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Furniture Takes a Manly Turn

By **PENELOPE GREEN**

JOOST VAN BLEISWIJK, a 34-year-old Dutch designer, makes domestic objects like clocks and candlesticks, chessboards and china cabinets out of Cor-Ten (otherwise known as “weathering”) steel that he sets outside his Eindhoven studio for a month or so, until it accrues a nice coat of rust.

He used to make shiny, highly polished pieces that gleamed like prerecession bling, or a Manhattan skyscraper built before the crash. Then he became interested in tougher, grittier finishes, and he’s been playing with the weather ever since.

“Small raindrops and lots of wind looks best — who knows why?” Mr. van Bleiswijk said recently, speaking by cellphone outside a restaurant in his hometown. Soon, he said, he’ll be working his pieces over with a blowtorch. His goal, he said, is to “do even heavier metal, and do it even more rough. I think, in this time, people are bored with too-perfect things.”

Thwack! So much for lacy Tyvek garlands, corseted velvet chairs and Swarovski crystal chandeliers. Or delicate Black Forest woodland imagery — indeed, anything that smacks of embroidery or the gentle arts is for sissies. So are teddy bear chairs, or even high-tech chairs designed with computer software and in materials hatched in a test tube.

Rough-looking furniture that carries a whiff of shop class, handmade by guys who have their own power saws — and know how to use them — is design’s new tack. Art is a many-gendered thing, but right now it is emphasizing the influence of the Y chromosome.

“Butch craft” is how Murray Moss, the canny marketer and former fashion entrepreneur, describes the work of Mr. van Bleiswijk and others, which he has collected in [an enticing show](#) that opened Wednesday night at Moss, his SoHo store. It has a “rough-hewn, virile and heavy-lifting aesthetic,” Mr. Moss said, albeit one that is sensitively rendered or considered, a nod to the history and semiotics of the word “butch.” (“Make Me,” reads the invitation, illustrated by a photo of a shirtless and ambiguously gendered individual wielding an ax. We’ll get to the queer-studies stuff later.)

There are boiled-leather vases cinched with wing nuts and riven by brutalist steel shafts made by [Simon Hasan](#), a British designer. The undulating shapes look like the bubbling lines of an R. Crumb drawing. Mr. Hasan uses a technique once deployed to soften and shape the thick hides for medieval body armor; [in a photo on his Web site](#), he wears a smithy's apron.

The “keel tables” by Oscar Magnus Narud, a Norwegian designer, have gutsy iron legs you whack in yourself with a mallet provided by Mr. Narud. He said he liked the idea of making furniture that was resilient and utilitarian; furniture you could fix yourself, and even if it was chipped wouldn't be ruined.

“I'd been looking at old Norwegian pieces that are put together with little fixings,” said Mr. Narud, who works in London, sharing studio space with his Royal College of Art pal, Peter Marigold. “A lot of pegs and wedges and things like that that are very simple but make a very sturdy piece of furniture.” It is in contrast, he noted, to super-modern, super-slick furniture whose value would plummet if its precious veneer were to be nicked.

Mr. Narud, who was speaking by cellphone, passed the phone to his studio mate, Mr. Marigold, whose stunning, blood-red tables and benches dominate the show at Mr. Moss's store. Made during a two-month residency in Norway, they were inspired by the electricity pylons dotted about the woods. Mr. Marigold used a circular saw and a single piece of wood to put together the tough-looking, archly artless pieces, which resemble the objects in a [Philip Guston](#) painting: the wood grain has been punched up with a sand blaster; brass screws are lined up, sort of.

“I think today people are very suspicious of a certain kind of ornament,” he said. “Like when I see laser cut, I think that's just lazy design. This kind of restraint” — restraint being the quality he was assigning his own and other semi-tough pieces — “is important because you try to focus on the idea rather than the form. I think things that are well finished should come from industry. For me to make something that's smooth and shiny would take a lot of unnecessary effort that I think would distract from the content. The ‘butchness’ is a focusing of my effort rather than a lack of focus.”

Mr. Marigold is no mere art school theorist, however. He has serious craft cred and can wield a power saw with the best of them. Tellingly, he recalled a conversation he had recently in a pub about English schools and how, he said, “If you're creative and vaguely intelligent, you're pushed into doing art, but if you are — how can I put this? — a bit thick, you're pushed into doing craft.”

You mean, like shop?

“Yeah, basically,” he said. “That’s what the troublemaking kids ended up doing, and that’s what I wanted to do. But I got pushed into doing art.”

Butch craft, as imagined by Mr. Moss, can also include nonfunctional work: four-foot tall, broken-plane pieces made from Sheetrock by Aaron Raymer, a soft-spoken sculptor from Louisville, Ky.

Drywall is pretty butch. Certainly, handling the utility knife to slice it up is.

