furniture, Arad is respected as a major pioneer on the technological front. For years, he has researched, experimented with, and utilized the latest technology, including rapid-prototyping, selective laser sintering, and stereolithography. But all of this must be kept in check when admiring the objects themselves. As Arad is quick to point out, “People should be more interested in the piece itself than the technology.”

Although the retrospective is a great honor, Arad continues to look toward the future. When asked about his new work, he replies, “It speaks about now of course! Every piece for the past 25 years has always been current and relevant for its time.”