

**OVER THE LAST DECADE** The Museum of Arts and Design has organized several exhibitions dedicated to specific techniques—quilting, knitting, and embroidery—and single materials—porcelain, paper, dirt, and organic material, from feathers to bones. *Against the Grain: Wood in Contemporary Art, Craft, and Design* is the latest of these projects. As with the previous exhibitions, the challenge for this project was to introduce new ideas and trends in a material that is familiar to us all. Curated by Lowery Stokes Sims and Elizabeth Kirrane, this exhibition opened at the Mint Museum in Charlotte, N. C., and will be on view at MAD from February through June 2013.

Wood is certainly a most ubiquitous material. Its special quality lies in its variable nature: it is a material that serves a basic function while demonstrating incredible versatility. Since the emergence of modernism at the beginning of the 20th century, there have been specific expectations of the work by artists working in wood, whether they were studio craftsmen, designers, or artists. These include the well-turned vessel; the cleanly designed piece of furniture or decor whose form conforms to its inherent function; and the sculptural form that celebrates the inherently textural qualities of the material.

In the last two decades, by approaching the material in new ways, individual creators have challenged those expectations

even as they continue to meet them. This has greatly expanded the expected protocols of woodworking. Vessel forms have been deconstructed and, like furniture, have begged the question of function being related to form; and sculpture has co-opted the techniques and forms of woodturning and furniture. *Against the Grain* presents some of these phenomena and strives to provide fresh thinking about the medium of wood.

The work in the exhibition has for the most part been produced since 2000. In examining the dynamic relationship between art and craft, craft and design, art and design, between concept and skill, idea, and execution, the exhibition shows how these dichotomies have served to position the careers of various artists who work in the blur zone where art, craft, and design come together. These artists include sculptors Martin Puryear, Ursula von Rydingsvard, Courtney Smith, Betye Saar, Laurel Roth, and William Pope.L; installation artists Gary Carsley, Sarah Oppenheimer, and Alison Elizabeth Taylor; designers Hugo França, Maarten Baas, Sebastian Errazuriz, Mark Moskovitz, Piet Hein Eek, and Hiroki Takada; and studio wood artists Bud Latven, Andrew Early, Thomas Loeser, and Hunt Clark.

Reflecting the exhibition title, other familiar expressions vividly suggest thematic sections for the organization of

*Against the Grain*. “Logging In” was chosen to describe objects that exist close to the original tree. The works in “A Grain of Truth” emphasize the essential texture of wood; “Mixing and Matching” represents a tendency to make assemblages of existing or familiar forms in order to create new identities for them; “Digitally Speaking” spotlights the impact of new technologies in the working of wood, often with results that are improbable as well as innovative. There is “A Flair for Materials” which shows the virtuoso working in the medium that continues to impel creators; “Whimsies and Caprices” includes objects that show off vivid visual puns on the function of the object or objects rendered in unexpected materials. Finally, “Politically Speaking” consists of objects that seamlessly marry design, craft, and art with polemic and content.

These themes might be seen as describing attitudes towards material, process, and form that represent “postmodernism” because they engage qualities of mimicry, assemblage, virtuosity, and whimsy (with an evident purpose). What’s more there is a decided ecological consciousness on the part of these creators in tune with the realization of the need to preserve our forests and woodlands while balancing the needs of our global populations.

