



VIEW GALLERY · 8 IMAGES

## How Designer Chris Schanck Pays Homage to his Detroit Neighborhood

By Katy Donoghue

Chris Schanck's team at his studio in the Hamtramck neighborhood of Detroit have come up with their own kind of design language. "You need to make it more Super Man Cave of Isolation and a little less Mars-whatever," is something you might hear from them.

Seeing the pink, mint green, orange, and emerald green metallic, sculptural furniture that was included in his recent solo show at Friedman Benda Gallery in New York, "Unhomely," helps to make more sense of those references. Coffee tables resemble scrying pools, a cabinet looks like a pillar excavated from the lost city of Atlantis, a silver credenza suggests an archaeological artifact somehow from the future. Schanck's furniture, made from a unique foiling technique he invented, looks like something straight of Merlin's cave.

We visited Schanck at his studio in Hamtramck last fall as he was preparing for his first exhibition at the gallery. There a team of young designers and Bangladeshi women from the neighborhood helped with the tedious task of foiling furniture and objects carved in Styrofoam and other materials. The cultural makeup of his studio, and the surrounding Bangladeshi community, has also started to influence his work.

Donoghue, Katy. "How Designer Chris Schanck Pays Homage to his Detroit Neighborhood," *Whitewall*, Fall 2018.

**FRIEDMAN BENDA** 515 W 26TH STREET NEW YORK NY 10001  
FRIEDMANBENDA.COM TELEPHONE 212 239 8700 FAX 212 239 8760

*Whitewall* talked with Schanck about his transition from sculpture to furniture, the allure of lost cities, the impact *Strange Stories, Amazing Facts* had on his imagination, and the reality of finding himself talking about magic outside the studio.



**WHITEWALL:** “Unhomely” has pieces in it, like Banglatown, that serve as an homage to your neighborhood in Detroit, Hamtramck. Can you tell us about the neighborhood?

**CHRIS SCHANCK:** The neighborhood I moved into is super-rich with artists and performers. There are residency programs, small community galleries; there are really cool architectural projects where people are taking homes and creating mixed-use spaces out of them. At first, it was a lot of watching and learning, doing my thing, but sort of going slow with trying to talk about being inspired by what I was seeing from the local Bangladeshi community that was infused with that.

As an outsider, initially, I felt best to go slow in talking about any of those narratives in any way. It took a while to understand the dynamics of it; I still am.

Donoghue, Katy. “How Designer Chris Schanck Pays Homage to his Detroit Neighborhood,” *Whitewall*, Fall 2018.

**FRIEDMAN BENDA** 515 W 26TH STREET NEW YORK NY 10001  
FRIEDMANBENDA.COM TELEPHONE 212 239 8700 FAX 212 239 8760

WW: When you went to Cranbrook, you went for 3-D design, having worked in sculpture before. What did your sculpture look like, and what made you want to make that switch?

CS: As a student, post-undergrad, it was more conceptual-based installation stuff—not so much about handmade or craft, but more about appropriation.

Then I started making architectural, fantasy/sci-fi-based models, small diorama-type things. It was not real, you couldn't really use it, so there was a part missing. I wanted people to use them in a way that it was very clear, and design had that going for it. I thought I would experiment with thinking that way. I wasn't like, "I want to be a designer." It was like, "I want to learn more about the way designers think about things."

Working with people's specific needs or desires—this idea of designing for an individual—really started to interest me. I thought that design at first, the constraints and rules of it, was constricting. But I started to find total freedom and clarity, something that I didn't have as just a sculptor when I was trying to tell my story and my perspective.

I came to this very simple idea that function was about experience. And I could support a more emotional experience with the work, opposed to a practical one. I'm not an industrial designer; I'm not an inventor.

Donoghue, Katy. "How Designer Chris Schanck Pays Homage to his Detroit Neighborhood," *Whitewall*, Fall 2018.

**FRIEDMAN BENDA** 515 W 26TH STREET NEW YORK NY 10001  
FRIEDMANBENDA.COM TELEPHONE 212 239 8700 FAX 212 239 8760



WW: What are some of the themes and stories behind “Unhomely”?

