

# **office**

## Boy Meets Art World

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Interview by Anna Zanes

Photos by Jesper D. Lund



It is a transitional time for Thomas Barger. And according to anatomy, at age twenty-five, this is appropriate—the artist has arrived at the dawn of actual adulthood. But for Barger—a burgeoning artist amongst the industry's big leagues and a NYC transplant, born and bred in a rural, religious farming town in Illinois who just this year finally came out to his family—this moment is about much more than merely his anatomical maturation. It's the moment for memories, and mourning, and making. Burdensome as it may be, growing up has been a beautiful breakthrough for Barger, both personally and professionally—proven by his powerful new solo show now on view at Salon 94 Design space on Freemans Alley.

*Growing Up will be on view through March 31st.*

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As Barger travels back through his boyhood, he's been busy, building on his bright, playful paper pulp "furniture", shifting focus from the inherent formalism of functional design and finding catharsis in crafting abstract shapes akin to sculpture. *Growing Up* is about Thomas Barger, and by Thomas Barger. But it is the bones that belong to us all— family, furniture, creativity, coming-of-age. We sat down with the artist in his sunlit studio a week before the exhibition opening, and across the table, titled, *My Family is Getting Bigger*, spoke about feelings, art, furniture, and having his first solo show.



## **How did you start working with Jessi Reaves?**

I was working in architecture at the time, and I met this guy, and he introduced me to her. I was interested in getting out of architecture, but still being within reach of design, so that type of transition worked. I wanted to learn through working for someone, rather than going back to school.

## **Where did you go to school for your undergraduate degree?**

I went to University of Illinois, and I studied architecture and landscape. That's where I'm from originally, Illinois.

## **Really? Where?**

In Charleston-Mattoon.

## **I realize now I know absolutely nothing about Illinois geography, so not sure why I asked that.**

It's a small town, I'm from a farming area. I've only lived there and here, in New York.

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**How long have you lived here? Would you want to go back and live there again?**

No, no not really. I really enjoy it here, it's like everything home isn't. I've been here four years. I came here right after graduation.

**So that's when you decided not to go back to school?**

I've said that about working for people here is like a second education. I mean, being in New York you can learn so many things.

**After interviewing a fair share of artists and creatives, it feels like anyone actually succeeding in the arts is either a dropout, or got their education with an entirely different focus than what they're doing now. To be fair, I also ask because it makes me feel better, having dropped out of art school approximately five... to ten... times.**

I feel the same way. My work is becoming less design and more sculpture, and I'm really excited seeing that transition happening.



**Embarrassing, but I have always been confused about this: we have design, furniture design, architecture, sculpture, and mixed media. Is it on a spectrum? How do you define them? How do you decide what you are doing? Or do you...?**

Well like, right now I think of my practice as sculpture. Coming from design school, I think about how designer makes a bench or a table, and then I think about the way an artist makes a painting— what those roles are.



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## What is the responsibility of an artist compared to that of a designer?

Oh, that's a good question. I think the responsibility of a designer is to make something functional, and that is the primary goal. For the artist— at least I can speak for myself— it's about expressing personal direction. And that's where this work is going. This table called *My Family is Getting Bigger* is a family unit, which I'm adding on to because my brother and sister just got married this year, and the laundry unit is inspired by my mom folding and sorting laundry. This year, I came out to my family, and after coming out I noticed their absence. The two chairs reminisce my parents' core roles in my life highlighting our relationship. They are called *Love me, Protect me, chairs*.

**That's brilliant. This artful, sculptural basis— but, in the form of table. So, you say it's such a personal piece, but regardless of someone knowing the story before, it's somehow still relatable. And also, emotional— at least for me, my own shit comes up with this table. It's such a strangely sensitive subject— furniture? Everybody has their own experience with it. It's not just an abstract sculpture where you have to force feeling something, Even if it's not intense feelings.**

Yeah, that's what I like about furniture. People all have their own reactions because everybody can relate to furniture, everyone has a past with it growing up, and a special memory. I don't think that's always the case with pure sculpture. So I like that connection for me, and for others. And even the materials are getting much more personal, this big circle bench is going to be covered in rocks — we have a pasture on the farm where the rocks come from, and the piece resembles a tractor tire. I guess I can see a clear departure from this design background.



**So, is this stuff for the show, and you're still working! It's so soon! Is that stressing you out?**

Yeah!

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**Sorry that's such an awkward thing to say. Shit.**

No it'll all come together, it always done. But I am a little bit nervous. I guess like with palate, all the colors will come together. In this show, I'm painting things so it all works together in the gallery space. It's like a culmination of the work that relates to my family, because I came out to them last year, and it's been this intense relationship with them, where we don't talk. And then I had to go home for weddings. It's a lot to go through, and it reflects in my work.

**Well, pain is can be a motivator.**

It's even seeping into it all in the weirdest ways. Like, this was my dad's truck blanket, it was in his truck seat, that for some reason I have. And this chair's not even related to it, but there is a touch of my growing up in everything that I'm doing right now.

**How are you going to explain these things in the show?**

It's interesting, I think of these things with explicit meaning, but other people think of them so differently. Like you were saying this table, but that's what's nice about these pieces— it's inclusive for everyone.