

how to spend it

Garden benches with sculptural clout

The feature garden bench is being transformed from elegant seat to provocative and enticing sculpture. Helen Chislett reports



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Over the past decade, a significant shift in design and architecture has meant the blurring of the boundaries between outside and in. Architects and interior designers have embraced the idea of “inside-out” houses that are a direct response to landscape and location, and privately commissioned homes are routinely designed to incorporate expansive roof terraces, internal courtyards and garden extensions with entire walls of glass that can be opened or closed as required.

The design of garden furniture has evolved at a slower pace, with the majority of pieces adopting an unchanging aesthetic. But at the more rarefied strata of design, gallerists and artists are waking up to the fact that the same clients who buy unique or limited-edition pieces for their homes are often keen to extend that vision into the garden and beyond. As a result, the simple garden bench has transformed into a piece of functional sculpture – an artistic statement that can be stunning, provocative, fun and enticing.

New York gallerist Cristina Grajales was among the first to make this leap when she was asked by the Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden in Miami to curate an exhibition to run parallel with Art Basel in 2012. As she says, her idea was simplicity itself: “I thought, ‘What do most people love when they go to parks? They love to sit on benches.’ So I asked several of my designers and artists to come up with ideas on this theme – to create something that people could not only enjoy for its beauty, but also use in a practical way.”

The result was *Sitting Naturally* (from \$6,000) a fabulous medley of designs from artists such as Sam Baron, Pedro Barrail, Christopher Côme, Gael Appler and Sebastian Errazuriz. The Errazuriz design – a classic garden bench with the twist of an integrated crystal chandelier hanging above called *Dawn Before Time* (\$24,000, edition of eight) – was particularly popular, as Grajales recalls: “I took a group of trustees from the Cooper Hewitt museum to look around the garden and they all lined up to sit on that bench and have their photo taken. It was such a ridiculous idea, but also so romantic – not surprisingly, that bench was also the favourite of those celebrating their *quinceañera* [like a sweet 16] who gather at the Fairchild each summer.”

Grajales may have been among the first to see the potential of the humble bench, but others have tapped into the same zeitgeist. The Haas Brothers, current *enfants terribles* of the design world, created a series of Elephant benches (price on request) in Pele de Tigre marble last year, so named for their elephantine legs. In the same material, they also produced Butt benches, the title of which is directly related to the way they mirror the contour of a pair of buttocks. Each Haas Brothers bench is unique and costs from about \$80,000. Evan Snyderman, co-founder of R & Company, the gallery that represents Simon and Niki Haas, says what drew the twins to the project was the sense of timelessness that garden benches capture: “The brothers have a background in stone carving and this reignited their interest in the material. The title is typical of their humour – they like to disarm people and enjoy being subversive. As an avant-garde sculpture that can actually be used, the bench is a brilliant contrast to formal, English-style gardens.”

Snyderman also worked with Brazilian artist Hugo França, whose enormous wood sculptures are so enticingly tactile that people feel compelled to touch, curl up or lie on them. França favours pequi wood taken from trees that are often thousands of years old, using the original forms to suggest a reductive way of carving that reveals the form rather than imprinting it. Snyderman explains that pequi wood is so oily and water-resistant it was once the timber of choice for native Amazonian Indians making canoes.

At Design Miami/Basel this June, Gallery Fumi showed two very different interpretations of the humble garden bench: Faye Toogood’s limestone collaboration with Lapidica (£22,000) and Study O Portable’s Fuzz bench (£21,600). Co-founder Sam Pratt believes that much of this change of direction is driven by clients: “There is a real demand now to have sculptures outside that you can sit on, so for many of our designers a garden bench is a way of continuing a series.” This was true of Toogood’s bench that began with her Loose Fabric fireplace – stone masquerading as textile – while Fuzz was a progression of Study O Portable making bracelets of jesmonite: “We then pushed them towards creating side tables and dining tables using the same material and aesthetic, and the garden bench was the natural next step of that.”

The fair also included monumental designs by Wendell Castle at Carpenters Workshop Gallery, his first-ever works in bronze. Designed as outdoor functional sculpture, they are a whole new imagining of the garden bench by a legendary designer now embarked on his ninth decade. The co-founder of Carpenters Workshop Gallery, Loïc Le Gaillard, considers Castle the real father of Arts and Crafts in the States: “He has always worked with these very organic, tactile shapes that he sculpts with a hammer and a chisel, but always with an element of functionality. It made great sense to translate his sculpture for use outdoors so he embarked on this body of bronze works.” Other artists within Carpenters who are also exploring the outdoor space alongside the inside one include Pablo Reinoso, who twists wood and steel into fantastic spaghetti-like statements of exuberance and dynamism.

