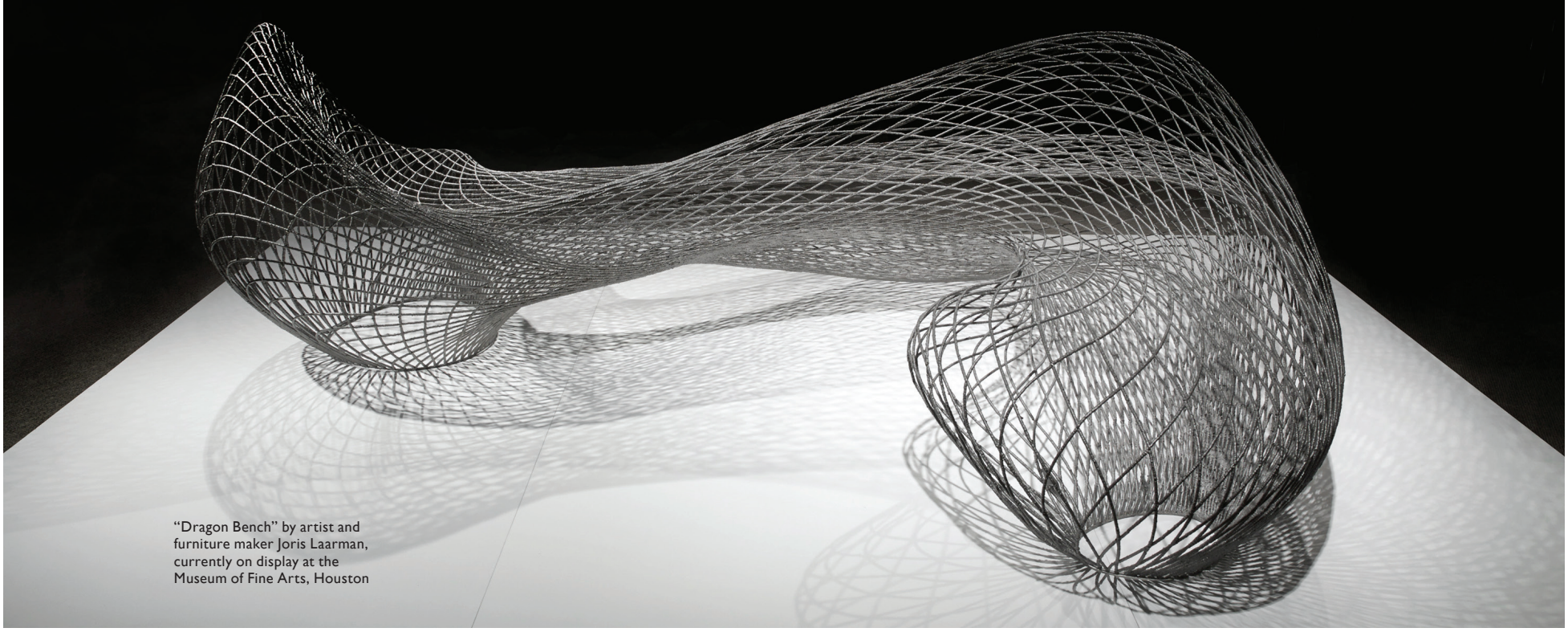
CUTTING EDGE

Sci-fi dreams set up house with a Dutch furniture designer's new exhibition, now on display at The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

By Michele Meyer



"Dragon Bench" by artist and furniture maker Joris Laarman, currently on display at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

"It was in the middle of nowhere," artist and furniture designer Joris Laarman, 38, recalls of his hometown, Borculo, a rural village in the Netherlands. "I had loads of time to daydream." Now, all of that dreaming has paid off and lead to his first major American solo exhibition, *Joris Laarman Lab: Design in the Digital Age*, which stops at The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, June 24 to Sept. 16. The show features 65 of his design experiments, and a multimedia exhibit that also includes videos and sketches that capture the full spectrum of the creative process. When it comes to the wunderkind's futuristic visions, it's as much about how as it is about what.

Laarman's drawing skills and interest in art history and physics landed him at the prestigious Design Academy Eindhoven, and his 2003 graduation project, *Reinventing Functionality*, included "Heatwave," a baroque wall hanging that doubles as a radiator. It wowed the design world and skyrocketed his reputation.

"I was stunned by someone rethinking the radiator and doing it in such a smart way," says Cindi Strauss, MFAH curator of decorative arts, craft and design. "With scrolls and foliate decoration, it's modular, rococo [and] contemporary, and has tremendous presence."

The day after Laarman's graduation, a Japanese film crew appeared at his door. At that time, he also got his first computer, which he says "changed everything." Today, he and filmmaker Anita Star, his partner both in life and in the lab, run an Amsterdam-based idea incubator that employs engineers, computer programmers and craftspeople.

Much as Charles and Ray Eames—another married couple—did with their molded wooden chairs, Laarman has revolutionized the furniture industry. He gleans ideas from writing science fiction, mining research worldwide and spinning it to make trendsetting furnishings.

Engineer Claus Mattheck's creation of lightweight car engine mounts got Laarman's mind churning about how the same technology

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From left: Artist and furniture designer Joris Laarman; Bone Rocker chair, on display in the exhibition.

could be applied to furniture. From there, he created a computer program that uses patterns found in nature—the evolution of bird bones, the growth patterns in tree branches—to help find the best structures and shapes for furniture. For two years, he tweaked his formula, and the result is his limited-edition Bone collection of chairs, rockers and tables.

"He combined new technology and materials with historical references and beauty—pushing what was possible in design," Strauss says. He's also creating art and raising functionality to a new level. A robot-built Asimov chair, named for author Isaac Asimov, flattens to a sheet of metal, making it easy to ship. He's created climbing walls with ivy scrolls, and his marble cumulus tables appear to float like clouds. His team has even built robots and 3D printers that eject molten metal midair, a technique they're using to create a stainless steel pedestrian bridge over one of Amsterdam's iconic canals.

"He's recognized as one of the most important designers working today," says Strauss, who notes that the MFAH's permanent collection touts six of Laarman's pieces. His work is also in the vaults at Paris' Centre Pompidou, London's Victoria and Albert Museum and New York's Museum of Modern Art. Not only do major cultural institutions revere his work, but just last December, one of his Bone chairs commanded no less than $280,000 at Sotheby's auction.

While the Bone series remains out of financial reach for most, the designer is providing MFAH patrons with a downloadable program that allows anyone with a 3D printer to make their own chairs. "I don't know of any other designer of his stature who'd release that kind of information," Strauss marvels.

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