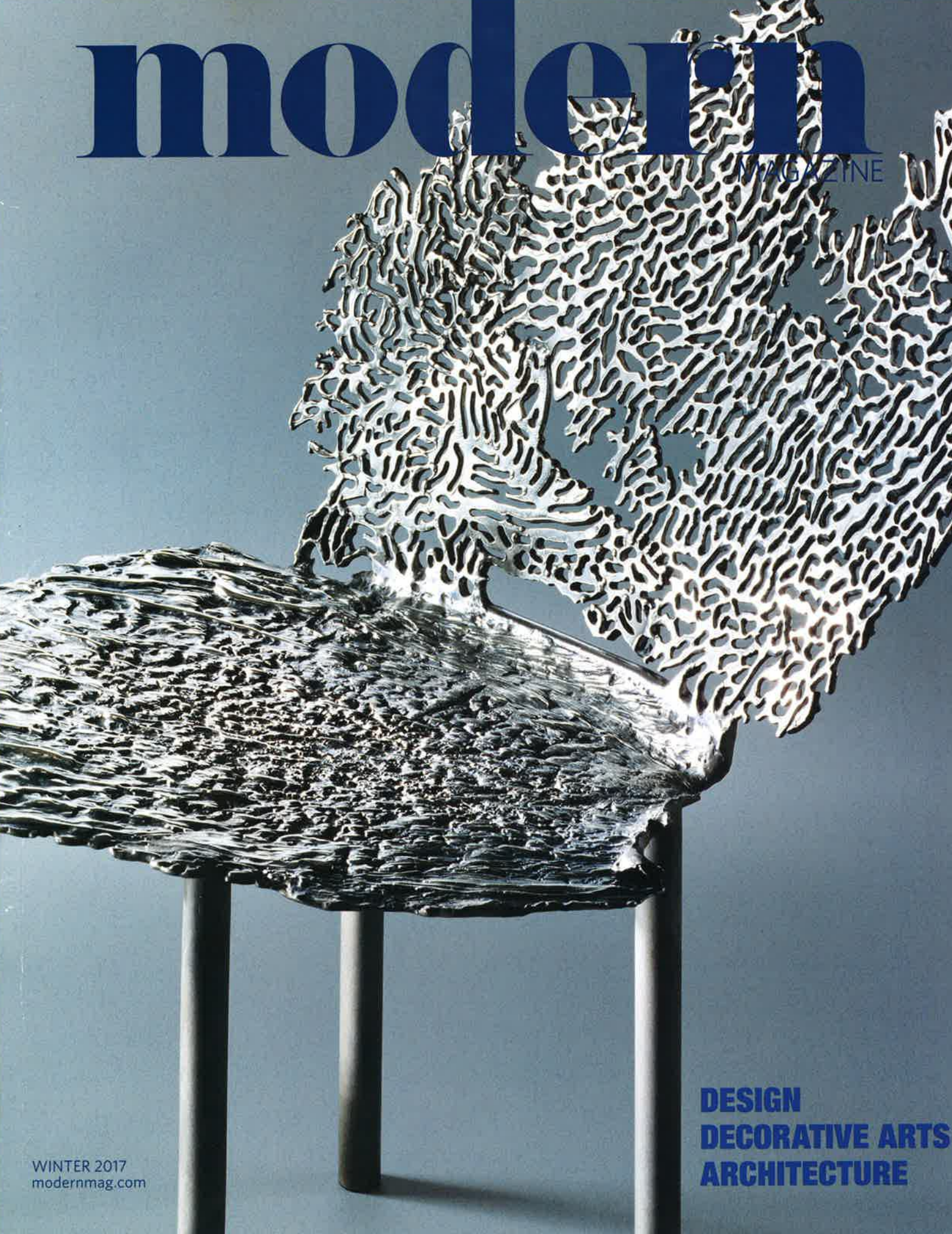


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**DESIGN
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Strong Impressions



DESIGNER MAT DRISCOLL LETS HIS FURNITURE COMPANY, BELLBOY, SPEAK FOR ITSELF

By ANNA FIXSEN

IT'S EARLY ONE FALL MORNING in the third-floor workshop of furniture designer Mat Driscoll in Sunset Park, Brooklyn. The windows are tilted open, allowing for fresh air to blend with the smell of sawdust and for the din of traffic outside to harmonize with the drawl of country artist Sturgill Simpson.

Driscoll's furniture brand, Bellboy, inhabits a similarly idyllic universe where time-honored approaches to woodworking reign supreme, one that favors utility, craft, and crisp geometries over faddish silhouettes and materials. But Bellboy is anything but conventional. Since establishing the brand in 2010, Driscoll has honed an aesthetic that is at once muscular and refined. Today, his work often sells for as much as a Honda Civic, which may seem at odds with its unpretentious presence. But the luxury here is found in the integrity of materials and the meticulous—even obsessive—way in which Driscoll works. "I want the people who experience the products to say, 'This is good,'" Driscoll says. "I think about that when we are finishing the back or the bottom of something."

