

surface

A black and white portrait of Kenya Hara, an older man with short, light-colored hair, wearing round glasses and a dark jacket. He is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

KENYA HARA

Brings His Design Pedigree to the Doghouse

PLUS: *The 2012 Portfolio of*
AMERICAN INFLUENCE

Uncommon Threads

REBELLION AND BRAVADO
PERMEATE THE CREATIVE
PROCESS BEHIND BREAKOUT
TALENT ANTON ALVAREZ.

PORTRAIT PAUL PLEWS

Anton Alvarez wouldn't call himself a rebel per se, despite the fact that he discovered his artistic side as a teenage graffiti writer in his native Uppsala, Sweden. It's just that the one theme underlying his creative life so far—following him through Swedish cabinet-making school, a bachelor's degree at Konstfack, and a product-design degree at the RCA—has been a compulsive need to do the opposite of what's expected of him. Whereas all the other graffiti artists he knew drew outlines of their designs, rushing to fill them in before they got busted, Alvarez was known for his improvisational, freestyle approach. And at Konstfack, he says, he was always avoiding the briefs. "Even if we were asked to do something simple, like a table, I'd see if water could support a group of objects instead," he says. "I wanted to do whatever I thought was the farthest away from the obvious answer."

When it came time for his most ambitious project to date, however—his RCA graduation thesis this past June—Alvarez had nothing to push back against; he and his peers were expected to develop briefs of their choosing. So he ended up subverting, albeit unconsciously, the rules he'd learned in cabinetry school and created a technique that united a mix of materials in the most expressive way possible, without the time-consuming precision inherent to wood joinery. "I have the knowledge and the skills to do that," he says. "But it's so boring." His Thread Wrapping Machine is essentially a spinning wheel



(TOP TO BOTTOM) Chair made with the Thread Wrapping Machine. Anton Alvarez makes a bench in his East London studio with assistants Nicholas Gardner and Ingrid Ohlund. (OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP) Alvarez in his studio. An unfinished side table. Three finished benches.



armed with glue-coated string that winds a messy cocoon around pretty much anything passed through its central hole; the thesis itself consisted of lamps, benches, and tables that looked more like mutant sock puppets than anything a skilled woodworker could possibly fathom. Any material is fair game: At the London Design Festival in September, he incorporated pieces of expensive crystal into the futuristic Technicolor spear he created for Swarovski's Digital Crystal show. Pieces made with the machine are currently being sold at the high-end London design shop Mint.

Yet since producing 180 wrapped seats for 290 guests in less than 30 days for an RCA-sponsored benefit dinner in October, put on by the organization Outset, Alvarez has found himself aspiring more and more to the technical mastery so characteristic of his former studies. "To do such a big production, I had to learn the machine really well, and as I learn, I'm trying to make these pieces as good as I possibly can," Alvarez says. His particular form of rebellion isn't meant to alienate people—least of all the clients he's begun courting from his newly launched studio in East London. It's more about finding unexpected ways to give them what they want. "I'm trying to push what's possible in a given context," he says.

In his other project at the LDF, for example, his RCA class was invited to the Benchmark furniture factory in the English countryside by the American Hardwood Export Council. Each student was asked to create a chair with the factory's technicians and calculate its environmental impact using a sophisticated set of algorithms. But while his peers were toiling inside, dutifully making their measurements, he chopped down a tree from the surrounding forest and used a chain saw to carve it into a bench where it lay. "I ignored all the parameters they were giving us so I could get an easier understanding of the real environmental impact," Alvarez says. "I wanted to cut the tree, produce it where it grew, and leave it there. The chain saw was the only tool that left a trace."

By creatively bypassing the project's criteria, he was able to reframe the discussion on his own terms. "If I make a wood joint," Alvarez says, "the craftsman who's teaching me could always say, 'This won't work because wood reacts this way or will move like this when it's wet.' But if I'm the only one who knows about a technique because I invented it myself, there's no one who can say it's right or wrong." —MONICA KHEMSUROV