

OTHERWORLDLY

THE POWER OF THE ART SIDE OF DESIGN.

by ALISON CLARE STEINGOLD



From far left: David Wiseman;
DISC Interiors, Dougall Paulson.

Middle, D. Gilbert

There are people whose mastery of skills in now-obsolete trades really makes you wonder if it's in their DNA. It's as if they should have been in another time.

As much as technology has given way to 3-D printer production, deep appreciation for the hands-on craftsmanship of decorative arts continues to grow. But as that world evolves, so do the parameters that define it. "There's this other category. It doesn't fall as strictly designer, artist, or artisan," explains Sean Yashar, founder of The Culture Creative (theculturecreative.com), an artist/creative agency. "It's not fine arts or making a collectible but toward conceptual craft. There are people whose mastery of skills in now-obsolete trades really makes you wonder if it's in their DNA. It's as if they should have been in another time. They find themselves in what you could call the art side of design." >



This page: David Wiseman.
Opposite: Dougall Paulson.



Opposite, top and middle, Meghan Bob

PHILOSOPHY, FROM FORAGE TO FOUNDRY

Picture a barbed plain-front compound along a stretch of LA not quite here (Atwater Village) or there (Glassell Park). Buzz through, and the unmistakable scent of melted wax heralds entry to the rich, imaginative world of David Wiseman (dwiseman.com). Here, installations in process, materials, and test pieces occupy every cranny, molds organized and catalogued. Ceramics stations are indoors; outdoor areas are dedicated to wax and welding, casting, chasing, grinding, and polishing.

Like an author speaking through his characters, Wiseman cultivates the fine detail and voices of nature. You might look up to see a handsome branch chandelier awaiting its patina, or a lonely egg-like bronze pendant, suspended, which has "cracked" open to reveal, like a window into its soul, a flurry of painstakingly applied porcelain flora. Meanwhile, a scattershot of motifs cast as a table is actually Wiseman's take on a bowerbird's collaged assemblage to woo his mate. No doubt the studio cat is fascinated by the tiny bronze mouse hanging from its tail.

Wiseman is quick to give all the credit to the materials. "The past 10 years in this studio have really been an exploration of observing what happens to molten metal. I love patterns and figuring out ways to make them functional," he explains. Still, balancing the masculine and the feminine, the elements

of nature, the voids and lava-like flow against a table's geometry and rigidity—such exploration requires a deft hand. His pitch-perfect bronze and porcelain installations are neither indulgent nor superficial in their application of aesthetic to form. Another century may have settled for a ceiling medallion; Wiseman transforms a dining room ceiling into an immersive white canopy of 3-D blossoms and delicate branches crawling organically across surfaces. His most recent commissions and edition of rugs collage his natural motifs and centuries-old decorative arts patterning onto various floorcoverings and large jali-like bronze screens. Meandering Asian motifs swirl and dissolve into layers of something utterly modern and fresh.

With solo gallery shows, a book, and the design fair circuit already under his belt, Wiseman is now shifting gears. Over the next year, he's developing a 30,000-square-foot gallery and studio in the hidden sliver along the LA River known as Frogtown, alongside his brother, Ari Wiseman, who most recently served as deputy director of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation. This setting will provide ample space to continue working with private clients and commissions, and engage a more diverse set of projects. "I'm making things for people, and I don't want to lose sight of that," he says.

creative disciplines like fine arts and music. There's precedent for management," says Yashar, who identified this need and added management to his thriving design PR/branding agency, The Culture Creative. "For us, the real, true talent needs to be supported, to develop and understand the arc of it all. Because while you're out there being tortured as much as any famous artist about that exceptional chair you're designing, someone saw it who's *not* tortured, who's a hustler, who will knock it off, distribute it, make money on it, and get the credit for it before you're even ready to show it."

One emerging client, Dougall Paulson (dougallpaulson.com), has thought up a worthy framework to understand their highly conceptual work. From the second floor of a converted light-bulb factory in the rough-around-the-edges LA patch rather appropriately named Watts, their live-work floorplan is modular yet dotted with objects of permanence: giant cutting tables, étagères of glazes, and half-glazed vessels in progress; Sean Dougall's ceramics stations and kilns; and Andrew Paulson's brilliant metallic threads and looms.

The design duo has begun to envision their growing oeuvre as narrative, with collections—Dark Matter, Spectrum, and Ocean of Emptiness—serving as visual storytelling. The first chapter of Ocean of Emptiness, their newest collection, is "Auraform," which will be shown at Blackman Cruz gallery in LA. If you remember how Pink Floyd travels through various songs in a narrative concept album like *The Wall*, a DP journey is analogous: a burst star through the infinity of consciousness, illuminated and explored through their designed objects. They conjure a sort of big-bang explosion from distant reaches in sculpted, fossil-like ceramic sconces and pendant lighting that practically radiate with a halo effect of rays and hot spots. "In Ocean of Emptiness, we're looking inversely from Dark Matter, looking to and inside the cosmos, and water, and playing with that," says Dougall. Perspective is central to their imagining the future of looking back.

