

Rhode

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THE TALENT // RHODE ISLAND SCHOOL OF DESIGN

At a world class arts institution in Providence, crystal inspires a range of works by a vibrant group of design graduates, discovers David Sokol...

PHOTOGRAPHY YOKO INOUE

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May of each year, America's tastemakers converge on the International Contemporary Furniture Fair in New York, expecting to be dazzled by new feats. In 2007, students from the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence invoked ICFF's high standards well and truly. Their presentation of Crystal Connection, a project linking the school's renowned 12-year-old furniture department and Swarovski, shimmered to the delight of thousands of passers-by.

Furniture designer and RISD assistant professor Lothar Windels shepherded the students' work over two semesters: the short but intense January term was devoted to conceptualizing, sketching and modelling, critique, and then more sketching and modelling; in the spring semester leading to the event, students further developed a smaller selection of ideas and fabricated one or two prototypes for display. Windels explains that RISD's young designers have the good fortune of participating in external design collaborations regularly, but the opportunity to design for Swarovski energized his charges in a way he had rarely seen. "The students put in the extra effort, because they really understood the potential of Swarovski's support, know-how and exposure," he says.

Why should a company that regularly collaborates with heavy-hitter designers such as Ron Arad and Yves Béhar nourish a bunch of barely-twenty-somethings? "Students have the ability to work very freely and come up with unexpected solutions," says Windels. Indeed, RISD's next big things have devised ingenious applications and new meanings for a material that's already a go-to for the fashion, interiors, and housewares fields. Even today's design stars will take a shine to these startling works.

WINGED CHANDELIER BY *Kallie Weinkle*

Explaining to your parents what it is you do, exactly, is the bane of the artistic child. Love may bind families, but it's not easy to describe the creative impulse to people with whom you may share every possible trait but vision. (Let's not even touch the perennial response: "And how do you think you're going to make a living that way?") For 21-year-old RISD senior Kallie Weinkle (right), Crystal Connection provided the opportunity to teach her elders about the meaning of product design.

Weinkle had an in. "My grandparents were huge collectors of Swarovski," she says of her father's parents. "In fact, by the time I was in the sixth grade I had travelled to Austria to see the factory. I was very excited to be able to talk to them about designing for Swarovski because they had never really understood my role in design school." To produce her Winged Chandelier piece, Weinkle began by "connecting the crystal and shine with lightness and images of bird and flight". Indeed, beholding Winged Chandelier is not unlike watching birds take off: the head tilts upward, the eyes adjust to the sparkle of the sky and the mind wanders to another horizon.

There is plenty to wander around. In addition to the silhouettes of birds rendered in crystals, the steel cubes on which they're appliquéd also include laser-cut silhouettes of the creatures. These cutouts, which literally dematerialize the steel, also reveal interiors clad in crystal-studded fabric – lending a metaphorical lightness to each cube. Aficionados of ingredients will also reflect on the marriage of weighty steel and the refined delicateness of Swarovski crystals. And that should be enough to stifle even the most sceptical of grandparent.

BEHOLDING WINGED CHANDELIER IS NOT UNLIKE WATCHING BIRDS TAKE OFF

CRATER BOWL BY *Chris Tolles*

Chris Tolles (left) is mad for materials. Asked to expand on his obsession, Tolles mentions a current ottoman project in which he's placing industrial felt on top of biodegradable foam. No upholstery, just layers of foam and felt – a design that's transparent about its fabrication. This concept of honesty comes up in discussion with Tolles. A lot.

While his passion for the building blocks of furniture design has characterized his entire RISD experience, the current infatuation with industrial felt dates exactly to Crystal Connection. For the prototype, Peat, Tolles wrapped a table with the stuff, incising it to exactly fit four constellations of crystals embedded in the table's surface. "I wanted to show the irony of using a valuable material like crystal as a trivet," he says.

Peat also contrasts hard and soft, just like Tolles's other work for Crystal Connection: his two crystal-dotted Crater bowls are made of tea-stained abaca and a cotton the colour of midnight (or, more accurately, of Japanese sumi ink). What's more, Tolles's small group of works shows that his views on honesty are more than talk. By hand-forming abaca and cotton fibres into bowls, he is underscoring just how many steps of manufacture it takes to transform sand into crystal. Of course, there is the slight detail that Tolles had to obtain cotton pulp by mashing up a T-shirt in a Hollander beater – but in a perfect world, his pulp would have come straight from the farm.

Tolles says he's neither glorifying his low-energy handiwork nor demonizing the painstaking evolution of a natural resource into a finished good such as crystal. "If you really think about it, there is a not-so-subtle political dimension in terms of energy investment and economy of materials: honesty is an enormously loaded word," he says. "But I would be honoured and thankful if one were to look at my bowls and take a moment to consider the difference between the crystals and this paper and this felt, and then reflect on why the differences exist."





SHINE CHAIR BY *James Lear*

Thanks to his Shine Chair, James Lear (right) reverses the ‘look but don’t touch’ expectations surrounding crystal. In fact, Shine is much more than an artwork to behold: Lear points out that his piece is a perfect Boston wingback armchair – right down to the cabriole legs on pad feet – except for the excess cushioning to emphasize the chair’s curves and to contrast with the soldierly lines of precise Swiss crosses that march across the black silk upholstery. In pairing curves and lines, the wingback chair may contemplate how yesterday’s and today’s design geometries differ, but it also begs to ease the aches and pains of a tired sitter.

While Shine screams comfort, Lears’s Huddle Lamps examine the act of viewing. “Crystals are made to be stared at,” says the 22-year-old, adding, “but what if they looked back?” Inspired by the image of prairie dogs protecting their territory, Lears designed his steel-and-fibre-optic floor lamps with an anthropomorphism that’s as charming as they are unnerving.