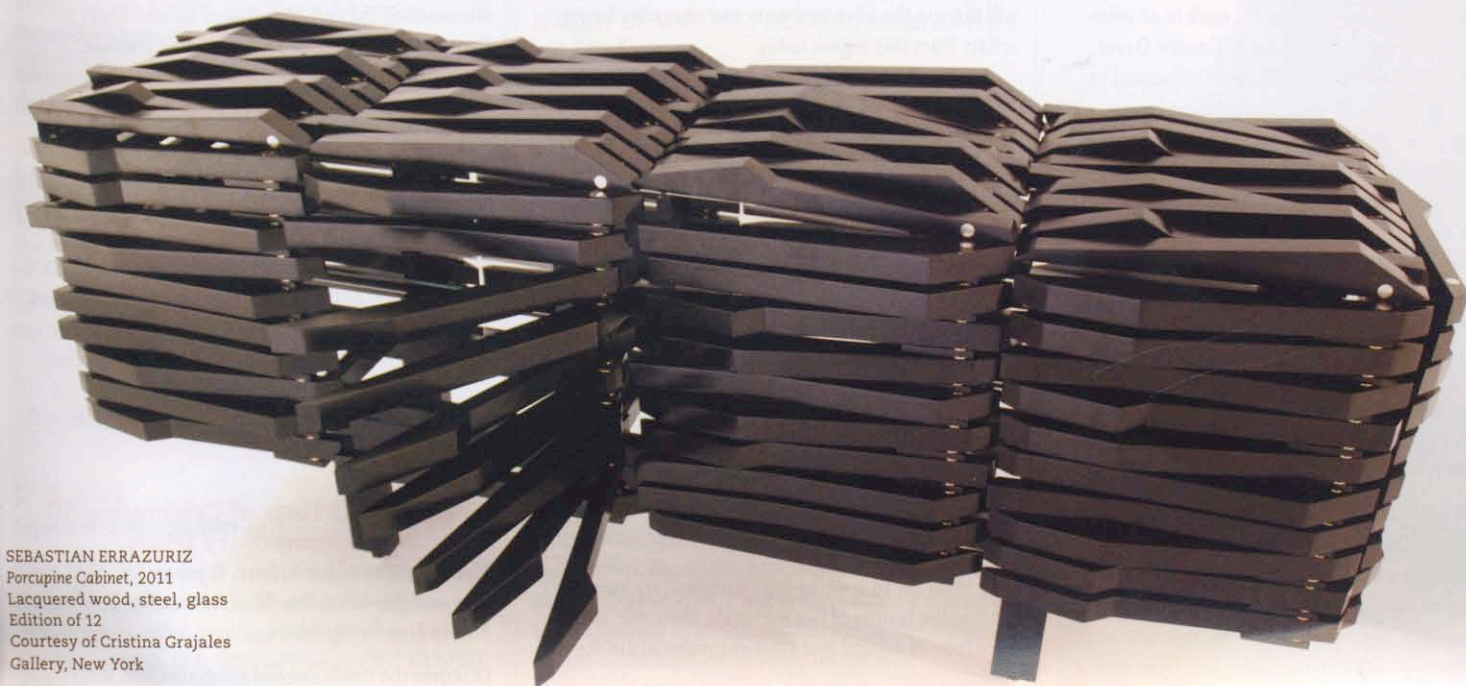
# Against the Grain

WOOD IN CONTEMPORARY  
ART, CRAFT, AND DESIGN



ELISA STROZYK  
Wooden Textile Walnut, 2011  
Walnut, viscose (rayon)  
Courtesy of the artist

**SEBASTIAN ERRAZURIZ**, whose work is featured in *Against The Grain*, is one of the most provocative young designers working today. Dividing his time between his native Chile and his studio in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, he creates work that transcends boundaries both geographic and technical, and is not afraid to cause controversy. In June 2012 he welcomed MAD Curator Lowery Stokes Sims and Natalya Mills, her intern, into his studio for a conversation.



SEBASTIAN ERRAZURIZ  
Porcupine Cabinet, 2011  
Lacquered wood, steel, glass  
Edition of 12  
Courtesy of Cristina Grajales  
Gallery, New York

**MAD:** People tend to gravitate towards a particular design product because of its look or style. What happens when your work introduces a sort of existential angst into the mix?

**SEBASTIAN ERRAZURIZ:** That's a good point. Before I went to university in 1995 and got onto the Internet, I used the library. I would find information arranged in different aisles. Information was compartmentalized for previous generations. I was part of the first generation that started consuming information from websites and blogs. Everything could be accessed together as a potpourri. We became bilingual or even trilingual. We started pushing and pulling and asking, "Why can't we put this and that together?" My generation now expects more, but at the same time, given the amount of information available on the Internet, the level of competition has been raised.

As a result I need to devise ways to make people stop at my work. I need to add layers of information, and to do that in the simplest, most direct way. And that is a tricky proposition. You have to layer your creation with many references—including nods to earlier generations—but always in a way that allows the viewer to have that "Aha!" moment. "Why hadn't I thought of that?" It's like in old karate movies, when the master teaches the students that they don't need all those fancy moves to make the hit. It can be done with one hit. If I can make people stop, I will be satisfied.

**MAD:** Was your training mostly in art or design?

**SEBASTIAN ERRAZURIZ:** My father had a Ph.D in teaching art, and as the oldest son, I was trained according to his theories. I was taken to museums every weekend when I was young. We could be in a room full of Turner paintings and I was expected to say which was the first and which was the last of the series. Where was the focal point? Where did the artist start? Where did he finish? Where did he doubt himself? And where was he freely and strongly just going at it? I grew up in that system, like in the army.

I was also raised with artistic heroes (I loved Duchamp when I was 10), and by the time I was 18, I was drawing slides for my father's

classes at the university. When I got to university, I knew a lot already, but I didn't feel worthy of being one of the people whose work I'd studied and admired all my life. I didn't feel I had the magical elements to be an artist. Design, on the other hand, seemed more like a job, a profession to me. There are problems, structure, and rules. There would be no reason to be magical.

As I studied design in Chile, I got attention and became a little rock star, but again felt I wasn't good enough. I was so young, so I left it all to come to New York and start over. I got my MFA from New York University and began to work with the Cristina Grajales Gallery.

**MAD:** It seems like the resistance to design and craft on the part of the fine arts is very strong, but not so much vice versa. Do you agree?

**SEBASTIAN ERRAZURIZ:** There is a hierarchy where the artist is seen as being above the designer, as is the architect, and that's been the way until now. I respect that and understand it, and at times even agree with it. I think there is a certain element of spirituality, existentialism, and a certain depth to the fine arts that is definitely above the functional aspect of design and craft. Nevertheless, the craftsmanship, the professionalism, even the restrictions and the rigor that go with craft and design is often very hard to find within the fine arts. I feel I'll do much better art because of my design training, as that will allow me to have a vision and to be true to it, because I know how to make my objects, and that eliminates any voice that would distract from the final element. At the same time, in my design practice, I love to be able to do highly technical pieces because it allows me a one-upmanship on technical people, as I can do the technical as well as the conceptual and the existential. Just as it is in any area where you work to produce a body of work—I'm only 35—you have to strive until the body of work has the necessary depth, and you can put it next to the work of anyone. In five more years, I think I'll have incredibly solid work that might be better than someone else's in a specific area, just because of my bilingual cultural practice.