

CRAFTS

THE MAGAZINE FOR CONTEMPORARY CRAFTS

LITERARY AGENTS

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I'd just accepted an invitation to sit on a panel at the Select Festival discussing the relevance today of the division between craft and design (see p.5 for details) when I found myself in Stockholm interviewing this issue's cover star Anton Alvarez. In certain respects, he typifies a new, post-industrial generation of designers – in that he trained in his discipline, is conversant with its history and mores, but wants to escape its conventions. As gallery-owner Libby Sellers pointed out to me: 'A prevalent trend coming through in recently graduated designers' work is the desire to make the tool rather than the end object. They're designing process rather than the finished item,' she said. 'I wonder if that has much to do with fear or a nervousness of adding to a world that is full of stuff that most of us don't need.'

She's quite right, of course. When I first started out writing about design in the mid-90s, a graduate's career path seemed much more straight-forward. After you left university, the plan was to be picked up by one of the major design magazines at New Designers. Subsequently you'd want to exhibit at 100% Design, hoping to be spotted by a major (very likely Italian) manufacturer, for whom you'd create a new collection of furniture, quite possibly in plastic. Now, however, things are rather more complicated. For a start,

there are far more design graduates in an already over-subscribed marketplace; meanwhile, many of the larger furniture manufacturers are more conservative, only occasionally straying from the elite cadre of globally renowned names. On the flipside, thanks to new technology, designers needn't take the traditional routes to reach the market, since they can make and retail themselves. And of course, we are all more conscious of the problems around over-consumption, environmental as well as economic.

As a result of all this, young designers are eschewing industry, and doing things their own way. Sometimes this entails re-visiting traditional techniques, as with Simon Hasan – or this month's Talent Spot Katharina Eisenkoeck (p.36) – who both work with *cuir bouilli*. Or it may mean creating a new craft. And Alvarez, who graduated from the Royal College of Art two years ago (and is featured on p.46), is a fine example of this. In his first year at the RCA, he realised that he 'didn't want to work for a company. I wanted to create something myself.' Which he duly did, designing a *Thread Wrapping Machine* that allows him to join pieces of material together and make brilliantly colourful furniture. Is this craft? Could it be design? Does it matter, as long as it's just plain good?



PORTRAIT BY KAREN CALDOTT



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Anton Alvarez's 'Thread Wrapping Machine' creates extraordinary furniture without the need for screws or nails. As his new exhibition at Gallery Libby Sellers opens, the Chilean-Swedish designer talks to Grant Gibson. Main photography by Gustav Almestål

ANTON ALVAREZ: THE SPIN

DOCTOR

'Should we just make a little show for you? You want some ear protection? Or do you just want to put your hands over them?' enquires Anton Alvarez. And with that the Chilean-Swedish maker hands me a set of ear-plugs and goes about demonstrating the extraordinary *Thread Wrapping Machine*, which dominates this small workshop located in the suburbs of Stockholm.

It's very much a two-person operation, with Alvarez standing one side of the Heath Robinson contraption, while his assistant Lenka Dobranska stands on the other. Each holds a piece of timber in their hands, the two ends overlapping in the middle of the wheel.

At the flick of a switch the machine's sewing-machine engine whirrs into life, whipping around on four sets of skateboard wheels. In a blur, four different reels of polyester thread, set equidistantly around its circumference, are pulled through four different pots of glue, wrapping themselves around the wood. The two pieces have been joined in an instant by a thin but – as I discover when I try and break the newly formed

bond – incredibly strong layer of orange thread. It's making as a piece of theatre, as entralling as watching a pot rise off the wheel or a piece of glass being blown.

Using this technique, which he developed during his time at the Royal College of Art, Alvarez has created wildly colourful, almost mummified pieces of furniture which are both functional and works of art in their own right. Crucially too they require absolutely no screws or nails.

While his work has been seen at the London Design Museum (with crystal manufacturer Swarovski) and, last year, at Design Miami/Basel, he's about to mount his most important exhibition to date. Gallery Libby Sellers will be showing over 20 new pieces that incorporate some subtly developing thinking. 'I've been trying to explore some different ways of working with it,' he tells me, in his proficient, if occasionally quirky English. 'Before I was always covering everything; now I have started to reveal something.' In other words, some of his new pieces display the frame – usually ash, birch and pieces of steel – below the outer skin.

Opposite: *The Thread Wrapping Machine Table* – 141211, detail, wood, polyester thread, PVA glue, 2013
Following pages, left: *The Thread Wrapping Machine Stool* – 140114, OSB-board, plywood, wood, polyester

thread, PVA glue, pigmented PVA glue, 38 x 45 cm, 2014
Following pages, right: *The Thread Wrapping Machine Stool* – 140110, OSB-board, plywood, MDF, wood, PVC-tube, polyester thread, PVA glue, 25 x 48 cm, 2014

Moving from London back to Stockholm has also led to a noticeable change. 'The Swedish glue that I started using I didn't like so much, because it was more shiny in a way than the glue I'd been using in London.' His solution was to add pigment to his new adhesive and let it run down the thread, so rather than being hidden away the glue is very much part of the work. His spattered overalls and the Pollock-like patterns of paint on the rim of the machine suggest it has become an altogether messier undertaking too. 'I can start to work in a more expressive, maybe more honest way,' he says. 'So I don't have to be so picky as a result.'

