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VINCE.

Looking Microscopically: Designer Sam Stewart's Democratic Eye



Designer Sam Stewart's bulbous furniture, rotund lamps, and curved sculptures quite literally round out the homes and haunts of the design elite—clients of custom pieces include New York City Chinatown restaurant Dimes, supermodel Paloma Elsesser, and Apartamento's Omar Sosa and food artist Laila Gohar, to name a few. "My work is generally heavy proportionally. Things are chunky," says Stewart on a call from his new Manhattan apartment. Whimsical in delivery, layered in concept, Stewart's work has grown bolder and boundary-defying in the few short years since his first commission. With a piece in the virtual The Essential Goods Show at Fisher Parrish online through August 30th, Stewart gives us a glimpse of his work in his new place, and talks about how to find inspiration in street pipes, postmodern literature, and oversized sweaters.

Let's start with the most globally-relevant question: has the lock down changed your work or how you make it?

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It starts from simple day to day observation. I absorb a lot of visual information and it gets synthesized into whatever information I'm making. That's what creates my language. I don't think that the process changes. The information I'm taking in is different and the details have changed.

Details like what?

I've been going on a lot of walks, looking microscopically at all the architectural details in the city. It's similar to how you walk through a gallery or a museum, but I feel freer walking around on the sidewalk and noticing something, because there's less instruction. What I really like are those idiosyncratic city vernacular objects or small industrial design things that feel less informed—like pipes, little weird stairways that landlords hired someone to make a repair to. They're not naïve works, someone knew what they were doing. But there's a direct relationship between the thing that's made and the hand.

You seem to almost always have a book in your hand. What are you reading right now?

I've been reading *Infinite Jest* for the first time. I know it sounds a little late to be reading that book. Last summer I was reading a lot of David Foster Wallace's non-fiction. I just like the general feeling of that moment in the '90s and early 2000s when he's at his most creatively productive phase. That's really his work: postmodern. His hypersensitive observational skills, his vocabulary, the way he uses language, and how vulnerable he makes himself through his work—he has an authenticity to him. I've felt really drawn to wanting to express myself in a way that's really genuine and authentic.



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What about designers or visual artists—whose work inspires you?

Erwin Wurm did these really beautiful fabric pieces early on. I have no earthly idea how he had these giant sweaters made. He did an entire gallery wall in purple knit wool with two sweater sleeves and a crewneck opening. It's such a simple thing and it doesn't feel like a one-liner. It feels like there's more depth. I've been thinking a lot about a directness of communication and I think that the less steps and the less layering, the better.



I think of the vinyl-covered twig chairs you made for your solo show at Fort Gansevoort. Where do you see a directness in your work?

I was thinking about Wurm's work when I was making the Bonnet Lamps because it was a very direct process to give these things life. You still want to create this dense visual thing but with the least amount of material. I'm making thin metal frames and working with a lampshade fabricator to cover them. It's not quite soft sculpture in that it falls under gravity's weight and collapses like a Claus Oldenburg, but it's not upholstered either.

Upholstery seems too mundane a word for how you work with fabric. There's really an element of fashion to how you cover your pieces.

I just started to think about what upholstery is. It really is this: clothing a form. It's also adding form and giving form as well. It doesn't have to be this beautiful finished object, it can be repulsive, too. Whatever effect you want to create can become a decision of materials and the limitations of the seamstress. Why not take fashion fabrics and apply that to what I want to do?

If you're producing anything on a larger scale, [fashion fabrics are] not something you want to get involved in because of the uncertainty—there are all of these materials that are known to function. I did this blue [Aengus] chair for R

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and Co., [upholstered with a sheer, pale blue pleated and tufted fabric]. You can sit on the chair and it's totally fine, but I don't know what it looks like 15 years from now if you use it as an everyday office chair. To me it's more about communicating an idea.



The chair has proven it has room for experimentation—especially recently, there has been so much interest in the chair.

I definitely noticed the same thing. Raquel Cayre curated a show of chairs for R & Company, and The Future Perfect did a chair show, too. I was talking with a friend of mine in Denmark, and we were saying that of all of the home furnishings, the chair is the most architectural. It's like designing a house. We're not the first ones to say this—a lot of architects have designed a chair. Every artist has made a chair. It's almost like a game of who didn't design at least one.

Where do you think that impulse—and consumer interest—comes from?

That attraction is really hard to pin down. It has a universal appeal, every culture has a chair. It's accessible—maybe it's easier than buying your first painting or first sculpture. If a chair embodies the mysterious elements of painting or sculpture, the chair grounds it into something people feel comfortable investing in because of the implied function.

What are you working on next?

I have a chair commission for a [house-call] orthodontist service. They actually worked with Chen [Chen] and Kai [Williams] on a retainer case. They need an easy-to-carry chair that opens at a certain inclination. The materials need

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FDA certification which isn't that complicated—just don't use linen or silk—and it needs to weigh less than 20 lbs. But beyond that, the design is up to me. It's hard for me to do something that lightweight. You lose a kind of flexibility in being more expressive. But it's a fun challenge. [Generally speaking,] if it can be done I want to do it.