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ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

Sam Stewart Rethinks the Slipcovered Chair

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Photo: Lauren Coleman / Courtesy of Sam Stewart and Fort Gansevoort

Is it art? Is it design? Who cares? In Wild Thing, the latest AD PRO column, senior design writer Hannah Martin discusses a thing that makes her heart sing.

As soon as my eyes adjusted to the fluorescent lighting in

Fort Gansevoort's pristine new upstairs gallery space, they immediately landed on a pair of high-back chairs wrapped in translucent black plastic.

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"This is sort of where my folk narrative came in," said their creator, *Sam Stewart*, 29, whose first-ever solo show, "Cryptid," went up at the Manhattan gallery February 15.

Stewart's designs first caught my attention about a year ago at the New Art Dealers Alliance (NADA) art fair, where a cartoonish set of furnishings (including an unforgettable cloud-shaped cocktail table) sat in Fort Gansevoort's booth. A quick search revealed Stewart was the mastermind behind the laminate-covered decor at one of my favorite downtown hangouts— *Dimes* —and was crafting custom tables and chairs for New York cool kids, including Petra Collins, Omar Sosa, and Laila Gohar.

That said, "folk" is about the last word that came to mind when I thought of Stewart's curvy, colorful, seemingly Memphis-inflected work—or as I took in the show. Installed in what looked like an intentionally cheesy show apartment, the chairs sat with a Formica-and-faux-leather table, an MDF-and-stainless-steel bench press, and a vinyl upholstered floor lamp. But closer inspection revealed that each item included some synthetic-looking bit of all-natural wood: The barbells were carved maple, the lamp base was burlled ash, and beneath their plastic slipcovers, the chairs of my obsession were actually crafty stick furniture hewn from maple and beech.

"I work with a stick furnituremaker in North Carolina who's a family friend," says the Carolina native. "He has a very different style, using a lot of finishes. It's all very controlled. But I told him I wanted to control this as little as possible."

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Stewart's vinyl-upholstered stick chair.

Photo: Lauren Coleman / Courtesy of Sam Stewart and Fort Gansevoort

Craft, as it turns out, is not so new to Stewart, who never went to art or design school but instead honed his skill as a woodworking apprentice for furnituremakers Moss/Fauset and Hucker, as a cabinetmaker for Eli Zabar's restaurants and grocery stores on the Upper East Side, and at galleries, including Friedman Benda (where he restored works of art and design, predominantly in wood).

To give the standard stick chair a new look, Stewart carbonized the seat's branching forms with a torch, leaving them a chalky black. "I like that it leaves little marks on the inside like drawings," he explains. "Every time you move the chair it makes another mark."

As for their plastic-y vinyl slipcovers? "I wanted to introduce a very synthetic material; a kind of sexualized material," Stewart says. "It seemed too serious when I just had a burned chair."

The main catch? You can't really sit on them. "At the opening, a few people tried," Stewart laughs. "The vinyl is pretty tightly conforming to the stick form inside, so if anyone were to sit down, the tension would most likely damage or break the carbonized sticks."

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But in a moment where the work of *Wendell Castle* and other folk furniture forefathers is finally getting its due, Stewart's almost futuristic repackaging of American handicraft—even if utility falls by the wayside—feels like an increasingly relevant conversation piece.