Alvarez's route to this point has been circuitous. 'He's not necessarily a typical RCA graduate, who ends up sticking around North London,' confirms Sellers. 'He's very self-aware and very ambitious, and very eager to try absolutely everything.' He was born in Uppsala, about an hour out of Stockholm. Neither of his parents came from a creative background: his mother was a social worker and his father – a Chilean immigrant forced to leave his native country when General Pinochet took power









– was a kindergarten teacher. (Intriguingly, they actually met working on the buses.) His first love was graffiti, and this, combined with his South American heritage, may go some way to explaining a use of colours not usually associated with Scandinavia. ‘I was working with the craft of spraypaint,’ he deadpans. After that he went to art school, before enrolling at a crafts college, where he learned to work with timber on a cabinet-making course. ‘At first I didn’t really know why I took this step, but I came to understand it, as graffiti is very much about mastering a skill, a material, a tool – which also is what woodworking is about. They are very much connected.’ Subsequently he studied interior architecture at Konstfack, before alighting at the Royal College of Art.

He believes this eclectic mix of interests and formal education has given him a unique perspective on his work. ‘So how I am right now and what I do? I don’t think it would have been possible without these different steps, because they contain the special design elements: trying to work with a room; the craft; and working with colour. All of the different things are part of it. Graffiti culture is very much about being on your own, being independent, doing what you think is important to yourself or the group of people you admire or paint with. And what I do currently is also an attempt for me to gain independence and not rely on anyone else.’ Studying under Gabriel Klamer and Rosario Hurtado on the RCA’s Design Products course proved to be the perfect place for a nascent designer with a distinct disinterest in industry. ‘We didn’t have any brief,’ he says. ‘It was sitting in a studio coming up with our own projects. You had to create your own context and understand what you wanted to do. That really interested me. In the first year I kind of understood that I didn’t want to work for a company. I wanted to create something myself.’

While his process starts with drawing, you sense that Alvarez is really more interested in working with his hands. Sat next to reels of thread, a shelf in his studio is stacked with his material explorations, for instance, and the idea for the *Thread Wrapping*



Machine came from time spent at his workbench rather than with a laptop. ‘I have a hard time explaining inspiration,’ he says. ‘I see everything as inspiration: my previous knowledge will come out through my hands as I’m doing it.’

At the Royal College he spent an intense period of research making something new every day, and turning the results into a book. As we flick through it, you can begin to see the antecedents of the *Wrapping Machine* – at one point, for example, he tried using the combination of a lathe and thread. His initial iteration was hand-powered and still sits on the wall of his study today.

There’s a fascinating tension between the tool itself and the furniture it makes. While the machine has obviously been very carefully designed – he spent two months working out how it would operate while the build took only a week – Alvarez likes to improvise while he’s making, letting the combination of his hands and the machine do the thinking. ‘I try to be open to what’s happening and see

where it’s taking me,’ he explains. ‘At the beginning of the day we choose a couple of colours and then we go. It’s just like that.’

The longer you spend in his engaging company the more you realise he talks far more like a craftsman than an industrial designer – someone whose natural milieu would be *COLLECT*, say, rather than *100% Design*. Whereas a designer is inclined to float between materials and processes, he is wedded to his thread. ‘I’ve seen too many times where some designers come up with a process or are making something, and then they are like magicians,’ he says. ‘They have to come up with another process. Perhaps they don’t have the commitment. I’ve been working on this for nearly two years and I’m becoming better and better all the time, finding new ways of working with it. It’s important to trust it and stay in it for a bit.’

After the show, he says the next step is to create architecture, which he first experimented with on Sellers’s stand at Design Miami/Basel by producing pieces such as a stool and a bench that connected to make something altogether larger. To this end he is working with Danish fabric company Kvadrat on a series of three arches that will launch at the Salone in Milan during April but, perhaps most excitingly, there’s a four-month on-going installation at Gustavsborgs Konsthall, where he will be building a structure on site using the machine. ‘I’m going to let this grow,’ he says simply.

You suspect that Alvarez is happy to let his hands decide his future. ‘My highest desire is to have a material to work with,’ he concludes. ‘The knowledge I already have just needs to come out.’ And he’s well on the way to forging the independence he craves. As he points out, there is no one else doing this after all: ‘It’s good that there are no other old men with beards that take the decision that this is the real craft or not. Because I am the master of this. I’m in charge here. So that’s very good.’ It’s his craft and he’s going to do it his way.

‘Wrapper’s Delight: New Works by Anton Alvarez’ is at Gallery Libby Sellers, 41–42 Berners Street, London W1T 3NB, from 6 March – 17 April, www.libbysellers.com, www.antonalvarez.com

Opposite: *The Thread Wrapping Machine*
Table – 141211, wood, polyester thread, PVA glue, 57 x 85 cm, 2014

Above: *The Thread Wrapping Machine*
Below: Alvarez at work with *The Thread Wrapping Machine*

