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# MENIKA

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**THE CENTENARY ISSUE**





# IFEANYI OGANWU

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**I**t was no mean feat when last year *New York* magazine's Global Design issue selected a new generation of young furniture and product makers, naming London-based designer, Ifeanyi Oganwu as one of its rising stars. Born in 1979, in Nigeria, the young designer studied Architecture at the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago and the Architectural Association in London, completing his postgraduate studies at Columbia University in 2007. The following year he founded his agency, Expand Design undertaking architecture, furniture and product design.

Oganwu engages in multi-faceted and functional projects, strongly influenced by digital design, engineering and an exploration of base materials. His craftsmanship engages in the abstract form using technological processes to guide his design techniques. He creates conventional furniture design, incorporating unexpected twists derived from his sustained and scholarly



*Full Circle*, 2010, composite material bench, L. 107.25 x H. 82.88 x D.122.85cm, limited edition of 20

engagement with architectural influences.

The designer has slowly and surely been gaining attention and gathering critical praise with his work frequently appearing in group shows at design and art fairs worldwide. In this context, the logical step would have been for him to sign with one of the many famous furniture manufacturers to produce his designs. In preference, he had his first solo exhibition *Look Mum, No Hands* at Galerie Armel Soyer in Paris last summer, where he debuted his desk and side table collection *Contoured Crater*, exquisitely crafted from stacks of birch ply plates.

At the recent *Design Miami Basel* in December, Oganwu showed a series of new designs with Gallery Priveekollektie Contemporary Art and Design based in Holland. Among the works on display was an iridescent blue boomerang-shaped chair, *Milky Splice*, seemingly combining the functions of art and design. Made of a fiberglass composite finished with a pearlescent white polychrome, the chair demonstrates his skillful approach in experimenting not only in form, structure, and materials but in grasping the principles of industrial design, sculpture and mixed-medium installation.

Oganwu is part of a continuing tradition of architects, furniture and product designers embracing hybrid practices and adopting variable experimentation and presentation of their work. The last decade has seen a shift where the functions of art and design have amalgamated. Both British architect, Thomas Heatherwick and designer, Barber Osgerby had exhibitions with recently shuttered art gallery Haunch of Venison in London. Industrial designer, Marc Newson regularly shows with Gagosian gallery while architect and designer, Ron Arad has exhibited with Timothy Taylor gallery.

The designer is a refreshing addition to the design landscape. While the contemporary art scene is booming on the African continent, contemporary design is often neglected and under appreciated. No doubt, the successful Oganwu will ignite interest and initiate dialogue on contemporary design practices.

*Contoured Crater Desk*, 2013, desk, birch, ply, stainless steel, lead ballast, L. 216.25 x H. 73.13 x D. 97.5cm, limited edition of 10



**OMENKA MAGAZINE:** You trained as an architect and worked for the offices of John Ronan Architects, Chicago and Zaha Hadid Architects, London. What led you to pursue a multi-disciplinary practice in setting up a studio engaging in architecture and furniture design?

**IFEANYI OGANWUI:** I cultivated my interest in multi-disciplinary practice while studying at London's Architectural Association (AA) where the role of the architect is constantly being debated. At the AA, architecture took many forms, from the ephemeral to the overdetermined. After graduation I worked in the offices of AKT Structural Engineers, where I spent over five years, considerably more time than in any architecture firm. My other experiences include collaborating with fashion designer, Hussein Chalayan, so my studio allows me to synthesize my interests and experiences.

**Furniture design seems to hold an intense fascination with architects beginning in the early 20th century with the likes of Gerrit Rietveld, Arne Jacobsen, Marcel Breuer and Mies van der Rohe, to present day practitioners such as Zaha Hadid, David Chipperfield and Thomas Heatherwick. Why do you think this is, and what drew you to develop this practice of design?**

Your examples are absolutely spot on, in the early 20th century, architects developed manifestos that set out their scope of practice. I would say furniture then became an integral part of the process of creating continuity between interior and exterior, while indicating a break with historical forms and embracing new technologies. Mies' Barcelona Pavilion and Rietveld's Schroder House are great examples of this. In my practice, I use furniture as a medium to experiment with concepts that have architectural origins.