The beginnings of a next chapter hang near one weaving station. It appears to be a floorcovering, though intricately woven with bright metal, a pure silver pigment vaporized over rice paper, then split and wound onto nylon. Sound wild? We're not done. The piece is literally a back-and-forth conversation between Paulson on the loom, where he innovates tensile weaving methods to manage such unruly material, and Dougall, whose abstract sketches on paper are knotted out on the piece. Dougall then carves the topographic pile-weave into 3-D forms that resemble some otherworldly oceanic critter or coral fantasy.

(And for outside projects—short stories, so to speak—they're delving into hospitality design with every last installation and vessel for the new jewel-box restaurant Giulia in downtown LA. There's also an ethereal holograph-meets-Japanese tatami weaving for an upcoming show in Paris curated by perfume brand Régime des Fleurs.)

Whatever craft employed to work through each collection, be it fiber arts or even graphic design/identity work, is all process. Borrowing a more bookish or musical lexicon frees the designer to be called, simply, a designer. Instead of multihyphenates or the desire to put sculptors or fiber artists in a box, the implication is that he or she might be skilled in and employ any number of decorative arts to complete a chapter. ▷

UNDERSTANDING THE MATTER

The structureless world of design is a wild frontier. Museums, galleries, advisors, and fairs exist at the high end, yet not with the centralized sway of their parallel industries. "Design" has been embraced, meanwhile, as a vague catchall phrase.

Society is no stranger to the conceptual. But the reality of the "art side of design" means forging new approaches to understand (and safeguard) the ingenuity of their works.

While interior designers serve clients, and galleries are straddling to serve client and designer, a handful of individuals, such as design PR expert Yashar, now scout and manage talents in this niche. "Look at our neighboring

BETTER TOGETHER, AND LIVING

Collaborating with interior designers and galleries on custom works and commissions is very much a key reality of today's working designer. "It's more exciting when you find someone who's interested in craft and spaces," says David John Dick, co-principal of Los Angeles-based DISC Interiors (*discinteriors.com*), whose 2014 *Sunset Magazine* Idea House concept home was a veritable funhouse of custom commissions with lighting by Jason Koharik and murals by Londubh Studio, among others. "When something is specific for the space, it becomes integrated. Like Chahan in Paris and Peter Marino working with the Haas Brothers, some designers have constant collaboration in their repertoire, which, to me, is far more interesting than buying a piece of artwork for the walls. People like David Wiseman are very important in that discussion," he adds.

With trade clients so sensitive to achieving flawless color and results, using precious materials, and other experimental methods, every step of the custom process is critical. Second-generation furniture designer and finisher Taj Monjardo (*mongiardostudio.com*) ensures rigorous testing has gone into each of his studio's fabricated pieces. A desk whose R&D has already been completed might take 200 man-hours to produce, while complex custom residential work might require thousands of hours.

Monjardo has ambitious motivations for his studio, set deep in the summer escape of southwest Massachusetts known as the Berkshires. He has carried on the direction of his father's art deco furniture business. Monjardo père began custom design with Michael Chow for Giorgio Armani boutiques, pivoting the business from almost entirely restoration to fabrication of custom pieces, high-end retail collaborations, and reproductions. Today, Taj also develops freestanding pieces with A-list designers and architects such as Peter Marino for Louis Vuitton, Fendi, Bulgari, and Christian Dior boutiques worldwide. He is pioneering processes such as carving heat-resistant mica with different textures for rich and deep reflections on side tables, and playing with prismatic paint used for hotrod cars—a nod to his father's beginnings in the auto industry. The results are magnificent, from carving unusual geometric prisms encased in thick, layered cast-acrylic to rosewood veneer dining tables on x-bases that would make Jean-Michel Frank smile.

"I want to be making the things that no one has ever seen before—the pieces that are going to be reproduced in 100 years," he says. Of anyone, he'd understand the criteria; while the other kids toyed with Fisher-Price playsets, this self-professed "shop kid" was raised with his hands on the finest French art deco furniture in the world: the Ruhlmanns, the Chareaus, the Grays. So today, the handiwork and integrity of the masters is there, albeit crafted with contemporary thought and modern materials.

The great news is that continued interest in collecting only fuels the market for its contemporary "art side of design." An alum of Los Angeles Modern Auctions, Heritage Auctions, and Bonhams, Katie Nartonis (*thenartonisproject.com*) curates in the field to bring fine design to auction. She assists private clients and makers of American Studio Design to place collections (think along the lines of a \$150,000 Brazilian modern collection or a \$70,000–\$90,000 Sam Maloof dining set from 1964).

Her focus is unusual in an auction environment where



value is often attributed posthumously. "It has been one of the hallmarks of my auction career to champion the work of living artists and makers," she says. "Many have gallery sales but may not have an existing auction record ... The more challenging the market, the tendency can be to concentrate on the big established names. I would actually argue that this is the time to take more risks. I believe collectors are hungry to be introduced to new and fresh design."

But don't hold your breath for any Mongiardo Studio pieces to come up at auction any time soon, or even the opportunity for the family to buy back their pieces. Recently, when a marquee brand renovated one of its boutiques, the Mongiardo Studio furniture was tucked away in storage rather than discarded or auctioned.

"Our intention is to make something last generations. As long as we can possibly make it last," says Monjardo. "So that's a compliment." ♦



Top and bottom: DISC Interiors.