Bellboy began with a gut feeling. Driscoll was enjoying a successful career as an art director at Mother New York, a creative agency that specializes in edgy campaigns for high-profile clients ranging from Calvin Klein to Stella Artois. But for Driscoll, the struggle to find a work-life balance took its toll. For kicks, he began to explore furniture making by taking beginner woodworking classes at the now-defunct maker space 3rd Ward in East Williamsburg. He found himself staying late after class and even turning up on weekends to work. He was hooked. One

Sunday, as the sun was setting, he realized, to his dismay, "I've got to go back to work tomorrow."

This epiphany drove Driscoll to take what he thought would be a brief sabbatical from advertising. He registered for a twelve-week training course at the Center for Furniture Craftsmanship in Rockport, Maine. "It's like the Peyton Manning fantasy football camp," he says. "You learn everything from the best instructors." The first course went so well, he enrolled in the center's nine-month program, subsisting on freelance advertising gigs, a few hours of sleep each night, and gas station coffee. For his graduation project in 2011 he presented a low-slung American sweetgum table with curved walnut legs. Driscoll had found his calling and left advertising for good.

Around this time, the idea for Bellboy—named for the fiberglass boat on which Driscoll learned to water ski as a kid in Wisconsin—took root. "My old instructor, who is Welsh, would say, 'You are over-egging the pudding,'" Driscoll says, "Don't add too much—just do very, very good work with what you have."

Bellboy had its first breakthrough in 2012 with a lounge chair called Water Tower. The chair emerged from the 12x12 design competition in which a dozen New York designers were allotted historic timber to transform into a piece of furniture. Driscoll was handed reclaimed redwood from a dismantled water tank that once hovered above Park Avenue. Inspired by the voluptuous silhouette of well-heeled women who once inhabited the neighborhood, Driscoll created a curved lounge chair from ninety-five pieces of redwood bonded together and then sculpted by hand to a silky-smooth finish. The chair sparked an explosion





of interest from the design press and gave Bellboy an essential push. "It's important to make things that are beautiful, but you are responsible for making something that's going to last," the designer says. "You can use all the great materials you want but that doesn't matter if it's going to be on the curb in a year and a half."

This ethos powers the Bellboy aesthetic, which is austere like a Tadao Ando chapel, but familiar like a favorite armchair. Some pieces rely on their sheer physicality. Take Nocturne, minimal cabinets finished in matte lacquer and bisected by a series of custom blackened steel hinges, manufactured by a shop in Michigan that specializes in automotive machining. Another series, a storage collection called Driver, is available in walnut and paper composite—a dense material created from post-consumer paper and resin—set on a blackened steel base. Other objects play with lightness and shape. Driscoll's hexagonal West occasional table features a lacquered tripod base, while the geometric base of his Thales dining table nods to its namesake Greek mathematician.

The work has captured the attention of gallerists. At the moment, Bellboy is represented by FAIR at the New York Design Center. Last summer Driscoll

partnered in a show with New York dealer Maison Gerard, which specializes in both contemporary design and French art deco. "When I learned that Mat had left a successful career to embrace his passion, it immediately resonated with me and a studio visit followed," says managing partner Benoist Drut, who knew of Driscoll from his advertising work (Mother New York designed the gallery's branding). "The decision to include his work at Maison Gerard was an easy step to take." The gallery exhibited Driscoll's work as part of the Salon Art + Design Fair, hosted at New York's Park Avenue Armory in November.

The collaboration with Maison Gerard is spurring Driscoll to experiment with new materials and techniques. At the moment, he is working to reproduce the Water Tower chair in a more forgiving timber, such as walnut. He is also investigating *shou sugi ban*—a Japanese technique in which wood is preserved through charring—and working with softer geometries. Driscoll has enlisted the help of a part-time assistant, but for the most part it's a one-man show—and he has no regrets.

"At the end of the day, you have a physical object to show for your work. There's no better feeling than when you drop a piece off and the client reacts," he says. "It never gets old."

Furniture designer
Mat Driscoll, founder
of Bellboy.

Driver dresser by Bellboy,
2015, in American walnut,
paper composite, and
blackened steel.

Academy chair by
Bellboy, 2013, in oxidized
maple with paper
composite seat.

West occasional table
by Bellboy, 2015, in
American walnut with
lacquered base.

Water Tower chair
by Bellboy, 2012, in
reclaimed old growth
redwood from a
decommissioned New
York water tower.