**Name a building, a piece of furniture and industrial product that influenced, you, or changed your life and why?**

There have been several influences and life changing moments. I have wonderful memories from my undergrad years spent in Mies van der Rohe's Chicago Crown Hall, which houses the Illinois Institute of Technology's architecture school. Studying in the open-plan modernist masterpiece broadened my perspective as it offered me a chance to observe teaching methods and student projects across all levels of the school. On furniture influences, I find Ron Arad's vertical series of chairs very fascinating, from the early *At Your Own Risk*, to the more recent *Gornli*. He basically reinvents the chair with these works which inhabit the space between art and design. An industrial product would have to be a dependable smartphone that allows me to work from whatever part of the world I happen to be.

**Most designers and architects choose famous furniture brands such as Cappellini, Cassina, Vitra or Knoll to showcase their pieces. You chose instead to work with two design galleries. Was this a conscious decision and how does it enhance or challenge your creative output?**

Choosing a partner works both ways, I met Armel Soyer when I presented my first collection in Milan four years ago and she has been a strong supporter, giving me my first solo show last year in her Paris gallery. Two years ago, I met Miriam and Irving van Dijk of Priveekollektie through the artist, Miguel Chevalier. A few months later, we went for it and my work has been introduced to new audiences in Basel, London, Miami and their home base of Heusden. I've also been working with Pascale Revert of Perimeter, formerly based in Paris and now London. Galleries offer me a platform to create experimental work that isn't necessarily suited for the production methods of the famous furniture brands, so both outlets present different challenges. **Whether, a chair, a desk or a table, what are the facets in beginning**

**to conceive a product, from designing the form to the function?**

I'm very inspired by film, I don't get to see much these days so I rely on my recollection to kick-start a concept or particular mood that I might be aiming for with a design. By injecting the concept with materiality and functionality, I can then push things forward. I'm also inspired when outdoors or overloaded with contemporary art.

**For your show in April last year at Galerie Armel Soyer in Paris, you created *Contoured Crater*, a desk and side table. This design illustrates how you elaborately impose new ideas of modernity in your pursuit of structure. The construction almost alludes to a blueprint for a building design, perhaps a museum in the new future. This, I am assuming, is a nod towards Futurism, the avant-garde movement founded in Milan in 1909 by the Italian poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti?**

I closely studied Futurist works during my final year at the AA, and I'm fond of Umberto Boccioni's *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*. Dynamism and morphology are of interest to me. When I designed the *Crater* desk, I was mostly preoccupied with gravity. The prototyping stage was very involved because we had carried out digital structural tests but the plastic nature of the material had other plans. The desk is literally forced into not falling over. More recently, the side table has been re-engineered for use as a bench, which lends it more



*Milky Splice*, 2012, composite material stool, L. 72.95cm x D. 44.84cm x W. 77.03cm, limited edition of 20



*Splice*, 2012, aluminum stool, L. 79.95 x H. 44.85 x D. 77.03cm, limited edition of 6

functionality. This was asking a lot of a byproduct assembled from offcuts of the central crater extracted from the desk. Lately, my focus has been on expressing surface through structure. I can see how one might read the crater as an architectural snapshot, perhaps as terraces looking onto a central courtyard.

**You are clearly motivated by 'contemporary digital tools of the future' in crafting your designs. This is also particularly evident in the works *Full Circle* (2010) and *Splice* (2012). The later design took two years of research and development before being produced. How do you undertake these technological processes and intricacies?**

Both projects are closely related in the way that compound surfaces are used to suggest multiple modes of habitation. The project timeline of two years involved going back and forth with my manufacturing partners, so we could create a work that matched the ambitions of the studio on a budget that was within reach. Understanding the manufacturing process was central to achieving this goal.

**You demonstrate an elegant mastery of engaging with diverse materials in creating your designs, such as with the table, *Ren* (2010), where you used marble for the first time. How do you begin to identify which works are created with wood, fiberglass or aluminum?**

Having an understanding of the material in the early stages of concept development drives the final outcome of the design. I had worked with marble on an earlier project, which weighed about half a ton, so with *Ren*, my primary concern was to create an expansive functional surface without the weight. If the work was made with aluminum for example, then its overall form would be adapted to the material's structural properties and other attributes, so the outcome would be different.

**What projects are you working on at the moment?**

I'm excited about the new projects currently under development. I'm broadening the applications of metal forming tools created last year for a wall-mounted console by inverting its design principles in order to present it as a freestanding construct. Also under development are a series of tables formed from folded planar surfaces, a large site-specific installation and a collection of very small objects.

**What and who would you like to design something for?**

It's great to work with clients who have a very strong vision, as well as the confidence to let me create freely once I understand their needs.

**What are your future plans for your agency, Expand Design?**

The plan is to keep moving and to share the output of the studio with a broader audience.