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REVIEW

Excisions and Constructions

Bordeaux
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"Is the digital era able to duplicate nature?" ponders the French designer Martin Szekely, whose work is the subject of an ambitious exhibition, *Construction*, which opened at the Musée des arts décoratifs et du design in Bordeaux (MADD) last week. Referring to his three low Artefact tables (2013), whose tabletops are made from perfectly smooth and rounded quartzite stones, he continues: "While walking on a pebble beach in Normandy, probably in 2012, the beginning of a solution came to me."

The relationship between natural forms and technological construction is paramount to Szekely. The Artefact table tops are in fact modelled on found pebbles, which have been translated into digital files with the help of a 3D scanner, scaled up and "cloned". The result is a group of gleaming, three-legged stone pods that would not feel entirely out of place in *Kettle's Yard* (<http://www.kettlesyard.co.uk/handfulofobjects/spiral-of-stones/>). Yet the Artefact tables are uncanny: the scale and smoothness of their pebble tops render them strange, and betray their artifice. "Is Artefact still a rock, or simply a new kind of stone disconnected from natural origins?" asks Szekely.



Such rhetorical questions abound in *Construction*, and are apt, perhaps, for a designer who styles himself as a thinker as much as a maker. The conceptual development of the artefact alone had a gestation period of about five years, says Szekely. It is one of the more recent pieces shown as part of *Construction*, which is hosted in MADD's contemporary design space, the former prison adjoining the museum's 18th-century Hôtel Lalande. But *Construction* also features pieces from as far back as 1978, many of which display the same cerebral approach and the same discreet reliance on technological production techniques.

"Martin's pieces are complex but simple to the eye," says MADD director Constance Rubini, who has curated *Construction* in concert with Szekely. "They employ some very technological collaborations. Often, when designers say they use technology, they show things that *look* like technology. With Martin's work, it doesn't look like technology. But he is in fact looking very closely at technological developments today."

A good example of this might be found in Szekely's 1997 L'Armoire, displayed in one of the small cell spaces of the former prison. The cabinet is pared down to its simplest form (it's a box with doors); so much so that it features no nuts, bolts, or hinges. This is made possible with the use of the relatively new material Alucobond, which consists of two sheets of aluminium sandwiching a layer of flexible plastic. The excisions made to the hard aluminium sheets allow for the plastic to act as hinge. A flattened-out Alucobond net is hung behind L'Armoire, demonstrating the intuitive ease with which L'Armoire is folded into shape. (No cryptic Ikea-style assembly pamphlet to scratch one's head over here.)



Disegno

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L'Armoire, 1997. IMAGE Fabrice Gousset courtesy of MADD Bordeaux.

Since the late 1990s, Szekely has downplayed the role of drawing in his design practice. "When I got interested in furniture and ordinary objects 40 years ago, drawing as a gesture and signature was the basis of my creations," he says, and it is true that early collections such as Pi, which catapulted him to fame in the early 1980s, have a whimsically gestural quality. Szekely's shift towards a more parametric and technologically attuned approach was perhaps most emphatically marked with the choice of title for his 2011 retrospective at the Centre Pompidou, *Ne plus dessiner* ("Draw no more"). Today, Szekely says he works "more like a scientist who observes data than an artist gifted with imagination. The shape is only the result of a process, and no longer a goal in itself."



Exacting parametric calibrations are found everywhere in *Construction*. The modular table MAP-TEX#3 from 2009 is held up by legs that are asymmetrically distributed and seemingly arbitrarily placed. Yet it is extremely sturdy, as Szekely himself demonstrates by giving it a forceful shove; it doesn't budge. The same goes for the spindly Tino shelves, also from 2009, notes Rubini. "He plays with the equilibrium of things. People look at Martin's furniture and say, 'Yes, but you can't put books in that!' But of course you can; in his home he has it full of books. It's just to do with the placement of the columns, never one underneath the other."



Tino shelves, 2009. IMAGE courtesy of Martin Szekely.

Szekely's method sees forms whittled down (conceptually whittled, of course – it's difficult to imagine Szekely whittling anything by hand) to their simplest constituent elements to achieve what he calls a universal legibility. "The more you simplify, the closer you get to the essence of things," says Rubini. And Szekely's pieces certainly do not foist any unnecessary distractions upon the user. However, for all its universality, Szekely's work can also be situated within a specific design tradition. His minimalism emerged in the 1990s, when designers such as Maarten van Severen and architects such as John Pawson were similarly seeking simplicity in form and execution.



In the catalogue and throughout *Construction*, minimalist reduction is presented as a process of almost timeless appeal. A line from Leon Battista Alberti's 1452 *De Re Aedificatoria* greets the visitor as they enter the space, and open the catalogue, for instance: "Let us call beauty, in the strictest sense, the adjustment of all parts proportionately so that nothing can be added, removed or changed without impairing the harmony of the whole." But although Szekely's pieces may appear timeless, they are in fact anchored to historically specific technologies, materials, and design values that all allowed for such an expression to emerge. It is tensions such as these – between the universal and the specific; nature and artifice; formal simplicity and structural complexity – that permeate the display at MADD, and that make Szekely's work so compelling.

Constructions is at the Musée des arts décoratifs et du design in Bordeaux until 16 September 2018.

MADD paid for Disegno's visit to Bordeaux.

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