

# Dutch design lab blends naturalistic and futuristic

October 11 2017, by Katherine Roth

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This Sept. 28, 2017 photo provided by the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, shows an Installation view of "Joris Laarman Lab: Design in the Digital Age," in New York. (Matt Flynn/Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum via AP)

The first U.S. museum exhibit devoted solely to the experimental and futuristic work of Dutch design studio Joris Laarman Lab is now on view at the Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum [here](#).

The works—mainly furniture, along with an unusual radiator and a newly finished section of footbridge—tend to be curvy and organic in form, many resembling strange yet elegant life forms that have sprouted table legs and chair arms.

Laarman and his team of computer scientists, engineers and craftsmen seem at first glance to get their inspiration from the past, with designs reminiscent of Art Nouveau or even rococo. "Gradient Lounge" is a generously sized chaise with voluptuous curves 3-D-printed from polyamide nickel and copper, with matching upholstery, 3-D-knit of silk, mercerized cotton and Merino wool. "Bridge Table," the sleek show-stopper of aluminum and tungsten carbide that greets visitors in the main part of the exhibit, resembles a smooth, silver-colored tree, with four trunk-like legs that separate into branches and extend to support a gleaming, flat surface.

But there's nothing old-fashioned about these works.

They are not inspired by nature so much as designed using actual mathematical principles of nature—algorithms drawn from plants, say, or multi-celled organisms. These algorithms are used to design the works created using 3-D printers or, in the case of the footbridge, using 3-D-printing robots invented by the team. Then the pieces are finished using a combination of high-tech and artisanal methods, such as binding the exteriors with nickel, copper or steel, or handcrafting elements out of wood.



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"The emphasis is on experimentation, and on looking to biology and physics for design inspiration," explains Andrea Lipps, assistant curator of contemporary design at Cooper Hewitt, who oversaw the exhibit.

Videos shown throughout the show help explain how the pieces were made and are crucial to understanding the works, since the techniques are so new, some of them only recently invented by the studio.

"When people saw our exhibit in Holland, they got very emotional, and some of them even cried. The future can feel like a very scary place," says Laarman, a soft-spoken 37-year-old who was in New York for the

opening of the show.



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"Joris Laarman Lab: Design in the Digital Age" will remain on view at the Cooper Hewitt through Jan. 15. It will then travel to The High Museum of Art in Atlanta (Feb. 18-May 13) and the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston (June 17-Sept. 9). The show, organized by each museum with slightly different works, has been expanded and updated since it originated at the Groninger Museum, in Groningen, Holland, in 2015.

Joris Laarman Lab, founded by Laarman in 2004 with filmmaker and



partner Anita Star, uses processes as innovative as the designs themselves.

"The waves of technology are accelerating rapidly," Laarman says, referring to a timeline featured along one wall in the exhibit; it shows waves of technological advances alongside stock market rises and downturns, and includes moments in the foreseeable future, like the arrival of driverless cars. On the timeline, the industrial age has fallen away precipitously and the [digital age](#) is blasting off in new directions.



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Laarman is optimistic.

"Digital technology is changing our lives at every level. It's very exciting. No one really knows how this next phase is going to happen. But I think it may start a whole new wave of creativity," he says.

"Creativity is the one most important thing we can do as humans," he adds. "This new technology will make it easier to make a living off creative ideas, and create a direct line between creators and the public."



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There is a tension in Joris Laarman Lab's work between technology and traditional craftsmanship, and between ornamentation and function.

The studio's Heat Wave Radiator (acquired by the Cooper Hewitt, with functioning examples available for purchase), is made of concrete and is designed to be installed on the wall. It resembles some kind of industrial ivy, with each twist and curlicue adding to its efficiency as a heater.

Currently, Laarman's studio is at work producing the stainless steel bridge across a footbridge in Amsterdam using its own "MX3D" production method, which allows for 3-D printing in midair using robots. The technology opens the door to enormous 3-D-printed construction projects.



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A newly completed section of the footbridge, which has a soft, nubby texture like that of a handwoven rug, is on view.

"Biotechnology and artificial intelligence are taking us to a very new phase," Laarman says.



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Citation: Dutch design lab blends naturalistic and futuristic (2017, October 11) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-10-dutch-lab-blends-naturalistic-futuristic.html>

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