Mr. Raymer, who used to make mechanical, machine-driven pieces, had been installing Sheetrock for years before he realized he could use the stuff for his own work. Last May, he was part of a team putting up drywall in Mr. Moss’s store when he caught the eye of the boss: “I said, ‘That guy is really good,’” Mr. Moss recalled.

Mr. Raymer let him know that was no stranger to Sheetrock. “It’s kind of strange to think of this,” he said the other day. “But it always seems like I apply a blue-collar trade approach to the art world. A lot of that comes from being in the labor force for a long time.” (Mr. Raymer, a stay-at-home dad, is 32; he received his M.F.A. from [N.Y.U.](#) in 2008.)

When Mr. Moss showed Mr. Raymer’s work to a reporter, he said, “Doesn’t it just put you right in the construction site, and there’s dust all over and everyone is wearing hard hats?”

DO tough times call for tough work? “Do people want to be reminded of tough times?” asked David McFadden, chief curator and vice president of the [Museum of Arts and Design](#) in Manhattan. “A real collector might want pieces that carry the voice of right now.”

But he added, “If you are looking for a functional piece of furniture, you may not want to see rough screws.”

Butchness, he continued, is in the eye of the beholder. “One man’s butch is another man’s femme. We attribute certain characteristics to design objects — they are clues to personality, but not the whole Freudian session. Marigold’s work is an example of the juxtaposition of the extremely refined with the extremely crude. It’s the design version of the raw and the cooked.”

The fathers of butch furniture could be said to be makers like Paul Evans, fomenters of the studio craft movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Or Tom Dixon in the 1980s.

Mr. Moss draws a line back to a “bowl” made with a slice of an iron I-beam by Enzo Mari

around 1957. (Mr. Moss's own I-beam bowl is in his shop this week.) "The toughness is there in the material," he said. "And in the banality, the humbleness of the material. And yet the elegance is truly evident."

For the last 10 years, said Paul Johnson, a gallerist in New York who represents Mr. Hasan, the boiled-leather man, as well as vintage work by Mr. Evans and other '70s-era craft types, "design has been very futuristic, very flashy. I think what's happened in the world has allowed the artists who make more affordable things with their hands to gain market share over someone who has to spend a ton of money to get their work produced."

He continued: "It's sweat equity. Some of these things take months to make. The first couple can take a year. That's what I've always liked about this kind of work: it's time and the hand, plus you get something that can't be made again."

As Mr. McFadden observed: "People are really eager to experience process, and something tangible. We live inside our heads so much. There's a sensuality to these designs, and it's not in terms of comfort, but in a more basic, instinctive sense. The other part of marketing contemporary design is that everyone is looking for a younger audience of collectors. I think the butch craft design definitely has a resonance with a younger person. There's a humor or a whimsy to the phrase — it sounds cool."

Andrew Wagner, editor of ReadyMade magazine and a former editor of American Craft magazine, put out by the American Craft Council, described Mr. Moss as "a master marketer."

He added, ruefully: "What the old school craft world needs is a Murray Moss. It needs a Moss to step up and come up with the language. Murray has an amazing knack of taking stuff that's pretty far out there and making it come to life. What he's showing now, and what these guys are doing, is nothing new, it's been happening for decades. But people got caught up in production furniture, and this idea of making it yourself kind of got lost and kind of stale."

In an era defined by an appetite for "conspicuous authenticity," to borrow a phrase from Andrew Potter, author of "The Authenticity Hoax: How We Get Lost Finding Ourselves," out this year from HarperCollins, it's easy to be cynical. Butch Craft could be an arts collective in Bushwick, or maybe a Viking metal band, the phrase peppered with umlauts, or a reclaimed-wood furniture collection produced by bearded hipsters.

Feh, Mr. Moss swatted the idea away. "This isn't an inelegant going back to the rough gesture," he said. "It's not a guy going out and making a bed of antlers. It's a progression

toward a very elegant gesture. It's just that the materials have this toughness and are an alternative means of giving an art content form and expression in a functional object."

What he means is that his artists have thought hard to present rough. Which leads us back to "butch," a term hatched years ago by the lesbian community to describe a kind of hyper-maleness: a woman's performance of masculinity, as queer theorists like Judith Halberstam, a professor of gender studies at the [University of Southern California](#), and author of "Female Masculinity," will point out.

"It's an old term, but it's still brimming with meaning," Ms. Halberstam said recently. "Today, I would define it as a counter-gender identity."

Mr. Moss would agree. "I thought about this a lot," he said. "I used the term 'butch,' versus 'masculine' or 'tough' or 'manly,' because what I mean by this is work that is stereotypically considered manly, but expressed by a personality that is stereotypically considered sensitive or feminine."

In other words, an artist.