

HYPERALLERGIC

A Young Designer's Pulpy and Surprisingly Personal Furniture

Thomas Barger, whose material of choice is colorful paper pulp, is part of a generation of adventurous furniture designers reshaping their field in the US.

Review by Glenn Adamson
March 20, 2018



Installation view of Thomas Barger's Growing Up at Salon 94 Design
(all images courtesy the artist and Salon 94 Design)

Something is happening in American furniture design — and it's happening mainly below the age of 40. It's a little too early to declare an actual youthquake, but suddenly, after decades of European dominance (Studio Alchymia and Memphis in Italy, "Creative Salvage" in Britain, the Droog collective and subsequent Dutch design), the most vibrant energy in the field seems to be right here in the USA.

The grand old man of the movement is Chris Schanck, born in 1975, whose sculptural foil and resin furniture, built collaboratively in Detroit, is the subject of a current show at Friedman Benda Gallery. Just

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HYPERALLERGIC

slightly younger is Vivian Beer (born 1977), who moves metal with seeming effortlessness; she brings a welcome feminist voice to the proceedings. The bricolage furniture of Jessi Reaves (born 1986) was one of the true revelations of the 2017 Whitney Biennial. Katie Stout (born 1989) applies a winsome, *faux naïf* idiom and a gently humorous touch to a wide range of materials. And Misha Kahn (also born 1989) is like a one-man design movement in his own right, feverishly prolific and magnetically inventive.



Thomas Barger, "Love Me, Protect Me Chair" (2018), paper pulp, plywood, two wooden chairs, polyurethane, and paint, 44 x 60 x 38 in

Now, enter another talent: Thomas Barger, all of 25 years old. His current show at Salon 94 Design, *Growing Up*, could almost have been conceived as a marker of the moment. Barger worked briefly in both Kahn's or Reaves's studios, and he shares certain traits with them, and other designers of this generation. All make supremely photogenic objects, which perform just as well on social media as they do in person. All rummage around in design history at will, not in the spirit of postmodern quotation, but associatively, like a Pinterest page sprung to life. And they are equally playful when it comes to functionality. They aren't setting out to radicalize the domestic environment, but instead deploy an object's use as a point of narrative departure. Most distinctively, these millennial designers combine a rigorous work ethic (often using self-invented techniques) with a remarkably relaxed aesthetic sensibility. Their furniture is definitely stylish, and intensely made, but it tends to slouch into a room as if it were no big deal.



Thomas Barger, "S.O.S. Green Goblin, Spidey Please Save Me" (2017), paper pulp, wooden frame, polyurethane, and paint, 36 x 24 x 36 in

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Barger's work has all these tendencies, including the grab-bag attitude toward past design — Gaetano Pesce and Joep Van Lieshout, among others. But it is also evolved from personal motivations. He was raised in rural Illinois, and draws his iconography explicitly from that milieu. There is genuine affection here, toward the Midwest in general — as in a series of “buttery” chairs, the exact shade of a stick left out on the counter for a few hours — and also toward his family. Barger's dad's truck blanket is immortalized in a Flintstones-ish sling chair. His mother's routine of sorting laundry — “a basket for Sarah, a basket for David, a basket for Dad, a basket for Mom, a basket for me” — inspired a wonderful storage unit of conjoined cavities, which can either be placed on the floor or hung on the wall.

Innocent of any proper training as a furniture maker, Barger builds his work out of paper pulp, using found furniture, jerry-built frames, rocks, and other objects as armatures. This imparts an overall softness, and permits him to explore a whole rainbow of colors (rather as Schanck does, more glamorously, with his variously tinted foils). In a couple of pieces, he adds dense pattern in colored pencil — so far an underdeveloped idea, but one which might become important for him with further experimentation.

HYPERALLERGIC



Thomas Barger, "Dicks Creek Rock Planter" (2018), rocks, wooden frame, and stucco, 11 1/2 x 27 x 22 in



Thomas Barger, "Wall Drawing 2" (2017), paper pulp, wooden frame, cardboard, and colored pencil, 33 x 26 x 11 in

Metaphorically, the paper pulp conveys a sense of fragile intimacy, most evident in a poignant work called "Love Me, Protect Me Chair." An allegorical portrait of Barger's parents, it features a ladderback chair covered entirely in sky-blue pulp, and an armchair that is exposed to view, but bound into the envelope of the sculptural form. Here one feels this young designer's full potential, his ability to convey complex psychological relationships with tenderness, and perhaps some pain as well.

In the press materials for the exhibition, we are told that Barger came out as gay to his family over the winter, and that this inspired many of the pieces on view. This does indeed seem important to the meaning of "Love Me, Protect Me," as well as another large work called "I Never Had a Closet — Closet." But what makes the show special is the way it transcends individual storyline. At a time of cultural schism between the US's heartland and its coastal cities, Barger's work feels like a precious patch of common ground. And its gently searching quality, while quite different from the anarchic intelligence of Kahn's or Reaves's furniture, equally extends the repertoire of the medium. Barger says of this body of work that it "embraces my past as I enter into adulthood." Already, though, he has wisdom beyond his years.

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