

DESIGNED BY DETROIT

Christopher Schanck's ironic pursuits

MAX BORKA



Turning the debris of what was once the powerhouse of American industry into gold, Christopher Schanck does not wish for his furniture to be soft and serene or easy on the eye, but to pack a punch. He prefers making design to making art, although the number of ironies interwoven into his working approach means that his objects are the least characteristic of design as we know it. DAMN° caught up with Schanck during his recent show in a Brussels art gallery.



"I know it's crazy", says Christopher Schanck, "how I landed up here." Here is in the sumptuous offices of the Brussels branch of Almine Rech Gallery. Worn jeans and a sweatshirt – little betrays that this still boyish 40-something has been hailed as 'the art world's new design darling'. In the exhibition *Dans un Intérieur*, two of Schanck's shiny aluminium-foil chairs are situated amidst works by Max Lamb, Franz West, and Joep Van Lieshout, three enfants terribles who, like Schanck, are hard to classify. But that is precisely what this exhibition is about: blurring boundaries, and particularly the ones between design and art. Schanck lights up as he calls them his heroes, and also mentions the absence of Jerszy Seymour – missed because of his plea for a New Order, a return to zero-degree design, where anyone can rethink all of its fundamentals in an amateur way.

Not on show at Almine Rech is a series of photographs that Schanck took in the small, rundown, two-room corner store that he turned into his studio in Detroit. And that's a pity. For the images are at least as impressive as his furniture pieces. "I made them because I found it important to be clear and transparent about the process", explains Schanck. The images depict members of his community-based practice, alone or in pairs: people young and old, locals, students, ... all amateurs, from the young woman with bare legs to the Bangladeshis dressed in embroidered saris. Each is working on a piece of furniture: a pair of minty

green tables, a golden shelving unit, a gilt-edged mirror, and a monumental silver desk. Handmade pieces that take, on average, more than a year and a thousand man-hours to produce. An aura of great and meditative calm radiates from these pictures. "And there's indeed an extreme contrast between how we make these objects and where they end up", remarks Schanck, who was also recently commissioned to create a gilded reception counter for Tom Ford. "The two scenarios couldn't be further apart."

Talking about contrast: as luxurious and shiny as the pieces may look, they're essentially made out of cheap, discarded materials. Their signature component, aluminium foil, was not what one would normally think of using as a finish. Invisible behind the glittering surface hides a simple foam-covered aluminium structure, subsequently coated in polyurethane to keep it rigid. Then comes the foil, and then a coating of clear resin. "The pieces are essentially built like a layer cake, with none of the materials even being a good match for the others", informs Schanck. Sometimes the resin is coloured, sometimes it's the foil, but whatever the procedure, the blatant result invariably looks as if it were created by someone who is colour blind. "You might still call it beautiful", enthuses Schanck, laughing out loud, "but that certainly wasn't the intention. A polite piece of furniture is about the last thing I have in mind. It has to feel uncomfortable, like a kick in the stomach."

Schanck's portraits of the locals and students, members of his community-based practice, posing with the handmade ALUfoil furniture pieces that take, on average, more than a year and 1000 man-hours to produce (also previous spread)

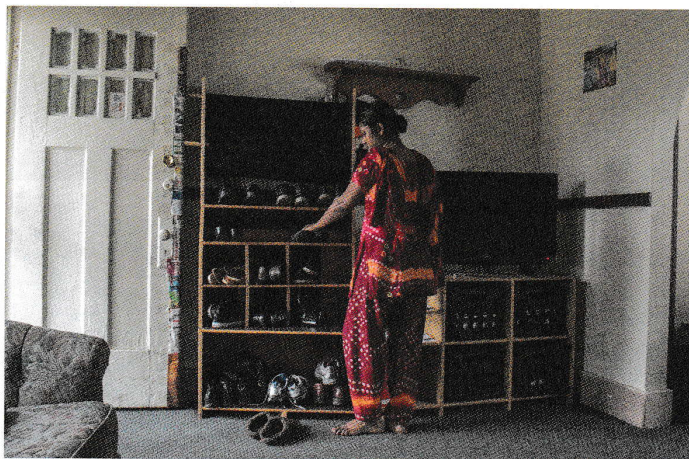


WHERE IS MY MIND?

The ALUfoil series came into being after Texas-born Schanck, who for nearly 15 years had been leading a rather inconspicuous life as an artist and model-maker in New York, moved to Detroit five years ago – the Motor City that had once been the powerhouse of American industry but is now a metropolis in ruins, destroyed by a capitalism in overdrive. The collection would also have been unthinkable without Detroit, says Schanck, not just because it could be read as an expression of Motown's tragic decay, but because it also celebrated the next generation's revolt against that downfall – on a continent where design is still primarily seen as a tool and a fool at the service of the industry; slick, glamorous, luxurious, good-looking, and highly seductive, or even simply practical, but also lethal and perilous, producing a sea of 'formes fatales' that promise us heaven but are a one-way ticket to its antipode: "There is no market in Detroit, and certainly no art market. And once art is no longer *motivated and shaped by market forces it becomes something different: it starts to grow into activism, community, and education. That's what's happening in Detroit.* While in other cities, like New York, artists might still come up with couch-conceptualism that is largely fictional, the actual context in Detroit is so powerful and extreme that all you can do is react to it. There are a lot of experiments happening there, because people have to be so resourceful. You are not



going to survive if you aren't. So, similar to what I saw happening in theatre, photography, and farming, *I wanted to make sculptures that you can touch and interact with. Which brought me to design. For much more than art, practicing design is a way to be part of the world. In the summer, the corner door of my studio is always open. People come in, ask what I'm doing, and immediately understand. Because it is a table, not a fucking painting. Bizarre as the pieces may seem to some, they are also shiny, colourful. So they pull them in, like hooks.*"



ABOUT-TURN

The same desire to turn his studio into a community practice was one of the reasons that kept Schanck from using industrial methods. "I wanted something anyone in the neighbourhood could do, while at the same time, the use of foil is also a perversion of the industry's obsession with the perfect surface." The fact that the former epicentre of American industry thus gave birth to furniture that turned into a worldwide success because of the way it totally refuted all principles of that very same industry, is only one of the 21st-century ironies that comes with the collection. The fact that the pieces don't land up in the houses of the neighbours who made them, but in galleries like Almine Rech, is another. Not that it bothers Schanck all too much: "One of the strengths of the work is that it is flexible and can take on every different kind of typology. And what I love about private collectors and clients is how they keep on pushing you into these new typologies. It's also a lot of fun when such an ob-

ject ends up in a Dior store. There are certainly more approachable interiors, but it's still a public space, where people can enter, interact with the work, and enjoy. That's also why I would like my work to become more architectural and monumental in future. I also see it becoming more sculptural and figurine. Stress-testing how far it can go, and pushing it to the point of failure. I already wanted to be fucking Rodin when I was a kid... And last but not least, I would love to go on with projects like Family, a project that was as important for me as the ALUfoil series, but that critics hardly noticed, and in which I tried to combine my work as a teacher with the work in my studio, such as by creating furniture for a neighbourhood Bangladeshi family with my students. You don't just design for a problem, but for people. And that makes all the difference."

christopherschanck.com

Family Furniture, a project that is as dear to Schanck as the ALUfoil series but largely remained unnoticed, in which he created customised furniture for a neighbourhood Bangladeshi family, together with LTU students.