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ART + AUCTION

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JORIS LAARMAN

THE DUTCH WUNDERKIND APPLIES CUTTING-EDGE SCIENCE TO REALIZE GRACEFUL DESIGNS

BY NICOLAI HARTVIG PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANGUS R. SHAMAL

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JORIS LAARMAN IS NAVIGATING a noisy basement where a figure clad in a hazmat suit is blending custom-made cellulose behind plastic sheeting. Another worker is busy with power tools, and a third is manning an enormous mechanical arm that is polishing a new piece of furniture.

“Do you know *Breaking Bad*?” the 32-year-old Dutch designer asks. “We’re cooking.” Part of the workshop does indeed resemble Walter White’s meth lab on the AMC television series—and aggressive volatile chemicals are in use. As Laarman delivers his punch line, the industrial-scale polisher sends water cascading across the floor. “It’s safe,” he assures me. “Still...we should move out.”

Housed in a 1950s former textile factory in a rough-and-tumble neighborhood on Amsterdam’s west side, the Joris Laarman Lab, as it is aptly named, produces furniture that takes more inspiration from cutting-edge mathematics and science than from classic design movements. Laarman himself exudes a slick geek vibe, dressed in dyed G-Star jeans, with his hair gelled surfer-wet, and making abundant use of the word “cool.” He could easily pass for a Silicon Valley start-up hipster.

Laarman’s trajectory likewise mirrors the overnight success of those nerds-turned-tech-heroes of the dot-com world. For his final project at the Design Academy Eindhoven, in

Below: The Bone chair is cast in one piece and carved down using an algorithm based on cellular growth. Opposite: Joris Laarman sits in a Bone armchair in his “lab”; a prototype of his Megavoxel table, 2011, built using a robot of his design, is behind him.



JORIS LAARMAN LAB

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Top: Miniature models of Laarman's Asimov chair, Bone rocker, Half Life lamp, and Bone chair populate spare surfaces. Below: The Heatwave radiator, 2003, part of Laarman's final project at the Design Academy Eindhoven, launched a small revolution in the Dutch design world.

2003, Laarman created the Heatwave radiator, an electric wall-mounted heater with scrolling rococo shapes in fiber-reinforced concrete. Dutch design heavyweight Droog optioned it for production, and it has been exhibited worldwide. "I always wanted to do something totally over-the-top," says Laarman of the Heatwave, sitting behind his desk in a loft-style office dotted with his designs, scale models, and slabs of experimental materials. "I wanted to work with style as a reference within the work itself. Everyone was doing conceptual work that was never actually made or sold. And there was a long, historic discussion in design about how ornament is bad." Sotheby's sold a prototype of the Heatwave radiator for \$33,750 in its June 2009 sale of important 20th-century design in New York, the only time a Laarman piece has been offered at auction. The Droog-produced models, now sold out, cost €6,850 (\$7,500).

The Heatwave sparked a small burst of rococo design, notably propagated by Marcel Wanders, in the mid-2000s. Moreover, Laarman became identified with a crop of young creators, alongside Maarten Baas and Christien Meindertsma, who broke with the Minimalist and Conceptual aspects of Dutch design. "The Dutch design world was an institution, with Droog as its head. But we kicked it open. Everyone was so fed up, we just went in every direction," he says, adding that the Heatwave project was intended as a statement that modernist functionality and postmodern effusiveness were not mutually exclusive. "Nobody understood it,"

he recalls, "but it doesn't matter. It gave me the opportunity to start out."

Since then, Laarman has become increasingly difficult to place in the design world. Aesthetically his work hints at



the organic forms that Art Nouveau designers like Henry van de Velde and Antoni Gaudí incorporated into their work. The Bone chair—perhaps Laarman's most famous work to date—is reminiscent of the sinuous curves of a stripped-down Emile-Jacques Ruhlmann armchair but was drawn from an algorithm mimicking essential bone and tree growth, which had been used by the German carmaker Opel. His Leaf and Bridge tables reprise the elements from nature. And whereas the modernists made industrial designs by hand, Laarman mines the latest scientific and technological advances to create something that only happens to look organic. "I really don't care about organic design, and anyway, we're so used to the language of industrial form that we can hardly tell what is industrially made and what is not," says Laarman. "I hope not to be stuck to any formal language."