Lear has a budding expertise in upending people’s expectations about a material. Since he was a teenager, he has worked for his brother-in-law Bart Bettencourt, a hero of the Brooklyn design scene and co-founder of Scrapile, which transforms seemingly useless wooden debris into dynamic works of contemporary furniture.



AMORPHOUS LAMPS SUGGESTS THAT EVEN LUXURY HAS A LIFECYCLE

AMORPHOUS LAMPS BY *Annie Adams*

Was RISD kidding? When graduate student Annie Adams (left) first got an inkling of the furniture department’s collaboration with Swarovski, she thought students would be making figurines. But when Adams learned of the company’s breadth of products and the artistic autonomy permitted of Crystal Connection, she quickly jumped on board the project.

About the time that Adams, a 1999 RISD alumna, returned to the school in 2005, her stepfather – whom she had known since the age of five – had passed away. To memorialize the beloved jokester, she designed a remote-controlled fountain that could spit water into onlookers’ faces. Thereafter, she decided, her second rendezvous with academe would be pure fun. Her master’s thesis, which ultimately included her Swarovski-patterned Amorphous Lamps, was devoted to different categories of humor.

With pieces that include a stool hiding a whoopee cushion and a vibrating bedside table, Adams says that Amorphous Lamps falls under the category of “surreal humor”. It also is a fitting adjective for the Swarovski-manufactured silicone impregnated with crystals that she chose for the prototype. For a designer who first thought the company was all crystal kitties, this product was a shocker. “Whoa, what’s that?” was her first reaction to finding it in the company’s catalogue.

Amorphous Lamps sparks an equally big whoa. From a distance, the luminaires appear as otherworldly garments, or even dialysis bags. On closer inspection, these are lamps that have lost their mojo. Amorphous Lamps certainly counters the viewer’s expectations, and surprises the three-dimensional world like a certain painting of a melting pocket watch did 76 years ago. While Adams says: “I try not to over-analyse”, in a contemporary context, her deflated, defeated lamps conjure up more meanings than a nod to art history. Just in the time between Adams first entered RISD and today, for example, fast fashion has infiltrated product and furniture design. And Amorphous Lamps suggests that even luxury has a lifecycle.

LAWN KITSCH CHAIR BY *Alex Spain-Strombom*

Although middle managers would love nothing better than to bottle the stuff, there is no formula for the creative process. Indeed, Alex Spain-Strombom's (right) two works, the glittering, folding Lawn Kitch Chair (right) and her Circuit Crystallized wall covering (not pictured), are the result of very different methods of inquiry.

"In the Swarovski catalogue, I found a silicone material with crystals embedded in it," Spain-Strombom recalls. "It kind of reminded me of chair webbing." With her imagination sparked by the material and influenced by a concurrent RISD seminar devoted to the American Dream, Spain-Strombom rendered a similar Swarovski plastic product into Lawn Kitch. The woven seat of this refurbished Sunbeam folding chair features a zigzag of black and white bands integrated with crystals.

Circuit Crystallized, on the other hand, was born of concept. Considering the rococo wallpapers that have enjoyed a resurgence of popularity, Spain-Strombom searched for intricate patterns in daily life that could inspire ornamentation authentic to our own time. She arrived at the circuit board – digitally printing one such pattern on silk, stretching it on a frame and substituting slightly iridescent, round crystals for each of the soldering points. (Spain-Strombom explains that the piece's fabrication is not unlike the process she means to refer to: she had to manoeuvre a dangerously hot tool in order to affix crystals to silk.)

Regardless of how they came to be, the pair of works offers a perspective of America that is far more damning than you might first expect from this soft-spoken 23-year-old. "Crystal got me thinking about bling," she says, also noting that her hometown of Houston, Texas, has an active rap scene. Using hip-hop as a shorthand for popular culture, Spain-Strombom's Lawn Kitch and Circuit Crystallized underscore Americans' spectacular consumption and the hypocrisy of a debt economy.

ICE BRANCHES IS A ROMANTIC PAEAN TO NATURE

ICE BRANCHES BY *Annika Schmidt*

You can catch glimpses of Gunnel Schmidt in her daughter Annika (left). The 22-year-old RISD student happily wears her mother's vintage clothes, was enrolled in Ölands Solkhögskola – a preparatory art school in Sweden that Gunnel had planned to attend before she emigrated to the US – and finds inspiration in her mother's photographs to create her Crystal Connection prototype.

Annika's Ice Branches evokes the trees and shrubs laden with berries and ice that Gunnel snapped in Cambridge, Massachusetts, years before. Conceived during an abnormally warm New England winter, Ice Branches is by turns a romantic paean to nature, an exercise in childhood nostalgia and a comment on climate change. By combining Swarovski's crystal-beaded yarn with a second matrix of irregular hand knitting, Schmidt also marries the worlds of design and craft.

Correspondingly, the work treads a fine line between function and composition: although it is not artificially illuminated, this luxurious assemblage of suspended flossam reflects ambient light at a candle's intensity. "I'm really interested in both worlds," Schmidt says. "I don't see myself directly making furniture."

Schmidt notes that, during the iterative design process, she devoted more of her time to material juxtapositions, proportion and execution than to pondering her work's place at the nexus of several design phenomena. The admission only adds another layer of biographical meaning to Ice Branches: Schmidt speaks of her personal interests in textiles, soft forms, sculpture and interior design, while her portfolio reveals explorations in fashion, public art and studio furniture. Rather than yield confusion, for Crystal Connection these seemingly divergent paths produce a keen yet multivalent identity.