CS: We’re starting to call them archaeological fantasies. It’s between these categories of monoliths and space operas, to fantasy places from film, like to mention Merlin’s Cave. Finding a place where these made-up places could have been found—ancient edifices that are discovered. It’s the idea that the future is found in the past in these ancient alien things.

I was really into these things as a kid. I would go to the library looking for books on Atlantis. My bible growing up was *Strange Stories*, *Amazing Facts*. I had this entire book visually memorized: natural phenomena, Loch Ness monster, tribes, creatures, lost cities, robotics. It’s pretty out there.

WW: Were you able to play with the forms in the furniture more, working with these kinds of themes?

CS: Yeah. Sculpturally, we’ve had a lot of experimentation, trying to get things to occur. I wanted to work with spheres, like sighting orbs—a shape that is perfect and unknown, like a crystal ball. We looked at scrying pools, which are like a

Donoghue, Katy. “How Designer Chris Schanck Pays Homage to his Detroit Neighborhood,” *Whitewall*, Fall 2018.

**FRIEDMAN BENDA** 515 W 26TH STREET NEW YORK NY 10001  
FRIEDMANBENDA.COM TELEPHONE 212 239 8700 FAX 212 239 8760



magical pool that you look into to see the future. The coffee table is like a big scrying pool.

It's funny because we talk about this stuff in the studio without thinking about the actual outcome of having to talk to people about it [*laughs*].

It's like, "Oh, you've managed to mention Terminator 2 today." They tell me what I need to watch. Like, you need to watch this seventies sci-fi animation or listen to this music; there's like a shared sort of culture that happens. It's approached through a relatable, pop culture way that doesn't have to be historical. It's sort of playful in that way. We'll say things like, "You need to make it more Super Man Cave of Isolation and a little less Mars-whatever."

It's like a language of reference. Not everyone has an art background and not everyone has a design background. I've said this a lot, but it's true: Because it's furniture, it's a little less threatening. You can still bring it back down to "Sit in it and try it out." It's a chair, no matter how far we've taken it into a playful or abstract space.



WW: When did you start hiring Bangladeshi women in your neighborhood of Hamtramck to work in the studio?

Donoghue, Katy. "How Designer Chris Schanck Pays Homage to his Detroit Neighborhood," *Whitewall*, Fall 2018.

**FRIEDMAN BENDA** 515 W 26TH STREET NEW YORK NY 10001  
FRIEDMANBENDA.COM TELEPHONE 212 239 8700 FAX 212 239 8760

CS: In the beginning. When the studio first opened, it was literally just my neighbors who I started hiring first. They would come in and hang out, and I definitely needed help. I was producing the first pieces on my own, speculatively, without any sales. But I had to make them to give them to the gallery. A lot of the population here can't find work immediately.

So the first woman and her two daughters worked in the studio and lived adjacently across the street. I'd go over for tea and noticed that nobody was going to work, and I asked if they wanted to help. I paid them. I've never had an intern; everyone's always been paid.

There's a lot of textile industry background from all of the Bangladeshi women—high attention to detail, great sense of color, all of that stuff. They respond to the work, and somehow it's very natural and easy. Then that just sort of grew word of mouth with the community to the point where we get people showing up all the time.

WW: Are you thinking about what you want to explore next—maybe more finishes?

CS: We have a library of finishes that have come out of accidents and the process that we can imagine growing into something. We want to invent the things as much as possible on our own. We want them to come here from the ground up, to be very unique to us and our process. There's something about the foil process and the finishing that is so specific to this place, it seems like it could be a technique that could have been done for hundreds of years. It's time consuming and it's frustrating, but it's very specialized.

We're not aiming for higher production; it's the specificity and the uniqueness that happens in the process, and all the different hands that touch it to create that one thing is what sustains us. I think drawing from the local vernacular is the most inspiring thing to me right now. It's what trumps everything else as far as material—the culture. I see them as literal infrastructures for self-reliance, and that's wildly powerful to me. That's the direction we'll keep exploring.

Donoghue, Katy. "How Designer Chris Schanck Pays Homage to his Detroit Neighborhood," *Whitewall*, Fall 2018.

**FRIEDMAN BENDA** 515 W 26TH STREET NEW YORK NY 10001  
FRIEDMANBENDA.COM TELEPHONE 212 239 8700 FAX 212 239 8760