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DESIGN BOOKS

Culture



Joris Laarman, right, and two Bone Chairs, the first product of the designer's work with 3D optimization software. Other designs include Heat Wave, a radiator made from swirls of concrete, left, and Bridge Table and Asimov Chair, above. Below, a robot producing miniature Asimov Chairs at the "Joris Laarman Lab" exhibition at the Friedman Benda gallery.

From lab to life, the 'new world'

AMSTERDAM

With the help of robots, Joris Laarman injects science into his work

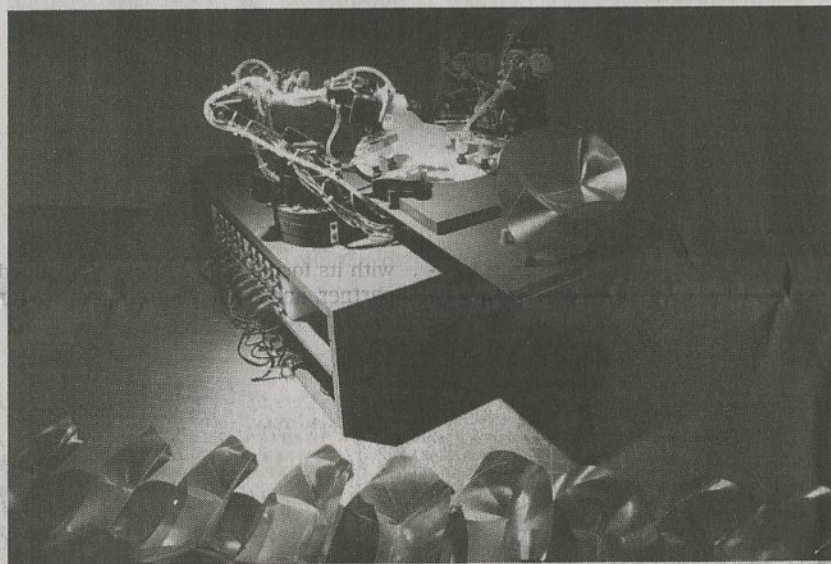
BY ALICE RAWSTHORN

Day after day, the robot folds a slender sheet of steel in exactly the right places and applies exactly the right pressure to make a chair. As the robot is tiny so is the chair, but, if all goes well, the same process may soon be used to produce "real" furniture.

"It's a super-efficient way of making things," said Joris Laarman, the young Dutch designer who hatched the project. "The software is so precise that you can tell the robot how to fold the material into complex shapes with the right amount of force so it doesn't break or bend the wrong way. We should be able to program the robots to make other things, too, and to use other materials, like plastics. It could create a new world of objects."

For now, the "baby" robot is doing its stuff in an exhibition of Mr. Laarman's work at Friedman Benda, a design gallery in New York. The title sums up the show perfectly — "Joris Laarman Lab" — because it features some of the experiments that he and a couple of dozen collaborators are conducting at his studio-cum-laboratory in an industrial area of Amsterdam.

As well as the robot, there is a prototype of a bioluminescent lamp they are developing with a team of tissue gener-



JORIS LAARMAN STUDIO

ation specialists from a Dutch university. By infusing a Chinese hamster's cells with a firefly's luciferase gene, they hope to make the lamp glow. Then there is the furniture made from a form of 3D optimization software that simulates bone growth.

Not all of the experiments work, at least, not yet. Mr. Laarman had hoped to include a working model of the bioluminescent lamp, only to realize that a) it was too fragile to ship to New York and b) U.S. Customs might not welcome the arrival of the genetically modified remnants of a rodent and insect. But that's the point. It's the thrill of experimenting with new scientific theories and technologies that motivates him.

"Joris is certainly a gifted designer, but what makes him truly special is how inquisitive he is about biology, software and materials," said Paola Antonelli, senior curator of design at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. "The objects he designs exist as pretexts for his experiments. He belongs to the new breed of restless designers that long to be infected by science."

He isn't alone. Design and science have always been intertwined. Throughout history, designers have striven to translate scientific advances — from electricity, to the World Wide Web — into things that are useful or entertaining for the rest of us. So many innovations are now emerging from re-

search laboratories that science seems particularly seductive to many designers, especially young ones.

Ms. Antonelli set the agenda in "Design and the Elastic Mind," the blockbuster show she curated at MoMA in 2008. It included the Bone Chair, the first product of Mr. Laarman's work with 3D optimization software. Scientific experimentation contributed to some of the projects in "Design by Performance," an exhibition that opened Sunday at the Z33 gallery in Hasselt, Belgium. It also is the central theme of "IMPACT!," which is to open Tuesday at the Royal College of Art in London to present recent collaborations between its students and science researchers.

Many of the current crop of science-obsessed designers are seeking to translate scientific advances into practical solutions to urgent problems, such as helping us to live more sustainably, but Mr. Laarman's approach is more old-fashioned. He is interested in science's aesthetic potential. "I don't have an ethical agenda," he explained. "I just want to create objects of beauty and poetry."

Unfashionable though this may be, at a time when design is dominated by social and environmental concerns, it has an obvious appeal to "design-art" collectors, who tend to share his prefer-

ence for aesthetics over ethics. Their support has treated Mr. Laarman, now 30, but so boyish that stewards still ask to see proof of his age before serving him alcohol on airplanes, to a charmed career.

Having been "a really bad student," as he put it, in his first few years at Design Academy Eindhoven in the Netherlands, he redeemed himself with his graduation project. It was Heat Wave, a radiator made from rococo swirls of concrete. The ornate styling and inspired choice of material (concrete conducts heat more efficiently than metal) produced what Annemartine Van Kesteren, a curator at the Boijmans Museum in Rotterdam, calls "a superb combination of functionality and uplifting aesthetics."

It made his name, though not quite as he'd hoped. "For three years I was the 'rococo guy,'" even though the radiator was so not about rococo," he groaned. "Oh man, I had so many approaches to do rococo things."

Luckily for him, he could afford to say "no." Thanks to the Dutch government's grants for young designers, he was able to wait for the right approaches. One came from a scientist who'd bought Heat Wave and suggested that they collaborate. This led to the ex-

periments with 3D optimization software and genetic modification.

"There are so many great ideas being developed in university laboratories that stay there," said Mr. Laarman. "I want the studio to grow into a sort of laboratory by doing the experiments that the universities don't want to do. It should be a place where other designers can produce pieces on a small scale and where I can translate certain ideas into industrial production."

He has already started by adapting the formal language of the Bone series for mass-manufactured products, a light for Flos and a chair for Vitra, both of which should be completed next year.

"Those industrial projects are much more difficult and demanding than the experimental ones," he said. "I've been working on the Vitra chair for two years, constantly adjusting details to meet their constraints. But I like the extremes of doing super-experimental work for a gallery and super-industrial work for super-industrial companies."

"What happens in between isn't really very interesting to me."

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