

By Deborah Cassell



Christopher Streng

My background:

I studied at the Milwaukee Institute of Art & Design. Then, I moved to Europe briefly to do mostly contract work. Later, I spent about two and a half years with Kohler Co. as a design consultant.

My materials:

I experimented with composite plastic, which is a higher quality version of fiberglass, and I began to manufacture objects that people told me couldn't be done. I wanted to see where the process could take me and what I could learn from it.

My process:

I always start my designs by hand, and I keep every sketch I've ever done. I did the first drawing of the Ubu stool in Milan, Italy, 12 years ago. There, I saw bicycle racks that resembled upside down U-shaped structures. They were bolted to the grid work of the subway and positioned at 90 degree angles. They seemed to create a family of organic objects. I thought, wouldn't it be great to have a public space where one could interact with such objects?

Ubu stool is made from a thermoset plastic that's similar to epoxy. Each piece may take up to eight hours to produce, but actual labor time is about one and a half hours. The stool comes in bright colors, such as neon magenta. The color is achieved through a seven-layer process and then UV-protected to keep from fading.

My inspiration:

I avoid being influenced by design or art history. I don't want to be a traditionalist or a transitionalist. I want to have completely original ideas. I look at how objects intersect and how surfaces come together on industrial objects—for example, the castings on a fire hydrant.

My challenges:

It's difficult for an American to work for an Italian design company, but a few of us are starting to break those boundaries. America was "the" place for design in the '50s and '60s, but then the Korean War came along. We've been recovering ever since.

My next project:

Urban sprawl has caused me to explore other options for living. I'm working on a concept for a portable, solid-walled cabin or cottage that you could put on the roof of your SUV, drive out into the countryside and pop up. Inside, it would have rooms and facilities. Twin-sheet thermoforming would enable you to put duct work for air and water, and wiring into the construction. The pieces would come together to create a modular environment.

Three words that describe my designs:

Uplifting, nurturing, loving.



Select pieces by Christopher Streng can be seen at the Smithsonian's Cooper-Hewitt Museum's National Design Triennial, Inside Design Now, through March 2004. Shown here are (from top) Belle bar stool, NaLi stool, Ubu stool, Tray light, and LoLa lounge and ottoman. **CIRCLE 258**