

OUT OF THE WOODS AND ONTO THE SHELF

Returning to Texas, a Designer finds his Groove

**FURNITURE DESIGNER
MICHAEL GARMAN,**

FOUNDER of the Houston-based One3Creative and resident of The Woodlands, was honored with the Best Prototype award for his “Bnch” at this year’s Interior Design Show (IDS) held in Toronto. The annual juried contemporary design event is the largest of its kind in Canada, showcasing innovative international furniture design by 300 established and emerging artists. Garman, 30, was chosen by a jury composed of designer Gord Peteran; journalist Tim McKeough, a contributor to *Metropolis* and *The New York Times*; and Anne Vos, North American director of Moooi.

Constructed of Baltic birch plywood and hard maple, the bench’s characteristic feature is a set of juxtaposed cutaways into opposing corners. This disruption in an ordinary bench’s configuration refocuses the user’s attention while emphasizing the dynamics of the piece. Closer observation reveals that the insides of the legs and the underside of the seat all share the same geometry. The cutaways are therefore an extension of those components, resulting in a product of stunningly balanced proportions. The stacked pieces of production cutoffs ironically resemble the grains of exotic tropical woods, while also evoking the designer’s training as an architect and his experience in manipulating fine strips of wood when building models. This method requires few joints, allowing for a more homogeneous façade. Garman likens the exposure of the striations to a glimpse of a mountain cross-section, belying the piece’s inherently light profile and what the company’s website terms “contemporary warmth.”

When deciding on a winner among the 25 candidates for the Best Prototype award, the jury searched for products that featured a thoughtful design as well as the potential for easy production. All three of the jurors praised Garman for employing simple ideas and simple geometry—qualities often undervalued by young designers

and often the most difficult to realize. Elaborates McKeough, “I think that young designers are often tempted to overwork things because they feel like they haven’t done enough.” Not Garman, who argues that as a designer, “you have to keep the composition dynamic, but it must also be understood as a whole.”

Garman’s interest in furniture design evolved while he was pursuing a degree in architecture at the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence, where he explored concrete furniture construction in independent study courses. His graduation coincided with the economic downturn of the early 2000s. After a period of working various jobs in Boston including collaborating on live-vegetation green roofs, outfitting bespoke rooms for a prominent physician, and an experimental stint discovering the corporate retail culture of a “big box” home decorating store, Garman decided to return to Houston. He began work on his current furniture line in a shed attached to his family’s home in The Woodlands. Two years later, he launched a website for One3Creative, and his Bnch made headlines at IDS.

Working as an innovative furniture designer and trying to reach a large audience while based in Houston presents a distinct set of challenges and rewards. Garman cites the difficulties of locating others in the city’s stratified design community, which limits the stimulus that comes with sharing ideas and collaborating in comparison to a place

“Bnch,” Best Prototype at Toronto Interior Design Show; Michael Garman.

like Brooklyn. Because Houston is not a design mecca on the level of Copenhagen or Milan, the manufacturing resources also can be difficult to come by—a moot point for Garman, who remains committed to making each piece by hand in his studio. The designer, however, firmly believes in Houston’s growing population of design-conscious individuals who have a vested interest in pieces with clean lines—“without the studded Lone Stars”—and he views the city as an ideal base from which to expand to an international market.

Both the IDS jurors and Garman agree on the increasing irrelevance of which city a designer calls home, due to the rapid distribution of techniques and new products online. However, notes McKeough, this access to the newest trends may also make it hard for designers to “block out that noise and find inspiration in their own environment.” The forested neighborhood where Garman

grew up and his medium of choice may indeed be intertwined. Whether The Woodlands will emerge as the Weimar of the 21st century remains to be seen, but for the time being Houstonians may anticipate Garman’s further explorations in wood beyond the Bnch. And while he enters his work into competitions across the pond, he plans to keep his studio within the bounds of FM 1488. As the designer acknowledges, “I’m not 100 percent sure where I fit in yet. In general, I should have been born 40 years ago, maybe in some northern European city. But Texas is home.”

Michael Garman’s “Bnch” and other products from One3Creative are on view at Peel Gallery, Laura U Collection, and PerezCohen Gallery.

—Steven Thomson