There is little risk of that happening. Laarman's work, deliberate but utterly unpredictable, may be best described as design that is genetically modified—physically as well as conceptually. At the High Museum of Art in Atlanta last year, the designer presented a Super Mario-inspired rococo table built by robots of his design from little Lego-style blocks called voxels, which scientists at MIT and Cornell are developing as a future key to biomedical construction. The robots were programmed to replicate a digital model using the voxels like three-dimensional pixels. After a few repairs (the table was damaged in »

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BOTTOM: JORIS LAARMAN LAB

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From top: Laarman and Tim Geurtjens "cooking" cellulose in the workshop; a prototype for a Starlings table, 2010, based on the birds' unique flocking patterns.

transport) it will travel to the Groninger Museum in Groningen, the Netherlands. Laarman also shows me his Half Life lamp. Its glass frame, in the shape of a bell jar, holds a classic table lamp with Daniel Buren-esque stripes, lit by a bioluminescent material—culled from hamster cells modified with firefly genes—developed at the University of Twente. Laarman had planned to present it in Atlanta, but since the USDA takes exception to imports of genetically modified organisms, “we had to let it die,” he explains. He still showed the dead lamp—as *Half Life Preserved*. The electronics manufacturer Phillips recently began working on similar materials after a visit by the professor who helped Laarman develop his lamp.

Largely self-schooled in the sciences, Laarman views himself as a kind of emissary of the research taking place in university labs. “I’m always stunned by what I see there, and I’d like to communicate what is done. Not a lot of people know or understand what happens behind the universities’ doors, so it’s nice to see it in an object,” he says. The volatile cellulose down in the basement, for example, is tentatively slated for furniture that could expand when hydrated with water or another substance. A chunk of white, slightly translucent, textured ceramic that looks a bit like a cloud sits on his desk. “It’s a great alternative to brick,” he explains. “It expands in the kiln, and you can make very accurate shapes with it. You can glaze it or cut it like bread. It’s one-eighth the weight of the lightest brick on earth, and it’s a great insulator. We calculated that it could save a regular brick factory about a quarter of its total annual energy consumption.” Long-term use could include affordable housing, but in the early stages it could be great for a bathtub, Laarman suggests. “You’re in this soap bubble and it keeps you warm for a long time.”

When Laarman does undertake projects of a more conceptual than technical nature, his agenda is no less intellectually curious. In an Eindhoven housing complex, visitors can take the stairs, the elevator, or the white blobs of Laarman’s climbing wall to reach the first floor. It’s a comment on freedom, the designer says. For a Greek collector, Laarman created a glass library tower containing exactly a gigabyte’s worth of books, about as many as the first Kindle could hold. “It’s sort of a monument to the book as a product on the verge of extinction,” he says, adding that “as a designer, you’re always split in between worlds. I would like to prove that the pieces that we invent can become useful to people.”

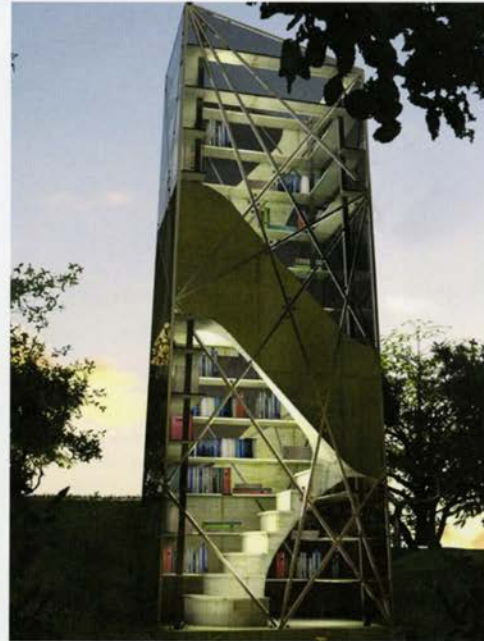
That democratic approach is a concept Laarman takes seriously, and it lies at the heart of his next grand venture: an online production center where designers worldwide can upload blueprints and be paired with nearby manufacturers that will build their designs. The MakeMe project is still on the drawing board, but Laarman is looking at a new space in Amsterdam’s northern industrial area, an undeveloped haven for creative enterprises since the world financial crisis curtailed plans for a high-rise skyline. “Very little of the technology coming to market is actually making something for the general public,” says »