There’s no doubt in Le Gaillard’s mind that the demand exists: “Our clients have remarkable houses and so they also have remarkable gardens. They need furniture for their gardens so, if they can afford it, why not combine these with a love of sculpture? There is more to a garden than a beautiful Henry Moore sculpture.”

Indeed there is. Gallery Arnel Soyer champions mirrored, geometric designs by British designer Julian Mayor. The Lunar collection comprises three stainless-steel benches that are developed on computer and then folded and welded by hand. The designs comprise undulating triangles that accentuate the reflective nature of the surface. Soyer says that many of her clients want their external spaces to be as elegant and inspiring as the internal ones: “Furniture with a sculptural aspect can encourage private contemplation and act as a talking point. On top of which, the garden is a great place to showcase your taste.” Ymer&Malta sells the wonderful Oiseau design (€35,000, edition of eight) by Sylvain Rieu-Piquet in Corten steel, which gallery owner Valérie Maltaverne describes as “like seeing an animal silhouetted in a landscape setting. A bench such as this brings a mood and a life into a garden. Oiseau has such a purity of line in contrast with the welded steel sheets that already look rusted, giving it a timeless dimension.”

Friedman Benda shows truly elemental works by Korean artist Byung Hoon Choi, that are imbued with the artist’s preoccupation with form, craft and material. Choi chooses each block of gargantuan basalt stone himself, carving from it a statement piece inspired by the generous strokes of Korean calligraphy. Gallery partner Jennifer Olshin says that here size really does matter: “These benches function as objects of contemplation, complemented by nature within man-made landscapes. Choi’s work is both familiar and unexpected – the juxtaposition of overt materiality and the designer’s vision.”

However, for all of this, it would be wrong to write off entirely the classic garden furniture that has adorned outdoor spaces for the past 300 years. The best of the type is surely McKinnon and Harris’s extraordinary aluminium benches that are powder-coated in so many layers that they resemble the age-old, wooden designs so beloved of the English country houses from which they take their inspiration – and which they are more than likely to outlive. The latest collection, Buie, starts at £3,350 for a dining chair. Co-founder Will McKinnon Massie Jr makes no apology for his defence of such classic staples, arguing that garden furniture completes the garden just as paintings and furniture complete a house, saying: “Just looking at a garden bench rests your mind even if you don’t sit in it.”

He believes we are increasingly heading for a more “relaxed progression” in the garden, quoting his favourite Winston Churchill maxim: “Never stand up when you can sit down and never sit down when you can lie down”.

Byung Hoon Choi, www.choibyunghoon.com and see Friedman Benda. **Carpenters Workshop Gallery**, 3 Albemarle Street, London W1 (020-3051 5939; www.carpentersworkshopgallery.com). **Cristina Grajales**, 152 West 25th Street, New York, NY 10001 (+1212-219 9941; www.cristinagrajalesinc.com). **Faye Toogood**, www.fayetoogood.com and see Gallery Fumi. **Friedman Benda**, 515 West 26th Street, New York, NY 10001 (+1212-239 8700; www.friedmanbenda.com). **Gallery Arnel Soyer**, 19-21 Rue Chapon, 75003 Paris (+331-4255 4972; www.arnelsoyer.com). **Gallery Fumi**, 16 Hoxton Square, London N1 (020-7490 2366; www.galleryfumi.com). **Haas Brothers**, www.thehaasbrothers.com and see R & Company. **Hugo França**, www.hugofranca.com.br and see R & Company. **Julian Mayor**, www.julianmayor.com and see Gallery Arnel Soyer. **McKinnon and Harris**, 220 North Dome, Design Centre Chelsea Harbour, London SW10 (020-7349 9085; www.mckinnonharris.com). **Pablo Reinoso**, www.pablereinoso.com and see Carpenters Workshop Gallery. **R & Company**, 82 Franklin Street, New York, NY 10013 (+1212-343 7979; www.r-and-company.com). **Study O Portable**, www.studyoportable.com and see Gallery Fumi. **Sylvain Rieu-Piquet**, www.rieu-piquet.fr and see Ymer&Malta. **Wendell Castle**, www.wendellcastlecollection.com and see Carpenters Workshop Gallery. **Ymer&Malta**, by appointment, 44 Rue la Condamine, 75017 Paris (+331-5342 3420; www.ymeretmalta.com).

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