

Sit Down - The Process of Furniture Design

Gallery Z
259 Atwells Ave
Providence

March 18 through 29

The bones of well-designed furniture echo an era when everyday household articles had the artisan legacy missing from so much of today's mass-marketed, disposable clutter. Whether your taste runs towards Eames or IKEA, furniture assumes a significant role in our human experience. Exalted as art, or taken for granted, furniture supports our weight, articulates our space and offers a strong platform for the exploration of materials, engineering and object interaction.



Chair by George Dubinsky



Table by Kallie Weinkle



CHAIRS (installation shot)
by Annika Schmidt



Notirondack Chairs 2007
by Zeke Leonard

Fans of deliberate design and articulated process have reason to focus their lens on Providence, for the students of the Rhode Island School of Design's (RISD) renowned furniture design program are revealing the secrets behind their work in an interactive exhibit at Gallery Z, located in the neighborhood of Federal Hill. Curated by RISD senior Kallie Weinkle, "Sit Down - The Process of Furniture Design" features the diverse work of 20 emerging designers alongside the tools, visual resources and raw materials utilized throughout the creative process.

By structuring this exhibit to highlight the material narrative behind each realized furniture piece, Weinkle hopes to convey how the process of interaction between an object and an individual can be used as a communicative device, educating the user about the intentions and goals of the designer.

On a quiet Friday during RISD's winter session, I took the opportunity to tour the workshops with Weinkle, and delve into the system churning out some of today's most conceptual designers. The RISD curriculum typically challenges students to

explore formal topics via structured assignments. However, as her first curatorial effort, Weinkle expressed a desire to steer away from any one specific style or object and instead to offer a broad spectrum of materials, thought processes and results.

And process is what RISD emphasizes above all else. Students are encouraged to begin each piece considering function, then to realize their achievement with a balance of structure, purposeful form and engaging material. When process is king, there is ample opportunity for deliberate choices and happy accidents to interact and form a new, physical statement.

This interaction is apparent in Alex Spain-Strombom's leather stool, which incorporates laser-cutting technology to marry an angular, plywood structure with an unusual, geometrically patterned leather seat. As evidence of this process, burn scars were deliberately left intact, providing tonal contrast on alternating edges of the plywood supports. Up above, fine-grained white leather takes on the surprising sheen of a woven textile, due to an optical effect caused by the irregular depth of the laser's scar-

like incisions.

Zeke Leonard offers his own, eco-conscious take on the design process. Once a set builder in New York's entertainment industry, Leonard revolts against the rampant waste he once observed on the job by championing salvaged raw materials otherwise destined for the landfill. His contribution to the show, a modular revision of the traditional Adirondack chair, was crafted from Douglas fir and Longleaf pine reclaimed from the floorboards of a South County Mill. This piece can be re-configured at will; either as a loveseat, or as a centered table flanked by two chairs. By reclaiming the detritus of the region's industrial decay and transforming it into something beautiful, he hopes to encourage a de-acceleration and self-reflection not readily supported by our cultural trajectory.

An array of rich material narratives awaits the visitor, from Da Sul Kim's draped styrene stools (molded with the heat of a pizza oven), to Annika Schmidt's sweet, yet jarringly legless "strap-on" white chairs. If you are seeking an opportunity to sit down and smell the future of furniture, look no further.

Meredith Cutler