FROM TOP: ANDRÉS R. SHAMAL; JORIS LAARMAN LAB

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From left: The Bronze Branch bookshelf, 2010, draws on a tree's natural growth patterns; a rendering of the Gigabyte bookcase, 2010, which Laarman conceived as a "monument to the book" in an age of digital readers.

Laarman, who predicts that a headquarters for MakeMe could become "one of the biggest workshops in Holland and a filter for all that is digitally manufactured."

MakeMe will also build on Laarman's scientific bent, bringing together the know-how of universities, individual craftsmen, and technology companies to develop new production methods. "Now all my experiments with furniture have an end goal," he says. "They are there not just for sculptural reasons, but for the knowledge that we can gain, put into the lab, and spin off into digital fabrication." The Bone chair could be a candidate for mass production, Laarman hints, if it can be made affordably. And it is "perhaps less over-the-top, so my mother would like to sit on it."

That blend of accessibility with technical innovation and intellectual rigor has earned the Bone chair a place in the permanent collections of both the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and the Rijksmuseum, in Amsterdam, where it is already considered an essential piece of Dutch heritage. "That's the coolest compliment you can get. Still, the piece has to prove itself, and hopefully it will be influential," says Laarman, touching on his yardstick of importance and utility. "That's what makes it worth something. Contemporary art is always so weird. Why it's worth what it's worth, I don't know."

Though he eschews the design-as-art movement—"If a piece of design is just a sculpture, then it's so empty," he scoffs—Laarman has nurtured relationships with both galleries and museums. He is represented by New York's Friedman Benda and sells through Carpenters Workshop in London and Paris, and six of seven pieces in the Bone

furniture line were recently shown at Kukje Gallery, in Seoul. In the workshop, a brand-new Bridge table with an unscratchable, mirrorlike tungsten-carbide top has just been finished. Laarman's works rarely are made in editions larger than eight, as is the case with this table. "Usually, the price is a balance between the cost of the piece and how much we can get for it," says the designer.

In 2009 Laarman proposed a concept for the 50th anniversary of the Guggenheim Museum in New York, wherein hundreds of paper planes shaped like starlings would flock and soar through the museum's famous rotunda; a simulation was exhibited in 2010 as part of the exhibition "Contemplating the Void." Laarman has since been working with MIT, the Dutch entertainment company USE, and the aerodynamics engineer David Lentink to develop what should become the "largest swarm of individually flying objects in the world." Several concerns have put the brakes on the project, however. If staged at the Guggenheim, the starlings would be a potential danger to the artworks, and each plane, controlled by an indoor GPS system, costs \$5,200. "It's a high price for maybe 15 minutes of joy, but it would be really beautiful," says Laarman, who hopes the toy industry will soon develop the technology, making it possible for the planes to be smaller, lighter, and cheaper.

Laarman's next museum foray is a traveling exhibition that will make its debut at the Groninger Museum in 2014. Echoing his dream of designing an entire house, the show will be built around nine unique spaces. "It could be boxed-in concepts, or the exhibition as boundary," says the designer, keeping his options open—as ever. ☐

FROM LEFT: JON LAM PHOTOGRAPHY; JORIS LAARMAN, AND FRIEDMAN BENDA, NEW YORK; JORIS LAARMAN LAB

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